

in the final analysis

“What kind of sad creature considers occupational licensing a hot topic?”

—Michelle Cottle in *The Atlantic*

Count me as one such a creature because many TMS members are passionate about professional licensing for engineers. The professional engineering (P.E.) designation means a lot in this community, and it is perceived as essential in many consulting and governmental sectors. The practice is literally and figuratively part of our infrastructure, yet it has become a contentious issue in state capitols across the country. Why? Perhaps because lawmaking can be a blunt-force instrument rather than a delicate tool.

How does licensure work? As with most things (everything?), I’m not an expert, but my understanding is this: There are effectively two types of licensure—licenses for those whose work requires considerable education and can have catastrophic consequences if performed ineptly (physicians, engineers, accountants, etc.) and those that require occupational or vocational training so as to competently deliver a particular service (beauticians, cab drivers, and so on). The process is governed at the state level. What occupations are required to have a license and how that license is issued will vary from state to state and job to job. While there’s a big difference between the risk of having a bridge fall down and the risk of getting a bad hair cut, the licensure process attempts to safeguard the public against both extremes.

So what’s the issue? There’s often wide variability from state to state on what occupations require licensure, what the licensure requirements are, and how much the license costs. Famously, the Obama and Trump administrations have few policy commonplaces, but both have supported reform to the licensure system so as to reduce costs and restrictions.

One organization trying to advance a minimalist licensure agenda is the American Legislative Exchange Council. It provides groups advocating change with model legislation to propose to state legislatures. An excerpt: “The Purpose of the Act is to: (A) Protect workers from unnecessary and burdensome licensing regulations; (B) Increase market competition by allowing consumers to make informed decisions in hiring the workers they choose; (C) Empower industry groups, trade organizations, and similar private associations to self-regulate without the participation of government; and (D) Make regulators more efficient by shifting resources away from enforcing occupational licensure to better focus on regulating for the purposes of protecting health and safety through different types of regulation.” Maybe this is reasonable for manicurists but is it right for engineers?

TMS is a staunch advocate of professional registration in the engineering field and does this through a network of collaborative relationships. Here’s how: TMS is a member of the Participating Organizations Liaison Council of the National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying. NCEES exists to “advance licensure for engineers and surveyors in order to safeguard the health, safety, and welfare of the public.” They coordinate with state licensure bodies and professional societies to bring uniformity to the process. Within NCEES, TMS has responsibility for the metallurgical and materials engineering P.E. area, and TMS volunteers work through our Professional Registration Committee. NCEES is part of the larger Alliance for Responsible Professional Licensing, a newly formed advocacy group that aims “to educate policymakers and the public on the importance of high standards, rigorous education, and extensive experience within highly complex, technical professions that are relied upon to protect public safety and enhance public trust.” Nutshell: They advocate that states refrain from weakening or eliminating licensing standards for the technical community.

Reasonable people can disagree reasonably yet find reasonable solutions to their disagreements. The reasonable advocacy position seems to be that while the licensure system may need some adjustment, the engineering community already has a solution in place that assures integrity and safety to the public. Sounds like something engineers would do.

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James J. Robinson
Executive Director

 @JJRofTMS

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