



# The Differences between Academic and Professional Credentials

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Both academic and professional credentials are indicative of some form of achievement, and both entitle the bearer to use certain initials after their name, but beyond that they are quite different. The most apparent difference is that with professional designations, one must pay dues to the professional association or regulatory body on an annual basis in order to continue to have the right to use the designation of title, whereas with academic credentials, once the credential is conferred one does not need to pay anything to the academic institution to have continued use of the academic credential. Nonetheless, the differences are more fundamental than that.

The essential difference between professional and academic credentials is that professional credentials are 'warrants of competence' or 'warrant of expertise' whereas academic credentials are not. With professional designations, the certifying body is warranting that the certified worker (tradesperson or professional) has the essential knowledge and skills of a specified domain necessary for safe and appropriate practice of the trade or profession. With academic credentials, there is no such 'warrant of competence,' an academic credential means that someone has successfully completed a particular course of study not that one is competent to practice a trade or profession.

Because professional designations are 'warrants of competence,' it become important for certifying bodies to define specifically what certificants must be competent to do. Professional designations are always built upon a practice analysis which defines what certified individuals need to know or be able to do. Academic credentials are rarely based upon formal and systematic practice analyses.

Although some educational institutions may make claims about the competence of their graduates, these are not 'warrants of competence' in any true sense. For one, academic institutions do not assume responsibility of the actions of their graduates. By contrast, professional do have some ongoing responsibility for the behaviour of their members. Professional associations and regulatory bodies are accountable for their certification processes. Professional associations and regulatory bodies must be able to demonstrate that they demonstrated due diligence in their certification process. This does not mean that errors cannot be made, but professional associations and regulatory bodies must be able to demonstrate that their certification requirements and standards and assessment protocols provide reasonable protection to the public.

This on-going warrant of competence or expertise, points to another key difference between academic and professional credentials: recertification. Academic credentials are good forever, even when the knowledge and skills are either long-forgotten or made entirely obsolete by the passage of time. By contrast, academic credentials have no expiry date. Many professional designations now require recertification in one form or another. The idea is that certified individuals must maintain the level of competence required for competent practice. With such professional designations, individuals who fail to maintain their knowledge and skills up to standards, or who fail to document their efforts at maintaining their knowledge and skills, will lose their certification. In some professions, members are subject to peer review or professional inspections. The idea here is that the professional association or regulatory body goes beyond periodic recertification to ensure that certified individuals maintain their knowledge and skills current.

Then there is the matter of recourse. Should a certified individual exhibit misconduct or fail to live up to the standards of the profession, the professional association or regulatory body provides for complaints and discipline processes. Academic institutions do not have such mechanisms.

Professional associations and regulatory bodies have a concern about the ethics of their members that academic institutions do not. Academic institutions are concerned about academic misconduct and other forms of misbehaviour but only in relation to achieving the credential. Educational institutions do not set out rules of conduct that graduates must abide by after graduation. The terms 'warrant of competence' or 'warrant of expertise' are too narrow really. Professional associations and regulatory bodies are, in fact, offering 'warrants of appropriate professional behaviour,' which includes not only competence but professional ethics and behaviour as well.

As part of their certification requirements, professional associations and regulatory bodies will often require a specific level of academic credential, or completion of a specific course of study. Although professional associations and regulatory bodies will sometimes provide some required training, the bulk of foundational knowledge and skills required for professional certification are delivered by educational institutions. What may blur the distinction between professional and academic credentials is the sometimes close cooperation between credentialing bodies and educational institutions. Educational institutions are well aware that an important reason students enrol in professional programs is to eventually achieve certification. Such programs are designed to meet the educational requirements of the relevant certifying body. Certifying bodies will, for their part, will publish lists of approved programs or courses. Despite this cooperation with educational institutions, most certifying bodies still conduct examinations. As the 'warrantors of competence,' professional regulatory bodies are loathe to delegate the assessment of competence to some other body. That is why professional regulatory bodies will specify education as an eligibility requirement but still conduct their own assessments.

In addition to educational requirements, however, professional associations and regulatory bodies will require candidates to have some minimum amount of experience. Although some academic programs will include various practica and co-op terms, the experience requirements of professional and trade designations are typically much more extensive than academic programs.

Another difference between professional and academic credentials is that, in any given jurisdiction, there is only one professional association or regulatory body that will issue a given professional credential. Academic credentials, such as B.Comm., B.A., B.Sc., MBA, Ph.D., are granted by a number of different academic institutions each accredited to issue such credentials.

Another interesting difference between professional and academic credentials is in credential verification. Federal and Provincial legislations in Canada require permission to research any information identifiable to an individual. Verifying an individual's claim that they have been granted a will require this individual's usually in the form of a signed release. By contrast, verifying an individual's claim that they have a professional designation is usually as simple as consulting a public register on line. Indeed, professional registers are, by law, public documents. One does not need any kind of authorization or release to verify a professional credential, and professionals cannot block the publication of such information.