

Qualifications of Nutrition Professionals: Comparing Registered Dietitians Versus Other Nutrition Certifications

Introduction

Objective:

The purpose of this study was to compare the requirements of ten common nutrition certifications to the criteria needed to become a Registered Dietitian (RD).

Background:

According to the the United States (U.S.) Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook, employment for nutritionists and dietitians is expected to grow by 21% from 2012-2022.¹ This online handbook groups nutritionists and dietitians together when describing job duties, work environment, how to become one, and pay. The handbook states, "Dietitians and nutritionists are experts in food and nutrition."¹ However, the titles "dietitian" and "nutritionist" are not exactly one in the same. There are not finite requirements needed to become a nutritionist or a dietitian because states have different licensure laws regulating the requirements and usage of these terms. However, there is one credential that is legally protected and is allowed to use the terms dietitian, nutritionist or both. This nutrition professional is a RD. RDs have met specific education requirements, performed a minimum amount of hours of supervised experience, and have passed a national registration exam. The RD credential is highly regarded, but is not easily obtained. Other organizations and associations have created their own nutrition certifications that are also available for individuals interested in a career in nutrition. These organizations use words like "certified" or "board certified" within their credential title. However, requirements to become certified through these organizations are not standardized. Also, certifications from these organizations does not necessarily make a recipient eligible to obtain licensure, which could be required to provide nutrition counseling depending upon the state they want to practice in. Each certifying organization sets their own criteria and determines its own qualifications and the individual requirements of different nutrition certifications were examined in this research.

Methods:

Through online web searches using the search terms "nutritionist," "nutrition certification," and "clinical nutritionist," ten different nutrition certifications were selected to be reviewed. A search for "comparing nutrition certifications" was also completed to see if reviews had been performed examining similar certifications included in our study. Elements used to compare certifications included education requirement, practical nutrition experience, selectivity, and examination specifics. Other details such as type of professionals holding the certification and legal recognition were also considered. These elements were gathered online through each organization's website that offers the nutrition certification.

Results

CERTIFIED NUTRITION SPECIALIST (CNS)

Certification Board of Nutrition Specialists

- Educational Requirements:
 - M.S. or Doctoral degree in nutrition from regionally accredited university, or foreign equivalent OR
 - Doctoral degree in clinical healthcare (MD, DO, DC, DDS, ND, PharmD)
 - 30 hours of science and nutrition related coursework
- Practical experience: 1000 hours in the nutrition field
 - Assessment, education, counseling, monitoring and evaluation, and management
- Exam: Proctored, 200 questions, multiple choice
- Notable: CNS is recognized as a credential for dietitians and nutritionists in the Occupational Outlook Handbook from the United States Department of Labor.



CERTIFIED CLINICAL NUTRITIONIST (CCN)

Clinical Nutrition Certification Board

- Educational Requirements:
 - B.S. from a regionally, national or state DETC accredited university including 30 hours of science and nutrition coursework OR
 - Advanced degree in health care (DO, DC, DDS, DPM, PharmD) with 15 hours in specific science coursework. *Associates degree in Nursing can qualify with completion of 15 hours in nutrition related coursework. AND
 - 56-hour online program:
 - Optimal Human Nutrition, Cognition and Sensory and Sensory Overload, Detoxification, Herbology and Homeopathic Therapy, Laboratory Assessment
 - M.S., Ph.D., or D.Sc. in human nutrition can be exempt from online program
- Practical Experience: None
- Exam: Proctored, 150 multiple choice questions with 42% of questions come from online program
- Notable:
 - Textbooks for online program include: Family Guide to Homeopathy, The Complete Homeopathic Resource for Common Illness, Professionalism and Ethics in Complementary and Alternative Medicine



SPECIALIST IN FITNESS NUTRITION CERTIFICATION

International Sports Science Association

- Educational Requirements: None
- Practical Experience: None
- Exam: Open book, untimed, 350 multiple choice questions, short essay and case study.



HOLISTIC NUTRITIONIST CERTIFICATION

American Fitness Professionals & Associates

- Education Requirements:
- Functional knowledge of English and arithmetic. Basic understanding of nutrition and a healthy diet.
- Practical Experience: None
 - Exam: Open book, through mail or taken on-line
 - Can re-take within 3 months if not passed on first attempt.
 - Notable:
 - Estimated time to complete course is 200 hours.
 - AFFA has board accreditation from the American Association of Drugless Practitioners
 - Web site recommends purchasing "Legal guidelines for Unlicensed Practitioners".



CERTIFIED NUTRITION CONSULTANT (CNC)

American Association of Nutrition Consultants

- Educational Requirements:
 - High school diploma or GED
- Practical Experience: None
- Exam: Open book, 775 multiple choice questions
 - Website explains answers to test must come directly from textbook. The exam has 11 sections requiring 11 individual books needed to answer questions.



INTEGRATIVE HEALTH COACH CERTIFICATION

Institute for Integrative Health

- Educational Requirements: None
- Practical Experience: None
- Exam: Several exams, open book, taken online.



SPORTS NUTRITION SPECIALIST (SNS)

International Society of Sports Nutrition

- Educational Requirements:
 - High School Diploma or equivalent
- Practical Experience: None
- Exam: Open book, online, timed
 - 120 questions, Multiple choice and True/False
- Notable:
 - Organization has a peer reviewed journal: Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition
 - Vice president and co-founder is a RD



BOARD CERTIFIED IN HOLISTIC NUTRITION

National Association of Nutrition Professionals

- Educational Requirements:
 - Holistic nutrition diploma OR
 - Occupational certification, degree or diploma that meets NANP standards
- Practical Experience: 500 hours in holistic nutrition
 - 250 indirect hours – Creating education materials, performing research, and writing articles
 - 250 direct hours – working with customers, clients or students
- Exam: Proctored, must score at least 70% to pass.
- Notable: Schools providing diplomas include non-accredited vocational schools



AMERICAN CLINICAL BOARD OF NUTRITION DIPLOMATE

American Clinical Board of Nutrition (ACBN)

- Educational Requirements:
 - Professional degree and licensed health care provider with 300 hours of post graduate nutrition education and 2 years practicing experience.
- Practical Experience: Website unclear if nutrition related experience required.
- Exam: Part one is case studies that are completed before exam. Part two is proctored, 150 questions, multiple choice.
- Notable: Organization was formerly known as American Chiropractic Board of Nutrition



FITNESS NUTRITION SPECIALIST (FNS)

National Academy of Sports Medicine

- Educational Requirements: None
- Practical Experience: None
- Exam: Taken online requiring 70% to pass



REGISTERED DIETITIAN (RD)

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

- Educational Requirements:
 - Bachelors Degree from a U.S. regionally accredited college or university or foreign equivalent
 - Completed curriculum requirements approved by ACEND, the accrediting agency for education programs preparing students to become RDs or Dietetic Technicians Registered (DTRs).
 - Typical coursework includes: nutrition sciences, foodservice system management, business, chemistry, economics, biochemistry, physiology, and microbiology.
- Practical Experience: 1200 supervised practice/dietetic internship, coordinated program in dietetics, or an individualized supervised practice pathway accredited by ACEND
 - Internships are extremely competitive with intense application process (2012 statistics: 51% of applicants matched to internships)
 - Hours are completed in clinical nutrition, outpatient clinics, community nutrition, food service management, nutrition research, long-term care facilities, and federal nutrition programs.
- Exam: Developed by the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR)
 - CDR is the credentialing agency of Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND).
 - Proctored, multiple choice with at least 125 questions.
- Notable:
 - As of December 1, 2013 there are 89,300 RDs (1,783 RDs in TN)
 - Approximately 50% of RDs hold advanced degrees
 - RDs are eligible for licensure in any state that requires a license to practice.
 - RDs are a recognized credential for dietitians and nutritionists in the Occupational Outlook Handbook from the United States Department of Labor



Nutrition Care and Licensure

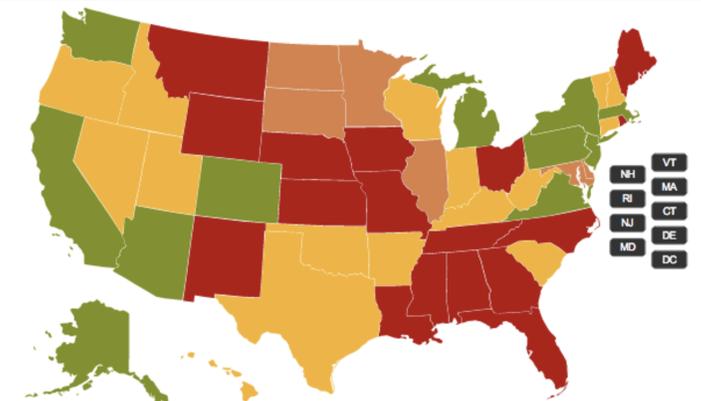


Figure 1: Licensure laws by state² (Adapted from the Center for Nutrition Advocacy website)

RED: Only RDs can obtain licensure. Licensure is legally required to provide nutrition care unless exempt.
ORANGE: There are pathways for individuals besides RDs to obtain licensure. Licensure is legally required to provide nutrition care unless exempt.
YELLOW: Licensure is not legally required to provide nutrition care, but is likely needed for insurance reimbursement eligibility.
GREEN: Licensure is not legally required to provide nutrition care. There are possible limitations for insurance reimbursement eligibility.

Conclusion

After reviewing the selected nutrition certifications, it is obvious that requirements to obtain a nutrition certification widely vary. The certifications focused on sports nutrition did not require more than a high school diploma. In contrast, the Certified Nutrition Specialist (CNS) credential require at least a M.S. or Doctoral degree. Surprisingly, some certifications allow exams to be taken online at home allowing the use of books and other resources. After comparing certifications, it is confirmed that RDs meet the most comprehensive requirements to be considered nutrition experts. Although only a bachelor's degree is required for RDs, institutions providing the education must meet specific curriculum requirements accredited by ACEND. RDs have the largest requirement for practical experience and also go through a highly selective internship process that is absent in the other certifications reviewed. Qualifications to become a CNS are similar to RDs, but the nutrition education and supervised practice experience requirements are not as comprehensive.