



# editorial

## The Fire Alarm

**B**ased on the reaction to our exposé of an attempt to remove boundary experience from the requirements to sit for a licensing exam, we seem to have struck a nerve. An educator from New Mexico chastised me for allowing the magazine to be “divisive, vilify the efforts of other professionals, and not maintain appropriate journalistic standards,” all without saying exactly what infraction had been committed. A surveyor from Massachusetts (whose letter you can read in Feedback) demanded that we cancel his subscription because he felt we had been racist. I’m guessing the educator was upset about the same thing, and maybe even standing up for one of his own.

For my 20 years of survey magazine publishing, the record is clear: I have been a strong supporter of two and four year degree programs. Personally, I have always been a very strong proponent of continuous (not continuing) education. And as for being racist, perhaps we could have stated it differently, but we were attempting to describe a problem within our education system, and nothing personal was intended.

The comment about the professor was aimed at the fact his students were having trouble understanding him. This is certainly not a new accusation in our country, and if people are paying a lot for an education, it’s not unreasonable for them to demand they be able to understand the teacher. My question would be, why is it we are only able to find English as a Second Language instructors in our country? I have learned that it’s because schools require PhDs to head up the programs, and we have no PhD programs in surveying in this country. It seems to me that since surveying is such a unique profession, and not one easily pigeon-holed, that requirement should be relaxed.

And it brings up another problem: Why are engineers in charge of survey programs? Aside from the fact that engineers tend to look down on surveyors, several aspects of surveying can be taught by an engineer. But no way should an engineer—especially if the engineer is not a licensed surveyor and therefore has no experience in boundary surveying—be teaching boundary surveying. Not all of the programs include instruction in boundary surveying, but those that do should meet *this* requirement.

Who’s behind this? As far as I can tell, it’s NCEES. You have to remember, NCEES is in the business of selling exams. Nothing wrong with that. Likewise, educators must have enough students to make programs viable, and are interested in increasing the number of students. Nothing wrong with that, either.

When the issue first came up two months ago, I contacted Curt Sumner, the executive director of NSPS, and after looking into the matter, he assured me that there was no intent to remove the experience requirement. However, I subsequently



“WHAT CHICKEN?” IMAGE AND PERMISSION BY DAVID DUPIRE.

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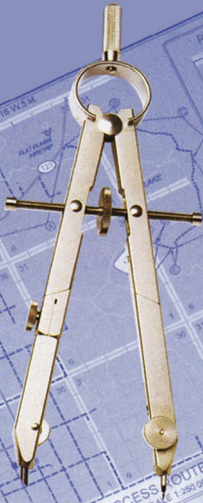
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received a copy of the December NCEES *Licensure Exchange* newsletter.

Before I proceed, a caveat: these NCEES committees function much like a Grand Jury in that they are charged with examining an issue, and if they find no grounds for proceeding, they can issue a “No Bill” and disband. Here’s what’s in the newsletter:

Under the charge given to the Committee on Examinations for Professional Surveyors, it states “...*consider whether the requirement that experience must be earned before a candidate can take the PS exam should be removed from the Model Law, as has been done for the PE exam.*” We consider this to be the smoking gun.

But wait! There’s more! Under the charge given to the Future of Surveying Task Force, it states “...*The task force will evaluate the current state of the surveying profession in terms of what NCEES can do to mitigate the low number of candidates seeking licensure as professional surveyors and to better promote the value of a career in the surveying profession. It will consider if revisions are needed to the definition of surveying to encompass new technology and methodology to broaden the potential base for licensed surveyors. It will also evaluate whether state-specific exams can be transitioned to region-specific exams or be eliminated.*”

The last sentence illustrates a gross misunderstanding of surveyor licensing laws. If we go all the way back to the 1950s when most of the surveying licensing laws were enacted, the reason why is because the public was being harmed by inadequately trained surveyors. As our readers know, legal principles of boundary location are founded on the bedrock of each state’s statute and case law. The U.S. Public Land Survey System can be very different state to state, even between adjoining states. (Of course the colonial states don’t have the USPLSS.) For these reasons (and others), the state-specific exam is just as important as the Fundamentals of Surveying (FS) and the Principles and Practice of Surveying (PS) exams produced by NCEES. To eliminate it would be pure folly.

One of the reasons given for watering down the requirements was that the profession is dying and that we needed to attract more people. Unspoken by those in favor is acknowledgment of the fact that the primary reason for a declining number of applicants has been the worst construction recession since the end of WW2. What

young person in their right mind would even give surveying consideration when they could see no job at the end of the tunnel?

Shortly after I received the NCEES newsletter, I learned NSPS leadership was going to have a meeting here in Frederick, so we took the opportunity to sit down with outgoing president Pat Smith, incoming president Jon Warren, Treasurer John Fenn, and Curt Sumner to give us an opportunity to explain why the magazine has done what it has done. Surprise was expressed at the NCEES state-specific idea above, but we had a very productive discussion as to the state of surveying. We agreed that the profession can and should be opened up to what I call geo-everything. Perhaps a specialty license is the answer. Sumner said that in Virginia, photogrammetrists take the same fundamentals exam, but instead of taking the boundary track exam, they take the photogrammetry track exam. But everybody sitting at the table agreed there’s a sound reason for the experience requirement, and it cannot be eliminated.

Well-known licensed surveyor and educator Dick Elgin has written an open letter to NCEES which will appear in the next issue. In his letter he details not only how he thinks these proposals came to be, but also why they are bad ideas. Some would point to the fact that many of the NCEES committee members are licensed surveyors, but I would ask why haven’t we heard from any of them? My assessment is that NCEES is trying to shoehorn surveyors into what works for engineers. A one size fits all approach, a marginalizing and minimizing of who and what surveyors are simply will not work. Not everything can be reduced to a formula.

You might wonder why we’ve been pulling the fire alarm. Oddly, much of the negative reaction seems to revolve around the fact that we would dare to shine the light of day. One California licensing Board member even accused us of doing it to “sell more magazines.” And similar to what passes for political discourse in our country these days, those who disagree with us have chosen to attack the source and the messengers rather than address the message. It is our belief that unless we express our opposition, it will end up a “done deal.” The primary reason for licensing is the protection of the public. Surveyors represent a relatively small population, and the magazine is here to provide a voice. And as always we welcome all viewpoints. ■