The much-publicized case involving the Oregon State Board of Examiners for Engineering and Land Surveying and Mats Jarlstrom is an issue of great interest and concern to the National Society of Professional Engineers and for the more than 400,000 professional engineers practicing around the country.

Given the attention the issue has received, including Mr. Will’s op-ed, we believe it is necessary to clarify why professional engineering is essential, why it is more than just “practicing engineering,” and why the engineering license exists in the first place. It’s easy for these points to get lost behind mischaracterizations and misunderstanding of the profession.

To begin, there is a clear distinction between an engineer and a licensed professional engineer, commonly referred to as a PE. The main distinction is the legal and ethical duty of PEs to hold paramount the public health, safety, and welfare in their designs, construction, and observations. It isn’t a matter of one being superior or smarter than the other, the piece of paper you hold from your college or university, where you earned your degree, or the organizations you’ve joined. It is a matter of meeting the legal prerequisites for carrying out the practice of engineering on projects that have public safety implications as defined by that particular state’s law and rules.

You would not rely on a medical professional who had not received a state license to practice, even if they had earned their medical degree. You would demand they be licensed. Likewise, you would not want to be represented in court by someone who had only graduated from law school. Instead, you would want to be represented by a lawyer licensed in that jurisdiction, someone who had passed the requisite bar examination and completed the jurisdiction’s requirements for licensure. In fact, it would be against the law for someone who had not yet passed the bar examination and completed their character and fitness evaluation by the jurisdiction’s legal registration board to represent an individual before a court of law, absent some very narrow exemptions. You would demand they be licensed. The same logic applies to engineering.

Since the enactment of the first engineering licensing law in Wyoming in 1907, state licensing boards have sought to ensure that qualified individuals practice in a manner that safeguards the public. And those individuals are held accountable when they fail to do so. Well known examples include the Kansas City Hyatt Regency Hotel collapse disciplinary hearings, the state investigation into the Texas A&M bonfire collapse, and the Hurricane Sandy inquiries in New York and New Jersey.
Put simply, professional engineers have a legally enforceable obligation to protect the public health and safety above all else. PEs know that safety comes before profit, and service before self.

No matter the outcome in this particular case, the principle of licensing engineers is sound. And the enforcement of a state’s engineering licensure laws and rules by licensing boards is critical in this pursuit.

Part of the broader societal challenge for licensed professional engineers is that the term “engineer” is often misused—and even abused—by individuals and companies to describe a wide assortment of non-engineering activities and services in ways that mislead, deceive, and at times put the public at risk. Engineering titles, like medical and law titles, should be reserved to those who are licensed or who have graduated from an accredited engineering program.

NSPE is hopeful that the action by the Oregon board will bring greater public attention and awareness to what it means to be a professional engineer and the critically important role that professional engineers play every day in protecting the public health, safety, and welfare.

Sincerely,

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