There is often confusion about the differences between national certification and state licensure. Many counselors believe it is advantageous to hold both national and state credentials for maximum effect in the profession. The following explanation of both processes may help students who are considering various options.

National certification is a voluntary process which is entirely separate from state licensure (even though the testing instrument is the same in many parts of the nation). The end product of an application for national certification is the right to call oneself an NCC (National Certified Counselor). National certification was developed within the profession to promote professional identity and pride. It has evolved to be a job search booster as well, especially for those who will eventually work in more than one state. NCCs benefit from other NBCC services: enforceable code of ethics, access to resource materials/newsletter for counselors, and advocacy/public education initiatives.

Licensure is required by many states for professionals going into private practice and expecting to receive third party payments. (48 states now have licensure requirements. California is the only state without licensure requirements for professional counselors.) For professionals who are only looking for state licensure, this is the most economical way to take the NCE. NBCC is essentially not involved in this process other than to act as the “testing company” for the state in question. In most states, an individual must have completed his/her degree in order to sit for the exam for state licensure; and there may be other state mandated requirements as well, depending on the state.

Whether a person undertakes state licensure requirements first, followed by earning the national credential or the other way around, is a matter of personal choice. The advantage of working on the NCC credential while still a student is that NCE testing occurs while book knowledge is at its peak. Many states will accept a passing NCE score achieved under the GSA-NCC program. However, applicants may need to be reminded that completion of all certification requirements is the only way to secure NCE scores for future use. Individuals who fail to complete the requirements face having their files closed and their NCE scores invalidated.

For more detail about national certification and state licensure, log onto StudentWorks at nbcc.org and visit the Preparing for Certification section.