

Professional Licensure 101

Does your career require a license?

After graduation, a license may be necessary to get a job.

Did you know that 1 in 4 jobs require a license in the U.S.?

All states license a number of occupations, impacting more careers than most people realize. Different states license different occupations. Some occupations, such as physicians, counselors, and educators, require licenses in every state. Other professions, such as interior designers, music therapists, or foresters, are licensed in only a few states.

It is important to know if the occupation you are working toward will require licensure or certification following graduation.

Why should you care now? You haven't graduated yet.

Some students' graduation celebrations come to a screeching halt when they learn that their degree or certification doesn't meet the unique licensing requirements in the state where they plan to work. Some states' education requirements for licensure include a specific curriculum, experiential learning, and the number of credits earned in specific subjects.

It's better to know sooner than later if additional education demands must be met to begin working following graduation. If you learn about these requirements while you are in school, you may be able to enroll in a certain class or participate in an internship or clinical placement as part of your certificate or degree program that is required for licensure.

How to find out if your education is on a path that leads to licensure?

Based on your program of study, your [academic department or faculty advisor](#) can help you assess if there are potential occupations related to your program of study that require licensure AND assist in determining whether your education will meet licensure requirements in the state where you plan to live after graduation.

SARA colleges and universities in Utah have made a good-faith effort to compare their educational programs with the education licensure requirements of every state and U.S. territory. This research is complicated because licensure requirements in any state can change at any time. You can also contact the campus SARA compliance officer for licensure information (see the contact list at the end of this article).

What can you do?

- Schedule an appointment with **an advisor in your academic department** to discuss your educational plan, career ambitions, and potential requirements or consequences for seeking professional licensure in the state you desire to seek employment.
- If you transfer to another school or a Utah institution, meet with your new advisor to re-assess graduation requirements relative to professional licensure in the state(s) where you plan to work.
- Perform your own research to thoroughly understand the licensure requirements for the state(s) you're considering for employment. While your college or university will share its research on education requirements and can provide guidance to locate licensing information in different states and territories, understanding ALL the requirements for licensure is ultimately your responsibility.
- Stay in contact with the state/territory licensure board where you intend to seek licensure to confirm that requirements haven't changed throughout your enrollment at a Utah institution.

Professional licensure can be complicated. Learn the laws and rules.

State licensure requirements are generally posted on the website of the state licensing board that governs particular occupations (*See "Links to state boards of licensed professions" in the Resources section of this document*).

Requirements will be posted in different places but usually contained in the "Laws and Rules" section, sometimes called Statutes and Regulations (*See "State Administrative Rules" and "State Statute" in the Glossary of Terms*). The language used to describe requirements may be confusing to people who don't read rules and statutes regularly. Also, make sure you understand the process to secure a license. If anything is unclear, contact the state's licensing board directly with questions. **Be aware it may take time to get a response from a licensing board. You may need to reach out again if they don't respond within a few weeks.** *See the PDF for State Licensing Boards in the Resources section.*

Frequently Asked Questions

How difficult is it to get licensed?

Obtaining a license often requires effort beyond graduating and applying to the state licensing agency. State/territory licensing agencies often have additional requirements beyond the education offered at your institution. Such requirements may include, depending on the state and licensing area, state or national examinations taken after graduation, specific clinical or work experience, specific training, fingerprint submissions, criminal background checks, citizenship verification, reference checks, and application/licensing fees.

If I graduate from a Utah SARA institution, will I be able to get licensed in Utah?

Yes, all Utah SARA institution's programs meet licensure requirements in Utah.

If I graduate from a Utah SARA institution and plan to live and work in another state, do I still need to get licensed in Utah?

Maybe. You don't need to obtain a license in Utah if you intend to work in a different state. You can

apply for initial licensure in the state where you will reside. However, there are occupations that allow you to secure an initial license in Utah and transfer that license to another state. *See Initial Licensure in the Glossary of Terms.* If you graduate from a Utah SARA institution, it may streamline the overall process to become licensed in Utah before obtaining licensure in another state.

Do professional licenses transfer from state to state?

Not necessarily. If you move to another state or want to work in a different state(s), you'll likely be required to apply for licensure in each state where you will work. Countries outside the U.S. also have an application process for becoming licensed for certain occupations.

Is there a way to streamline the professional licensure transfer process between states?

Sometimes. Some states participate in reciprocity or compact agreements that can make the transfer of licensure easier. *See the Compact Agreement and Reciprocity Agreement in the Glossary of Terms.*

What if there are multiple paths to licensure for my program of study?

Some occupations have different licensure levels. Nursing, for example, has different education requirements for licensing RNs, LPNs, and CNAs. If your occupation recognizes multiple levels of licensure, investigate each and understand differences in education requirements such as expected workload and estimated salary. As you evaluate the information, you may choose one designation over others.

Are there government regulations requiring higher education institutions to assist students with professional licensure?

Yes. The U.S. Department of Education requires all postsecondary institutions that lend federal student aid to disclose if programs meet the education requirements in each state where students are located. Utah SARA institution programs meet education requirements in Utah. Utah SARA institutions offering online programs and courses must disclose to students if programs meet the educational requirements for licensure in the state or U. S. territory where the student is located. **If the program does not meet the educational requirements, students in that state or U.S. territory may not enroll in the program.**

What if I have an occupation licensure complaint regarding my educational program at a Utah SARA college or university?

You should first file a complaint with that institution. If your issue is not resolved, you can [submit the complaint to Utah SARA](#).

What if I am not a U.S. citizen/resident alien? Can I still become licensed?

Each state has its own regulations regarding professional licensure for individuals who are not U.S. citizens. Many professional licensure boards ask applicants to submit proof of U.S. citizenship, legal resident status, and/or work authorization. States can have unique standards as to what documentation is accepted. Contact the state licensure board for your profession of interest. *See the PDF for State Licensing Boards in the Resources section.*

I have a criminal conviction. Will this impact my ability to get licensed in my profession?

Many licensure boards require applicants to submit a criminal convictions background check. Various professions have unique standards for which past criminal convictions are disqualifying for that profession. It's always best to be honest about past criminal convictions on the licensure application. The Utah Department of Professional Licensure [provides guidelines](#) on how criminal convictions impact professional licensure. For other states, call the licensure board in the state where you plan to seek employment to ask how past criminal convictions could impact your pathway to professional licensure.

Are there other licensure requirements that I should be aware of?

Yes. Some state licensure boards require applicants to submit a Social Security number. Some state licensure boards require applicants to sign and abide by a code of conduct. Applicants are often required to pay licensure fees. Additional unique licensure requirements are possible, like the requirement to have a food handlers permit, a current CPR certificate, or a valid driver's license.

Will my medical marijuana card keep me from earning licensure?

In some cases, applicants who have a valid medical marijuana card can apply for and earn professional licensure. However, it is possible that applicants in some professions, such as health care, law enforcement, transportation, and aviation, may find their employment opportunities limited if they have a medical marijuana card due to federal laws and regulations and liability concerns on the part of employers.

Glossary of Terms

Important terminology and requirements for professional licensing.

Compact Agreement: A binding agreement among states to recognize occupational/professional licenses issued by any state that has enacted the agreement. Typically tailored to specific professions (e.g., nursing, physical therapy). Allows professionals to practice in all member states without needing to obtain a new license for each state. It often involves an interstate licensure data system to streamline the process.

State or National Examinations: In some states, applicants are required to pass post-graduation state exams and/or nationally recognized exams of specialized accrediting agencies to obtain certain professional licenses. There are usually fees associated with these exams, minimum standards for a passing grade, and sometimes failing the exam can result in penalties, such as a waiting period before being allowed to retake the exam and secure a license.

Experiential Learning: Some states require license applicants to have experience beyond classroom-based education. They may demand hands-on experience and/or experience under the supervision of a seasoned professional in the field. Experiential learning may be called clinicals, internships, or practicums, for example.

Initial Licensure: If you don't have a professional license in any state, you will need to apply for "initial licensure" in the state where you plan to work. If you already hold a license in one state and want to become licensed in another, many states have a separate application process often called "*Licensure by Reciprocity*" or "*Licensure by Endorsement*."

Licensure by Reciprocity: Some states refer to licensure reciprocity as an expedited process for reviewing/approving out-of-state applications for those licensed in another state. *This differs from a formal "Reciprocity Agreement," defined below.* Licensure by Reciprocity may also be called *Endorsement, Comity, or Universal Recognition*. Be aware that these terms can mean the same thing in some states and different things in others. Assure you understand the usage and meanings of these terms for any particular state.

Reciprocity Agreement: A formal agreement between two or more states to recognize each other's licenses. The agreement can be broad or specific and simplifies the process for professionals relocating between states by acknowledging their existing licenses. However, it may require additional steps like verification or meeting state-specific requirements.

Scope of Practice: States typically have specific regulations for the services and business practices that licensed practitioners can perform. In medical professions, for example, only certain occupations are allowed to recommend, prescribe, or dispense medications, which varies by state. It is important to understand the Scope of Practice regulations for your occupation, which can be found in the Laws and Rules on the respective state licensing board's website.

Specialty Accreditor: An agency that provides official recognition to postsecondary professional and occupational education programs or schools that meet established standards for higher education. For some occupations, the education requirement may require the academic program to be approved by or meet the standards of a specialty accreditor.

Different states define education requirements for licensure or certification in their administrative rules or in state statutes:

(State) Administrative Rule or Regulation (or Administrative Law): A regulation or policy adopted by a state's executive branch and agencies that provides guidance on following state laws. Can interpret or implement laws or policies. May describe state agency procedures and practices.

(State) Statute (also called State Code): A law passed by a state legislature and signed by the governor. Statute for professional licensure defines the scope of practice for occupations licensed in a state; designates a state agency to administer the law; gives licensing boards the legal authority to establish minimum requirements to obtain, retain, and reinstate a license; sets penalties for operating without a license. In Utah, the Division of Professional Licensure (dopl.utah.gov) is the agency that coordinates licensing boards for most of Utah's licensed occupations. The Utah State Board of Education (schools.utah.gov) licenses educators.

Universal License (also called Comprehensive License): For this type of license, laws are enacted by individual states to grant a license by endorsement to practitioners from other states. These licenses generally apply to most or all professions regulated by the state, and they reduce barriers to entry for out-of-state professionals by recognizing valid licenses from other states. However, this type of license may still require an application process and eligibility verification.

Resources

There are a number of websites with more information on education requirements for licensure in different states and U.S. territories.

[Reciprocity Agreements](#)

[Compact Agreements](#)

[State Boards of Licensed Professions](#)

[Utah SARA Campus Contacts](#)

For a list of occupations requiring licensure:

- Visit [CareerOneStop](#)
- See *List of Occupations* under the search field and click the + symbol to display the list.