

PERSPECTIVE ▶ By Alfred R. Pagan, P.E., P.L.S.



Thoughts on licensure — Part 2

This is the second part of a two-column series inspired by an article in the June 2007 issue of the National Society of Professional Engineers' (NSPE) *PE: The Magazine for Professional Engineers* (www.nspe.org/pemagazine/june2007.asp) — "The future of professional engineering licensure" — by Jon D. Nelson, P.E., and Bobby E. Price, Ph.D., P.E. The authors posed eight questions for consideration. Part 1 of this column (*CE News*, August 2007, page 12) offered my thoughts on the first four questions; following are some thoughts on the last four questions.

Will future educational requirements for licensure change? In my view, it is a certainty that this will happen. Standards in a related field, land surveying, are already undergoing significant changes. (See my April and June 2007 columns on this subject.) Although there appears to be no consensus at this time as to the direction engineering licensure testing will take, we may be approaching a crossroad. I have no answers regarding the future, only the following questions:

- Will tests be more difficult than they are today? Or easier?
- Will tests "broaden out" or "narrow down"? For example, will stormwater management problems on the tests permit the use of software and computers *in the testing venue*? Or will the permitted tools be limited to calculators?
- Will testing procedures continue to permit "open-book" assistance, or will other possibilities present themselves, such as permitting use of proprietary software in the testing venue? Note that even experienced "graders" of the P.E. examination (some with Ph.D.s) may not always be familiar with the proprietary software.

What about national licensure? The NSPE article points out some of the comity problems that are, and will be, encountered. There is little agreement within the 50 states as to what reasonable standards will prevail. States zealously guard their power to regulate and that policy will prevail into the foreseeable future.

Many questions arise regarding reciprocity, including the tenuous relationships that might result if a state that already has a reciprocity agreement with another state were to want to change its licensure standards. The NSPE article points out also that "some headway" has been made in recent years to establish universal criteria for granting licensure. But there is a long way to go before unanimity — or even majority agreements — are made concerning this important matter.

Will the trend to consolidate professional boards continue? Many reasons for this trend are evident. Perhaps the most important one the NSPE article points out is that "some jurisdictional governments believe engineering professionals

should only be involved in the regulatory process."

It is clear that, at least in some states, politicians are most concerned with who wields the power. By giving power to state licensing boards, the real power brokers — governors, state senators, and state assembly personnel — are ceding some of their power to others.

While most licensing board members are not paid for their services to the state, some politically connected board members probably enjoy the feeling of accomplishment and power associated with being in a position to make important decisions regarding the issues that are vital to the professionals within a state. They will try to cling to this power.

Will the proliferation of international practice result in changes to the U.S. licensure system? It is clear that there will be significant changes to the way licensure will be administered. Given my age, it is unlikely that any of the changes will impact me greatly. (As an aside, I intend to keep my P.E. license active for now but am considering transferring my land surveying registration to inactive, or retired, status in a year or so.)

The authors make the point that "few countries have licensure requirements that are as rigorous as those in the U.S." That is probably true, but I would have difficulty proving that as fact. As the authors mention, many engineers who are allowed to practice in other countries are fully capable of successfully practicing their profession here. The problem is that it is not, and would not be, easy for our 50 or so licensing boards to separate the wheat from the chaff as far as the capability of a foreign applicant for licensure is concerned. The difficulty should be evident in the two standards that normally have to be met in this country — education and quality of pre-licensing experience. The latter specification is hard enough for U.S. boards to define, even when all of the experience has been acquired in this country. Consider the difficulty faced by even the most conscientious and qualified deliberative bodies when trying to sort out the credentials of someone who has had a successful licensed career in a European, Asian, African, or South American country.

I hope I have shed some light — but little heat — on the problems faced by our state licensing boards when tackling future licensure problems. The task will not be an easy one. ■

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