



The Alphabet Soup of Certifications and Credentials:

Part 2

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Last month, I defined certification and certificates, suggested organizational and personal reasons for becoming nationally board certified, and offered strategies to prepare for certifying exams.¹ Part 2 provides greater detail on how to list board certification credentials on business cards, conference programs, author bylines, resumes, curricula vitae (CVs), and in e-mail signatures. Based on the number of nursing credential listings I read that are wrong, there is clearly confusion about how to appropriately list one's education, licensure, and board certification credentials. Other professionals continue to experience the same level of confusion, so it is important to have a standard for how credentials are listed so other parties (e.g., consumers and payers) understand the significance and value of credentials. Thankfully, the American Nurses Credentialing Center provides a "how-to" guide that answers questions about listing credentials, but for some reason, nurses are either not unaware of this excellent resource or, even after reading the guide, remain confused about how to list their credentials.² So below, I review the how-to and provide additional examples, followed then by additional suggestions about what to do when one has multiple national board certificated credentials.

FIRST, LIST THE ACADEMIC DEGREE

Because your degree is permanent and remains throughout your career, it should be listed first, but only as the *highest earned degree* from within the same discipline. Listing lesser degrees in the same discipline, regardless of the discipline, is redundant. Listing DNP, MSN; or MSN, BSN; or PhD, MSN (when the PhD is in nursing science) is just as redundant as is DrPH, MPH or DHA, MHA. Because many nurses choose to complete a doctorate (also known as a terminal degree) outside the nursing discipline, it can be important to distinguish between one's terminal degree and a lesser degree, so long as the degrees are in different disciplines.

The subtle distinction of the degrees being in different disciplines tends to cause the most confusion

and is why I suspect nurses continue to list redundant degrees such as MSN, BSN when both are nursing degrees and only the highest degree should be listed. So, for nurses who have a doctoral (terminal degree) in another discipline such as public health (DrPH), education (EdD), or business administration (DBA), or a doctor of philosophy (PhD) that is *not* in nursing science, the highest degree is listed first, followed then by the highest degree in nursing (e.g., DrPH, MSN or EdD, MSN). The opposite can also be true. When you have earned a doctoral degree in nursing (DNP or PhD), with a master's degree outside the nursing discipline, then including the master's degree is appropriate if it is directly related to your work role. For example, the PhD or DNP prepared nurse leader who earned an MBA or MPH would list PhD, MBA or DNP, MPH. One could earn terminal degrees in 2 disciplines, such as PhD, DBA.

The same is true for master's degrees, which is why one sees MBA, BSN or MSN, BS. These are also 2 examples that convey different degrees in different disciplines, where each set of letters signals the highest degree. How to correctly list their academic degrees is confusing for many nurses, but simply clarifying how to appropriately list degrees can shorten the list of letters behind one's name, leaving more space for other credentials. There are nurses (like me) who completed all their degrees in nursing, so you will note that I list only the terminal degree, followed by licensure—PhD, RN.

SECOND, LIST THE LICENSURE

After education, the next credential to list is licensure (e.g., RN or advanced practice RN [APRN]), because in order to practice nursing, completing a degree is not enough, one must be licensed. Remember that professional licensing exams are described as the minimum competency requirement. Listing this credential is the most straight forward—education first, followed by licensure. Here, are a few examples: PhD, APRN or MSN, RN; or for those with degrees within different disciplines PhD, MBA, RN; or PhD, MSN, RN. Different states may have different requirements for

listing licensure, so be sure to check the nurse practice act in your state. Whew!

THIRD, LIST THE BOARD CERTIFICATION CREDENTIALS

This is where things can become even more complicated. *Credentials* often refer to academic, educational, and occupational qualifications, typically showing that you are qualified to do something. Credentials are proof of a claim you make about yourself or your skills. Recall that Signaling Theory describes how recruiters (and others) will make inferences about you based on unobservable information (e.g., cognitive ability) from observable attributes (e.g., certification credentials).³ Because the proliferation of certification credentials raises concerns about the quality of individual credentials, I always recommend pursuing only national board certification from an accredited certifying body.¹ And although it certainly makes sense to list certification credentials upon successful completion of the exam, at some point, using a bit of common sense is also needed because a long string of letters can signal unintended information. For example, listing American Heart Association basic competency certification, such as CPR or ACLS, is not recommended anywhere. But I am often asked about what to do if you have more than 1 national board certification.

My reply is “it depends” on where you intend to list the credentials and how much space is available. Certificates awarded by employers (e.g., chemotherapy administration) or by for-profit companies (e.g., a vendor or an education company) I refer to as proprietary certificate programs. Although they do not result in board certification, they can be listed in the certificate section of a resume, along with any board certifications. On a CV, all board certifications (even those that are expired) should be listed in the certification section. Some CVs may include 2 certification sections, one for board certification and another for non-board certification (i.e., proprietary). Certificates awarded by higher education organizations are listed in the education section of the CV.

There are those nurse leaders with 2 or more board certifications, such as a nurse executive, advanced (NEA-BC) from the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), executive nursing practice (CENP) from the American Organization for Nursing Leadership (AONL), or fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives (FACHE) from the American College of Healthcare Executives. Those credentials can be listed in order of relevance to your current practice, in the order you obtained them, or the most relevant for the role for which you are applying. Here, I suggest using some common basic sense. Sue Smith, PhD, MBA, RN, NEA-BC, CENP, CPHQ, FACHE, looks excessive, and may not even fit on a business card

or across the top of a CV or resume (except in 10-point font!). Listing all your credentials in a conference program, bio sketch, e-mail signature, or as an author byline begins to look excessive and may not signal what you intend. Some publications and organizations have begun to set limits on the number of credentials one can list. My suggestion is to list only the credential(s) most germane to your current practice or most relevant to the audience. For example, if Sue Smith is speaking at a health care business conference focused on quality she might list the credentials most relevant to the audience—PhD, MBA, RN, CPHQ, FACHE.

One final issue that adds to the confusion is punctuation. Nurses learn American Psychological Association style to guide formatting, writing, and punctuating papers. Other professions have their own style guidelines, for example the American Medical Association Manual of Style, which is used for articles published in *Nurse Leader*. Related to punctuation, the 4 style guides I checked indicate using the format without periods (e.g., PhD rather than Ph.D.) and not using periods between letters for abbreviations composed of mainly capital letters. The style guides also recommend omitting periods unless required by tradition or for consistency. Style manuals also include how an author’s academic and professional credentials are to be listed, so checking the appropriate style manual is a good idea.

CONCLUSION

Listing one’s hard-earned credentials correctly can be confusing, but this article provides clarification so nurses can follow the standards for how their credentials should be listed. In this way, consumers, recruiters, and others understand the significance and value of credentials. Adding a dose of common sense will ensure your credentials send the right signal.

REFERENCES

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1541-4612/2019/\$ See front matter
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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2019.07.003>