

## What's the Difference? Accreditation, Certification, and Related Terms

By [Maria Knake](#), Laboratory Assessment Program Manager  
Posted: October 2015

### Reflecting on 50 Years of Quality

As we look back on 50 years of contributions to quality and excellence in materials testing at AASHTO re:source, we reflect on the largest turning points that have led to the program's success. One such event that marks a proud moment in AASHTO re:source history occurred in 1988 when the [AASHTO Accreditation Program](#) (AAP) was established. The program was developed to provide a mechanism to formally recognize the competency of construction materials testing laboratories. (Check out [The History of the AASHTO Accreditation Program](#) for more information.) As we look back on this historic occasion, we reflect on the term "accreditation" and its essential role in construction materials testing.



### What is Accreditation?

Accreditation is a voluntary process in which an agency is evaluated for compliance against a certain set of established criteria. In general terms, accreditation is an attestation by a third party that an agency has demonstrated competence to carry out certain duties and tasks. In the case of AASHTO Accreditation, accredited labs must meet the requirements of [AASHTO R 18](#), the criteria outlined in the [Procedures Manual for Accreditation of Construction Materials Testing Laboratories](#). Laboratories may choose to add specific AASHTO and ASTM test methods to the scope of their accreditation, as well as additional quality system requirements as defined by ASTM standards or [ISO/IEC 17025](#). Obtaining AASHTO Accreditation makes a statement about a laboratory's continued commitment to excellence and is an attestation that the agency is competent to perform the laboratory testing for which they are accredited.

Accreditation requires ongoing compliance with the established accreditation criteria, which, in the case of laboratory accreditation, is accomplished through regularly scheduled [on-site assessments](#) of the agency and participation in a [proficiency testing program](#). While accreditation is a voluntary process, many agencies require laboratories to be accredited in order to do testing work for them and to submit bids on project work. The AASHTO Accreditation Program is the most widely recognized and accepted accreditation program for construction materials testing laboratories in the United States.

### What about Certification?

The term *certification* is sometimes used synonymously with the term accreditation. However, the two terms have very different meanings. The two processes seem to be very similar, so it can be difficult to understand the differences. Certification, like accreditation, is a voluntary process. Certification provides written assurance that a person, product, or process conforms to specified requirements and standards. Certification, also like accreditation, is an attestation made by a third party. An example of a common certification within the construction materials testing industry is technician certification. Many ASTM quality system standards, such as D3740 and D3666, have [technician certification requirements](#) in them. In order for a laboratory to become accredited to these ASTM standards, they must have personnel that hold certifications that conform to the requirements outlined in these standards. Product certification programs are also common, and these kinds of programs provide attestation that a product is manufactured using a specified process or has met certain criteria when subjected to laboratory testing (which, coincidentally, is often times performed by an accredited laboratory). Certification is commonly associated with ISO 9001, which is an internationally recognized standard for Quality Management Systems (QMS). Accreditation is generally considered to be a higher level of recognition than certification. In fact, it is common for certification bodies to hold some kind of accreditation as an attestation to their competency to perform their duties in the field of certification.

### Other Terms

Both *accreditation* and *certification* are terms used by credentialing authorities. Other commonly used terms used include *licensure* and *registration*. Licensure is a process by which an individual is given permission to practice a certain profession. Generally, the licensee must meet certain minimum requirements, such as passing a standardized exam, completing a certain number of years of work experience, and receiving some kind of advanced education or degree in their field of study. Common licensures in the construction materials industry include Professional Engineer (P.E.) and Professional Geologist (P.G.).

*Registration* is often used interchangeably with certification, especially when referring to compliance with ISO 9000 and ISO 9001. Technically speaking, however, these terms are not exactly the same. An agency that is on record as being certified through a particular certification body is registered with that certification body, or registrar. Confusing, huh? We agree. The good news is that interchangeable use of the two terms is usually considered acceptable by most industry standards. The rules are slightly different when it comes to product certification, in which it is not common to use the word *registration* in place of *certification*.

#### **More Information on Accreditation**

AASHTO Accreditation is a great tool that can be used to provide confidence in the results of laboratory testing. To find an AASHTO accredited agency, check out the [directory of accredited laboratories](#) on AASHTO re:source's website. For more information on the AASHTO Accreditation process, check out [A Beginner's Guide to AASHTO Accreditation](#).