

guest editorial

Should a College Degree be a Required Element of Professionalism?

I recently attended a continuing education seminar where amendments to our state land surveyors act were being discussed. Running through the various texts, we came to the section of our act that outlines requirements for licensure as a Surveyor Intern. The most notable change to this section concerned educational requirements to sit for the fundamentals of surveying examination. With the intent to increase licensure, our act was amended to allow candidates with a baccalaureate degree in any subject including 24 hours of surveying courses to qualify for the exam. Prior to the change, a candidate needed a baccalaureate in land surveying or related science plus the requisite 24 hours of surveying.

Personally, I support the change and found it relatively insignificant. However, a passionate discussion began when the audience was asked to voice its opinion regarding the amendment and the value of requiring a four-year degree at all. While we generally acknowledged the need to increase our numbers, opinions were mixed on the degree requirement. Some proposed a technical associates degree. Others were hell bent on the four-year requirement, rationalizing ... "if we want to be on par with engineers and architects we need to keep it".

I interjected that I would like to see a non-degreed path to licensure. Something requiring a combination of college course work and on the job experience. One of the guest speakers responded to my comment, retorting ... "in some States you cannot be considered a professional without a college degree". As a non-degreed surveyor, I fully understand my bias on the topic, nevertheless, this comment got under my skin. Whether it is true or not is not the issue—rather why does the opinion exist at all? After all, I considered myself a professional.

I founded my own survey firm shortly after obtaining my license, problem solved with attorneys, engineers, planners and many other design and legal professionals over my thirty-three-year career. I can't recall a single time that my professionalism has been called into question. Quite the opposite, I remember receiving complements for my professional conduct. The thought that my life's work in the survey profession is somehow relegated to a lower status, simply for not possessing a college degree, is disturbing.

That's not to say that I believe that obtaining a college degree is a bad thing or that schools are not preparing students adequately. To the contrary, obtaining a college degree should be rewarded as being the most desirous and quickest way to becoming licensed. However, it should be viewed from the proper perspective and assigned appropriate weight. After all, what unique knowledge is bestowed on a college student between eighteen and twenty-two years of age that so separates them from their non-student counterparts, that are actively working in the profession?

Is it the history of the U.S. Rectangular Survey System? If so, any authoritative book on land surveying will provide insight on that subject. Maybe some form of special math or science? I've taken college level math and science classes, but I can safely say that my high school courses would have sufficed to solve any survey computation I've encountered so far. Attorneys at law have some of the highest educational requirements of any profession; following this logic, lawyers as a group should be a paradigm of professionalism. These are our current and future judges, many ascending to high political positions, making and shaping the laws that govern us. But you need to look

the American Surveyor

amerisurv.com

November 2018 / Vol. 15 No. 11
© Cheves Media LLC

PUBLISHER Allen E. Cheves
allen.cheves@chevesmedia.com

EDITOR Marc S. Cheves, PS
marc.cheves@chevesmedia.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR Jason E. Foose, PS
ASSOCIATE EDITOR Joel Leininger, PS
ASSISTANT EDITOR Jacalyn Cheves

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

C. Barton Crattie, PS	Wendy Lathrop, PS
James J. Demma, PS, Esq.	John Matonich, PS
Dr. Richard L. Elgin, PS, PE	Michael J. Pallamary, PS
Chad Erickson, PS	Jerry Penry, PS
Linda Erickson	Walt Robillard, Esq., PS
Gary Kent, PS	Fred Roeder, PS
Lee Lovell, PS	

The staff and contributing writers may be reached via the online Message Center at amerisurv.com

GRAPHIC DESIGN LTD Creative, LLC

WEBMASTER Joel Cheves

OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR Becky Sadler

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT Edward Duff

ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE Richard Bremer

The American Surveyor (ISSN 1548-2669) is published monthly by Cheves Media LLC. Editorial mailing address: 7820-B Wormans Mill Road, #236 • Frederick, MD 21701. Tel: (301) 620-0784.

The American Surveyor is a publication of Cheves Media LLC, 7820-B Wormans Mill Road, #236 • Frederick, MD 21701. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without the express written permission of the publisher. Opinions and statements made by the writers and contributors do not necessarily express the views of Cheves Media LLC.

Subscriptions prices in the U.S.: Free for qualified professionals. Canada: 1 year \$56.00 US; international subscriptions \$72.00 per year (Airmail), U.S. funds prepaid. Back issues (subject to sufficient stock) are available for \$4.95 + S/H.

New subscription inquiries and all other address changes should be sent to *The American Surveyor*, P.O. Box 4162, Frederick, MD 21705-4162. Fax: 301-695-1538. Subscribe online @ www.amerisurv.com



no farther than their billboard advertisements to find evidence to the contrary.

Professionalism manifests itself based on our beliefs and personal ethics that were developed over our lifetimes. In fact, our parents probably had a greater influence on our professional capacity than any college course or job training experience ever will. Professionalism can't be legislated into existence—which is the primary reason I rallied against mandatory continuing education before it was enacted in Illinois. It became clear to me early in my career, that if an individual did not possess the drive, commitment and most importantly the passion to continue learning on their own, no amount of mandated study would substitute. You either conduct yourself in a professional manner or you don't. There is no middle ground.

For reasons that escape me, we tend to compartmentalize things to the point of being meaningless—for instance, the topic of ethics. In my state of Illinois, surveyors are required to have taken two professional development

hours in ethics every renewal period. This is not entirely unreasonable, but what is it really teaching us? Ethics class for me typically consists of three to four real-life examples of abhorrently reckless surveyors attempting to cover up a mistake they made, resulting in damage to one or more parties. This is usually followed up with a short question and answer session. Where is the mistake? Was it ethical for said surveyor to withhold this information from his client? Blah, Blah, Blah. Of course not, it's a cover-up! And why was the reckless surveyor attempting to cover up their mistake? Because he doesn't want to pay for the damages and admit the embarrassing mistake. A perfect example of the ageless dilemma of choosing between right and wrong.

Certainly, there exists cases where the difference between right and wrong is nebulous, but in the end, it still comes down to a binary choice between right and wrong. Simply put, you can't be a professional without first being ethical. The two are mutually inclusive. You can't develop ethics over the span of two hours biannually—nor

can it be obtained in the four to five years spent earning a baccalaureate degree.

Mentioned earlier, but worth repeating, professionalism is based on our beliefs and personal ethics which combine to create our principals. Principles guide our moral compass and help us navigate the right and wrong in the decision process. In my opinion, this the only required element of professionalism. As practitioners of the profession, we are the sole arbiters of professional conduct and bear the responsibility for policing our peers. We do this through our state board of registration. Should we decide to define professionalism in terms of college, I believe that we will have effectively ceded our authority to the universities. ■

Donald Johnson is a licensed Land Surveyor in Illinois and Wisconsin. He currently serves as survey manager for Omega and Associates in Lisle, Illinois. Prior to this, Don co-founded and operated a small survey and engineering firm located in suburban Chicago.

GET NOTICED

▶ **Certify your skills and abilities with CST**

Make your resume stand out!

Today's employers prefer certified technicians.

NSPS
CST
CERTIFIED SURVEY TECHNICIAN

nsp.us.com

+1 (240) 439-4615 Ext. 112



Level I & II Training Now Available at learnCST.com