



Certificates: A fast track to careers



**N**o time or money to earn a college degree? No problem. An educational certificate may be a good option, but do your homework first. That way, you'll know if a certificate is the best choice for you.

Certificates are nondegree awards for completing an educational program of study after high school. Typically, students finish these programs to prepare for a specific occupation. And they do so in a relatively short period of time: Most certificates take less than a year to complete, and almost all are designed to take less than 2 years.

Among the questions about certificates that you'll need to have answered are the following:

- What occupations can certificates prepare me for?
- What are some benefits and drawbacks to getting a certificate?
- How can I find a program that's right for me?

This article answers these and other questions about certificates and certificate programs.

The first section of the article describes certificates and some of the occupations that require them. The second section explains some potential benefits and drawbacks to these educational awards. The third section offers advice on evaluating certificate programs. The final section provides additional sources of information.

## Occupations and certificates

Certificates are one of the most popular types of postsecondary education awards. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2010–11, U.S. schools awarded more than 1 million certificates—more than the number of associate's (942,000), master's (731,000), or doctoral degrees (164,000). About 1.7 million bachelor's degrees were awarded in that same year.

Certificates and certificate programs differ in many ways. Knowing about certificates,



and whether an occupation requires one, is the key to choosing the right program.

### What to know about certificates

Before enrolling in a certificate program, it helps to understand who earns certificates, how certificates differ from licensing and certification, and how school options and costs vary.

**Who earns certificates.** People of varied ages and educational backgrounds earn certificates. Most certificate programs are designed for people who have at least a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED).

People usually earn certificates to help them prepare for a specific occupation; in other words, certificates are for people who want to train for a job rather than to earn a college degree. In some cases, however, a certificate can pave the way to college because certain programs' credits count toward a future degree. And for some people, certificate programs help them prepare for licensure, certification, or other career-related qualifications.

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*In 2010–11, certificate programs related to healthcare occupations were more popular than any other.*

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***Certificates versus licenses and certification.*** Certificates are not the same as—and typically do not lead directly to—professional licenses and certification.

Certificates show that a person has completed a course of study. Licenses are required to practice in some occupations, including teaching and cosmetology. And certifications, which often involve assessments and documentation of experience, show that workers have attained competency in an occupation. Sometimes, state licensing requirements are based on professional certification standards.

Schools issue certificates, states or other governments issue licenses, and professional or industry organizations usually issue certifications.

Prospective certificate enrollees should find out what is typically required to get a job in the occupation they hope to enter. Then, they should learn whether the program they are considering will help them meet those requirements.

***How school options and costs vary.***

According to NCES, private for-profit schools and public community colleges award most certificates. Private nonprofit schools and other types of public schools award certificates in much smaller numbers.

Where people earn certificates varies by field of study. For example, people were more likely to earn certificates in business or information technology at public community colleges, while they were more likely to earn certificates in cosmetology and in healthcare at private, for-profit schools.

School costs vary, too, especially by institution type. Public school programs are usually less expensive than private school programs. Average tuition and fees for all first-time in-state students at public community colleges, for example, were \$3,384 in 2011–12, according to NCES. That compares with \$13,204 at 2-year private nonprofit schools and \$14,131 at 2-year private for-profit schools. And at \$6,888, costs for students attending a public school program outside their home state were higher than for in-state students but still lower than the average cost for students at private schools.

## **Certificate occupations**

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has identified 33 occupations as typically requiring a certificate or other postsecondary nondegree award for people entering those occupations.

In 2010–11, according to NCES, the most popular disciplines for certificate programs were healthcare, personal and culinary services, and mechanic and repair technologies and technicians. But people also earned certificates in a wide range of other occupational areas, such as computer and information sciences and protective services.

Tables 1–5 show occupations within selected broad career areas. For each occupation, the tables list the percentage of workers who reported needing a postsecondary certificate, along with those who said they needed a high school diploma or GED, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree. These data come

from a survey conducted by the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET), which asked workers or occupational experts what the required level of education was for a specific job. The occupations are arranged from largest to smallest in terms of the percentage who reported that a certificate was needed.

Each section also includes a discussion of BLS data on job outlook, employment, and median annual wages for some of the occupations in the tables. Where detailed data aren't available, information is for a broader occupational title.

Wages for workers in these occupations varied significantly. Whether to consider an occupation as having high or low wages depends on how it compared with the May 2011 median annual wage of \$34,460 for all wage and salary workers.

**Healthcare.** Health professions and related healthcare programs accounted for nearly half of all certificates earned in 2010–11: about 463,000 certificates. Table 1 shows

selected occupations related to healthcare in which a certificate may be needed.

The job outlook for healthcare occupations is good: BLS projects that employment growth for most of these occupations will be faster than average or much faster than average between 2010 and 2020. Some of the largest of these occupations are licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses, medical assistants, and pharmacy technicians. The May 2011 median annual wages within these selected healthcare occupations ranged from \$22,830 for veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers to \$55,120 for radiologic technologists and technicians.

Other healthcare occupations not shown in the table that may require a certificate include phlebotomists, home health aides, dispensing opticians, endoscopy technicians, medical equipment preparers, and diagnostic medical sonographers.

**Personal and culinary services.** About 131,000 certificates were awarded in fields related to personal and culinary services in

**Table 1: Healthcare-related occupations in which a certificate may be needed**

Occupations	Percent of workers who reported needing the credential			
	Postsecondary certificate	High school diploma or equivalent	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree
<b>Selected healthcare practitioners and technical</b>				
Surgical technologists	44%	10%	27%	0%
Emergency medical technicians and paramedics	41	15	5	12
Pharmacy technicians	39	16	1	0
Radiologic technologists	26	5	46	10
Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses	31	5	23	5
<b>Selected healthcare support</b>				
Massage therapists	88	3	0	0
Dental assistants	68	14	7	0
Medical transcriptionists	29	34	1	0
Veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers	23	44	0	0
Medical assistants	23	41	22	1

Source: O\*NET17

Firefighters led among protective service occupations that may require a certificate.



2010–11. Table 2 shows selected personal care and service and food preparation and serving related occupations that may require a certificate.

Employment growth for occupations in the table is projected to be at least average between 2010 and 2020, with personal care aides, fitness trainers and aerobics instructors, and childcare workers having even faster growth. Some of the largest of these occupations are personal care aides and hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists. In May 2011,

median annual wages for workers in these occupations ranged from \$19,430 for childcare workers to \$31,030 for fitness trainers and aerobics instructors.

Other personal and culinary services occupations not shown in the table that may require a certificate include skincare specialists, shampooers, private household cooks, barbers, and theatrical and performance makeup artists.

**Homeland security, law enforcement, and fire fighting.** Fields related to homeland security, law enforcement, and fire fighting accounted for about 32,000 of the certificates earned in 2010–11. Table 2 shows selected protective service occupations that may require a certificate.

All of the occupations in the table are projected to have slower than average employment growth between 2010 and 2020. Some of the largest of these occupations are police and sheriffs' patrol officers, correctional officers and jailers, and firefighters. Median annual wages in these occupations ranged from

**Table 2: Personal care and protective service occupations in which a certificate may be needed**

Occupations	Percent of workers who reported needing the credential			
	Postsecondary certificate	High school diploma or equivalent	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree
<b>Selected personal care and service and food preparation and serving related</b>				
Hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists	74%	6%	0%	0%
Manicurists and pedicurists	43	34	0	0
Nannies	30	48	4	4
Personal care aides	22	59	1	0
Fitness trainers and aerobics instructors	17	17	17	25
<b>Selected protective service</b>				
Municipal firefighters	31	26	2	0
Municipal fire fighting and prevention supervisors	22	35	19	12
Sheriffs and deputy sheriffs	21	55	19	1
Criminal investigators and special agents	16	42	15	3
Correctional officers and jailers	15	57	5	0

Source: O\*NET17

\$38,990 for correctional officers and jailers to \$71,770 for detectives and criminal investigators in May 2011.

Other occupations in this group that are not shown in the table but sometimes require a certificate include fire inspectors and investigators, gaming surveillance officers and gaming investigators, private detectives and investigators, lifeguards, ski patrol, and other recreational protective service workers, and bailiffs. Homeland security related occupations that may need a higher level certificate, in addition to a bachelor's degree, include business continuity planners, emergency management directors, and risk management specialists.

***Mechanic and repair technologies and technicians.*** In 2010–11, about 89,000 awards were conferred in mechanic and repair technologies and technician fields. Selected occupations for installation, maintenance, and repair occupations are in table 3.

All of the occupations in the table are projected to have average employment growth between 2010 and 2020, except for heating and air conditioning mechanics and installers which are projected to have much faster than average employment growth. Some of the largest of these occupations are general maintenance and repair workers, automotive service technicians and mechanics, and heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers. Median annual wages in May 2011 ranged from \$35,030 for general maintenance and repair workers to \$53,960 for telecommunications equipment installers and repairers, except line.

Other mechanic and repair occupations not shown in the table that may require a certificate include commercial divers, motorboat mechanics and service technicians, electronic home entertainment equipment installers and repairers, electrical power-line installers

**Table 3: Repair and production occupations in which a certificate may be needed**

Occupations	Percent of workers who reported needing the credential			
	Postsecondary certificate	High school diploma or equivalent	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree
<b>Selected installation, maintenance, and repair</b>				
Automotive master mechanics	72%	8%	4%	0%
Heating and air conditioning mechanics and installers	72	16	3	0
Mobile heavy equipment mechanics, except engines	57	15	14	0
Telecommunications equipment installers and repairers, except line installers	51	15	21	0
Maintenance and repair workers, general	42	44	3	0
<b>Selected production</b>				
Tool and die makers	68	11	17	0
Machinists	50	34	5	0
Welders, cutters, and welder fitters	41	40	0	0
Computer-controlled machine tool operators, metal and plastic	32	48	3	1
Electromechanical equipment assemblers	24	53	0	0

Source: O\*NET17



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*Welders, one of the largest of the production occupations, may need a certificate to work in some jobs.*

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and repairers, and electronic motor vehicle equipment installers and repairers.

**Precision production.** There were about 29,000 certificates awarded in precision production in 2010–11. Selected production occupations that may require a certificate are in table 3.

Employment in these occupations is projected to grow at rates that are about average or lower between 2010 and 2020. Some of the largest of these occupations are machinists; welders, cutters, solderers, and brazers; and metal and plastic computer-controlled machine tool operators. In May 2011, median annual wages for these occupations ranged from \$31,730 for electromechanical equipment assemblers to \$46,650 for tool and die makers.

Other production occupations that may require a certificate include metal and plastic machine tool setters, operators, and tenders; patternmakers; gas plant operators; model makers; and jewelers.

**Business, management, marketing, and support services.** In 2010–11, about 66,000 certificates were awarded in fields related to business, management, marketing, and support services. Table 4 shows selected occupations in these areas that may require a certificate.

Employment growth in these occupations is projected to be about average or slower than average between 2010 and 2020. Some of the largest of these occupations are claims adjusters, examiners, and investigators and industrial production managers. Median annual

wages for these occupations in May 2011 ranged from \$37,640 for procurement clerks to \$88,190 for industrial production managers.

Other business occupations in which some workers reported needing a certificate include property, real estate, and community association managers, farm products buyers and purchasing agents, medical or legal secretaries, assessors, and tax preparers.

**Engineering technologies and engineering-related fields.** In 2010–11, about 37,000 certificates were awarded in fields related to engineering and engineering technologies. Table 4 shows selected occupations in these fields that may require a certificate.

BLS projects slower than average employment growth in most of these occupations between 2010 and 2020. Some of the largest of these occupations are electrical and electronics engineering technicians, architectural and civil drafters, and mechanical drafters. May 2011 median annual wages ranged from \$47,250 for architectural and civil drafters to \$58,670 for engineering technicians, except drafters, all other.

Other engineering occupations that may require a certificate include electrical and electronics drafters, civil engineering technicians, electromechanical technicians, surveying and mapping technicians, and electromechanical engineering technologists. A higher level certificate, in addition to a bachelor's degree, may be needed for occupations such as marine engineer, industrial safety and health engineer, and validation engineer.

**Computer and information sciences and support services.** People earned about 28,000 certificates in this field in 2010–11. Table 4 shows selected computer occupations that may require a certificate.

Employment growth for most of these occupations is projected to be average or faster than average between 2010 and 2020. Some of the largest of these occupations are computer support specialists; computer programmers; and information security analysts, Web developers, and computer network architects. In May 2011, median annual wages ranged from \$47,660 for computer support specialists to \$79,930 for computer occupations, all other.



*Workers in computer-related occupations more often reported needing a degree than a certificate.*

Other occupations in this group that had small percentages of workers who reported needing a certificate include information security analysts, network and computer systems administrators, computer systems analysts, systems software developers, and geospatial information scientists and technologists.

**Table 4: Business, engineering, and computer occupations in which a certificate may be needed**

Occupations	Percent of workers who reported needing the credential			
	Postsecondary certificate	High school diploma or equivalent	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree
<b>Selected management, business and financial operations, and office and administrative support</b>				
Government property inspectors and investigators	41%	29%	*	6%
Energy auditors	33	33	25	4
Procurement clerks	27	33	16	12
Insurance adjusters, examiners, and investigators	25	6	13	35
Industrial production managers	24	25	3	29
<b>Selected architecture and engineering</b>				
Manufacturing production technicians	32	9	27	27
Civil drafters	29	0	57	5
Mechanical drafters	22	1	40	23
Industrial engineering technicians	18	8	*	29
Electronics engineering technicians	15	7	66	13
<b>Selected computer</b>				
Web administrators	26	0	9	39
Computer user support specialists	15	12	18	29
Web developers	13	10	20	43
Computer systems engineers/architects	13	0	0	61
Computer programmers	11	6	5	78

\* O\*NET recommends suppressing due to a high standard error.  
Source: O\*NET17



Certificates may be required in many of the fast-growing construction trades occupations.



**Construction trades.** The number of certificates awarded in construction trades totaled about 30,000 in 2010–11. Selected construction and extraction occupations that may require a certificate are shown in table 5.

Employment for most occupations in the table is projected to grow faster than the average or much faster than the average between 2010 and 2020. Among the largest of these occupations are carpenters and plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters. May 2011 median annual wages ranged from \$27,010 for helpers of pipelayers, plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters to \$47,750 for plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters.

Other construction and extraction occupations in which workers may need a certificate include electricians, elevator installers and repairers, segmental pavers, stonemasons, and boilermakers.

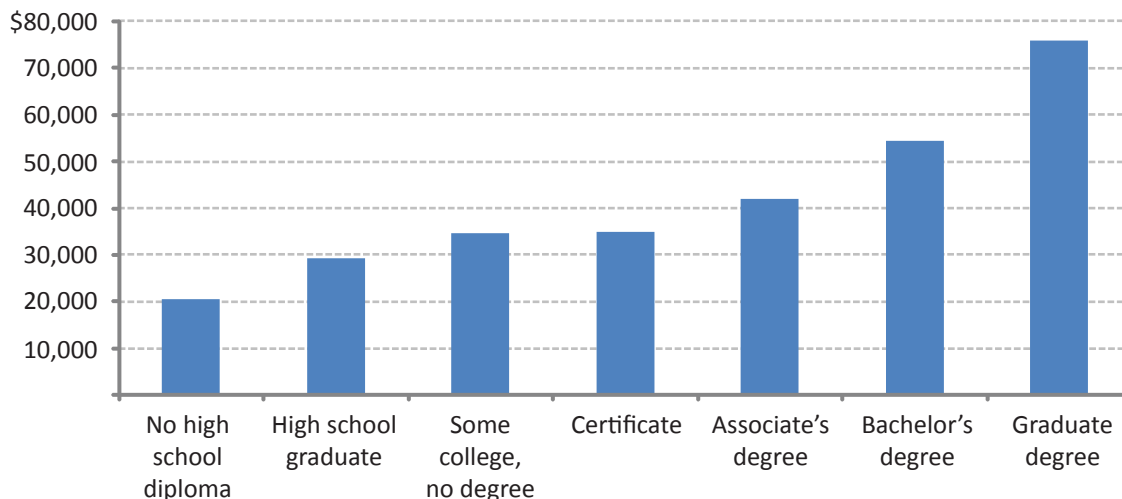
**Transportation and material moving.** Certificates awarded in transportation and

**Table 5: Construction and transportation occupations in which a certificate may be needed**

Occupations	Percent of workers who reported needing the credential			
	Postsecondary certificate	High school diploma or equivalent	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree
<b>Selected construction and extraction</b>				
Pipe fitters and steamfitters	69%	26%	0%	0%
Sheet metal workers	39	52	0	0
Plumbers	33	52	7	0
Rough carpenters	28	39	3	0
Helpers—Pipelayers, plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters	27	*	0	0
<b>Selected transportation and material moving</b>				
Bus drivers, transit and intercity	18	74	0	1
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	15	53	0	0
Automotive and watercraft service attendants	14	53	0	0
Industrial truck and tractor operators	13	74	0	0
First-line supervisors of transportation and material-moving machine and vehicle operators	13	48	3	18

\* O\*NET recommends suppressing due to a high standard error.  
Source: O\*NET17

## Median annual earnings of U.S. workers, by highest level of educational attainment



Source: Center for Education and the Workforce analysis of Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data using the combined 2004 and 2008 panels

material moving fields numbered about 24,000 in 2010–11. Selected occupations in this group that may require a certificate are shown in table 5.

Employment growth in these occupations is projected to be average or faster than average between 2010 and 2020. The largest of these occupations are heavy and tractor trailer truck drivers and industrial truck and tractor operators. May 2011 median annual wages in these occupations ranged from \$19,930 for automotive and watercraft service attendants to \$52,950 for first-line supervisors of transportation and material moving machine and vehicle operators.

Other transportation and material moving occupations that might require a certificate include ship engineers; crane and tower operators; motorboat operators; ship, boat, and barge mates; and transportation vehicle, equipment, and systems inspectors, except aviation.

## Benefits and drawbacks to certificates

There are many reasons why people choose to earn certificates. These awards give people

career-related skills and might help them get a job.

In addition, data show that workers who have a certificate often enjoy earnings premiums. A June 2012 report by the Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW), which used 2004 and 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data, found that people who have a certificate as their highest level of education earned, on average, 20 percent more than those whose highest education level is a high school diploma. (See chart above.)

But the payoff for earning a certificate isn't the same for everyone. People who work in the occupation in which they earned their certificate usually benefit more financially than those who work outside their certificate field. And a certificate isn't always the most direct path to entering an occupation.

### Certificate-related employment

To reap the benefits of a certificate, people typically must work in an occupation related to the award. Those who do, the CEW report says, earn 37 percent more than workers with a high school diploma and almost as much as workers with an associate's degree. In contrast, those who work in an occupation

**Table 6: In-field earnings and earnings premiums of certificate holders, by percent in field**

Certificate field	Percent in field	In-field earnings	In-field earnings premium
Business/office management	62%	\$40,000	66%
Transportation and material moving	58	44,336	38
Healthcare	54	30,577	35
Metalworking	49	45,040	2
Police/protective services	46	55,499	68
Auto mechanics	46	45,586	30
Drafting	44	59,592	56
Electronics	42	61,668	60
Construction trades	42	50,989	25
Aviation	40	65,642	73
Refrigeration, heating, and air conditioning	38	53,850	18
Food service	31	17,600	-41
Cosmetology	23	25,217	9
Agriculture/forestry/horticulture	20	47,800	8
Computer and information services	15	70,400	115

Source: Center for Education and the Workforce analysis of Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data using the combined 2004 and 2008 panels.

unrelated to their certificate earn about the same as workers whose highest level of education is a high school diploma.

Almost half of certificate holders worked in an occupation related to their certificate in 2010, the CEW analysis shows. (See table 6.) As the table shows, people with a certificate in business and office management, transportation and material moving, or healthcare were most likely to work in an occupation related to their certificate. For workers with a certificate in agriculture, forestry, and horticulture or in cosmetology, fewer worked in the occupation related to their certificate.

Computer and information services had the smallest proportion of certificate holders working in their field, but those workers enjoyed the best payoff for doing so: They earned 115 percent more than those who did not. The payoff is so high, in part, because these workers have specialized skills that are used in few occupations. But in food services,

wages are typically low, so people who worked in occupations other than what they held a certificate in had higher earnings than those who worked in this field.

### **No certificate required?**

There are many reasons why people might not work in a field associated with their certificate. Sometimes, for example, jobs in a particular field may be limited and, therefore, competitive for the workers qualified to fill those jobs. Other times, this nondegree award might be less desirable than an associate's or bachelor's degree or other qualifications. Or perhaps a certificate holder may not meet the certification or licensure requirements for the occupation.

Furthermore, workers in some occupations are hired without having a certificate, so earning one might not be necessary. Some schools, for example, offer programs in accounting, early childhood education, human

resources management, marketing, or paralegal studies. But O\*NET data show that only small percentages of workers in these occupations reported needing a certificate. (See table 7 below.) More commonly, workers in these occupations reported needing a bachelor's degree, associate's degree, or high school diploma.

The expense associated with earning a certificate might not be worth it if wages in the related occupations are low, jobs are scarce, or employers do not generally require workers to have the award. Prospective students should do their homework about the kind of certificate they need, if any, for the occupation that interests them—and not be duped into getting a credential they do not need. (For information about avoiding scams and certificate mills, see page 14.)

*(Continued on page 15)*



*In some occupations, such as accountants, a certificate is available—but workers may not need one.*

**Table 7: Occupations in which certificates are available but are not commonly required, by level of educational attainment (percent)**

Occupation	Percent of workers who reported needing the credential			
	Postsecondary certificate	High school diploma or equivalent	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree
<b>Accounting</b>				
Accountants	2%	0%	5%	79%
Bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks	4	38	12	18
<b>Early childhood education</b>				
Kindergarten teachers	6	0	4	67
Preschool teachers	6	19	22	21
<b>Human resources management</b>				
Human resources assistants, except payroll and timekeeping	6	26	30	12
Human resources managers	0	0	5	68
<b>Marketing</b>				
Market research analysts and marketing specialists	0	0	0	71
Marketing managers	0	4	0	84
<b>Paralegal studies</b>				
Paralegals	8	5	30	44

Source: O\*NET17



## For-profit institutions: Proceed with caution

If you're considering a for-profit certificate program, beware of some institutions that may be trying to scam you. Many for-profit schools in recent years have been identified as having aggressive recruiting practices, high costs, and poor student outcomes. The main goal of some of these schools is to take your money, not to give you a high-quality education.

Some for-profit schools spend a lot of money on marketing and recruiting—and much less on instruction and career services. This imbalance negatively affects the quality of the education they provide. As a result, students may fail to get the jobs they expected to get after completing their studies.

And with the average cost of tuition at for-profit schools more than four times the cost of in-state tuition at public community colleges, default rates on student loans for students of for-profit schools are often higher than those for students at other institutions. Before

signing up, think about the costs involved with earning a certificate and how much you will need to repay in student loans.

Also, carefully research an occupation's requirements, relevant schools and programs, and the job market. Talk to people who work in the job you are interested in about where and how they got their training.

Prospective students should be aware of diploma mills, too. These programs boast certificates, diplomas, or degrees that are of little or no value in the workplace. Warning signs that a school might be a diploma mill include the following:

- A school is not accredited or has been accredited by an organization not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation
- Credits awarded for “real world” experience
- Little or no academic work
- Minimal professor interaction
- Payment of a flat fee for the certificate
- Students can earn a certificate unusually quickly
- The school's mailing address is a post office box or suite number.

State departments of higher education often provide lists of accredited schools. Some states even publish lists of known scammers. These resources are available online from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation at [www.chea.org/degremills/frmStates.htm](http://www.chea.org/degremills/frmStates.htm).

Some schools may mention state licensing to imply that their programs are state-approved education programs that meet the requirements for professional licensure in an occupation. Always read these claims carefully, and check with your state to be sure that the program is recognized and approved for licensure.

The U.S. Department of Education has more information about education fraud, including diploma mills, at [www2.ed.gov/students/prep/college/diplomamills/diploma-mills.html](http://www2.ed.gov/students/prep/college/diplomamills/diploma-mills.html).



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## Finding the right program

There are several ways to evaluate whether a certificate is necessary for a particular occupation and how reputable individual programs are. Study occupational requirements, schools and programs, and the job market for an occupation to make an informed decision.

### Occupational requirements

Each occupation has specific requirements. But it may be difficult to learn what those requirements are. One source for finding out about how to meet the requirements for an occupation is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*.

Research occupations by contacting workers directly or by visiting the websites of professional associations. These sources should be able to explain what training is needed and why. And keep in mind that occupational requirements may change over time, so make sure the information is current.

## Schools and programs

When considering a certificate program and its reputation, prospective students should look closely at each school. Good ways to verify the quality of a certificate program include checking out a school's accreditation status or whether a program has been state or industry approved, reading gainful employment disclosures, and talking to alumni or teachers.

**Accreditation and other approval.** Any school can be accredited, but only legitimate ones are accredited by valid, independent, third-party organizations. Accreditation shows that a school or its programs have met established standards of quality. To be accredited, a school or program usually is measured against set performance standards, is evaluated onsite, and is monitored or reevaluated periodically.

Lists of nationally recognized accrediting organizations are available from the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

Government licensing agencies also have lists of programs that have been approved



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*Legitimate certificate schools and programs are accredited by nationally recognized organizations.*

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as meeting the educational requirements for licensure. And professional or industry organizations may endorse certain programs, such as those that can help people prepare for certification. If an occupation requires licensure or certification, it is especially important that the school's certificate program is approved by the relevant licensing body or certifying organization.

**Gainful employment disclosure.** A program's cost-effectiveness is also verifiable through its Gainful Employment Disclosure. This document, required by the U.S. Department of Education for certain types of programs that receive federal funding, often includes the cost of tuition, books, and fees; the amount of debt students are likely to take on; graduation and job-placement rates; and information about which occupations the program prepares students for.

Schools should report this information voluntarily, but it is sometimes hard to find on their websites. If it isn't readily available, call an admissions counselor at the school or try searching online for performance measures by school. (See the Grab bag item "Online tools

for comparing colleges," elsewhere in this issue of the *Quarterly*, for suggested search tools.)

**Alumni and teachers.** Other sources of program information are the people who know it. Talk to alumni or teachers to get a sense of the employment outcomes of recent graduates. Ask alumni whether they think the program helped them get a job. Find out from teachers whether employers actively recruit a program's graduates or how difficult it typically is for graduates to get jobs in the field of their certificate.

Direct discussion with alumni and teachers can provide other insight into programs, too. Are instructors knowledgeable about the subjects they teach? Do students feel prepared to enter the occupation at the end of training? However helpful these conversations are, though, they should supplement—not replace—other types of verification.

## The job market

Many certificates are offered in career areas that are in high demand. But that's not always the case. And the job market for workers with

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*Assessing the quality of instructors is a good way to evaluate programs—as long as it's not the only type of evaluation.*

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a certificate might be different from that for workers with a degree or other credentials.

Whether jobs are likely to be available for people with a certificate also depends on where they live and if employers there are hiring workers with this type of credential. To learn more about the job market, contact trade associations and talk to workers in the occupation. Find out what employers look for when hiring—and if they expect to have jobs.

## For more information

This article covers a portion of the occupations in which certificates are earned. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)* describes different educational paths workers can take to enter an occupation, including earning a certificate. For education, outlook, wage, and more information about occupations, see the *OOH* online at [www.bls.gov/ooh](http://www.bls.gov/ooh).

BLS also assigns occupations to one level of education based on what is typically required for entry. To search for occupations that typically require a certificate or other postsecondary non-degree award, visit [data.bls.gov/oep/noeted?Action=empeduc](http://data.bls.gov/oep/noeted?Action=empeduc).

CareerOneStop's short-term training finder locates certificate or other programs that take less than 2 years to complete. Visit [careerinfonet.org/ShortTermTraining](http://careerinfonet.org/ShortTermTraining).

Another CareerOneStop site, [www.careeronestop.org/WiaProviderSearch.asp](http://www.careeronestop.org/WiaProviderSearch.asp), directs you to your state's list of training providers (including other types of certificate program providers) that are certified to receive students using funds from the Workforce Investment Act.

For occupations that require a license, this CareerOneStop tool gives contact information for state licensing agencies that can verify whether a certificate program counts toward occupational licensing requirements: [www.careeronestop.org/credentialing/credentialinghome.asp](http://www.careeronestop.org/credentialing/credentialinghome.asp). For occupations in which certification is common, use the certification finder (on the same page) to get names



and contact information for the professional or industry organizations that certify workers.

All of this CareerOneStop information is integrated into two websites: [MyNextMove.org](http://MyNextMove.org) (for people new to the workforce) and [MySkillsMyFuture.org](http://MySkillsMyFuture.org) (for people with work experience). Career explorers can visit these sites to see relevant credentials information in a single occupational report.

To find public 2-year schools that offer certificates, try the American Association of Community Colleges' community college finder online at [www.aacc.nche.edu/Pages/CCFinder.aspx](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Pages/CCFinder.aspx).

For lists of nationally recognized accrediting organizations, visit the U.S. Department of Education's accreditation database site at [ope.ed.gov/accreditation](http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation) or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation's chart at [www.chea.org/pdf/chea\\_usde\\_allaccred.pdf](http://www.chea.org/pdf/chea_usde_allaccred.pdf).

