



Guest Editorial: To Decree or Not to Decree

Professional Surveyor Magazine - August 2007

First, let me begin with the assertion that I am a proponent of education in all its forms. My intention here is most certainly to "stir the pot" and hopefully to energize the debate that continues on this subject, and to get people talking, thinking, and maybe even acting. But please also be advised that the opinions I present are merely that, my opinions.

I want to focus this essay, or diatribe depending on your positions relative to mine, on the requirements for education now being both proposed and initiated in almost every state in our union. It is my firm belief that the requirement of education is the wrong direction for our profession to take. (You must be pondering how I can then reconcile this feeling with the opening statement of this article. I will explain in due course.) I truly believe that education requirements threaten the future of our wonderful profession. I have listened to this debate range for years in various forums and I feel I can no longer remain silent. I feel we need to be wary of where we are being taken as a profession. I believe that we are being taken there, ironically, by people who mostly do not have a degree in surveying or possibly even a college degree at all.

Educational requirements generally come in two forms, a college degree in surveying and continuing educational requirements. I will begin with the latter.

I think continuing education is an essential element to continuing to provide the best services possible to my clients and the public. I feel it is incumbent on the professional to maintain an awareness of how our profession is developing in order to continue to practice within this profession. I also feel extremely fortunate to have been schooled in the benefits of attending seminars and association meetings early in my career by my former employers and colleagues. However, I understand that not all surveyors feel the same as I do. Regardless of how important continuing education truly is, the old adage that "we can lead our fellow professionals to water but we can't make them think" could never be more accurate.

At a seminar a year ago, ironically, I heard from a lecturer that studies of various professions (not just surveying) have shown that even when required to accumulate a number of CEUs (Continuing Education Units) each and every year, individuals fall into more or less two categories. The first group attends only because of the requirements and gains little to nothing from the experience, while the second group would attend anyway because of their underlying desire to learn and develop as professionals. The presenter went on to say that those same studies showed that the professions ultimately don't gain much, if at all, as a whole from better practices as a result of CEU requirements.

Similarly, a recent informal poll on a survey newsgroup showed mixed opinions among surveyors nationwide about the benefits of CEUs within states that required them. This poll was from a group of individuals who are certainly interested in maintaining their standing in the profession as witnessed by their participation in the newsgroup. As for myself, as I said earlier, I'm a participator in continuing education even though my state

doesn't require it, although I am against it being mandated. I have not been shown, to date, the benefit of the requirement. But CEUs is not the major point I wanted to emphasize in this article.

My firm opinion about the requirement for a Bachelor's Degree (BS) in surveying as a prerequisite for licensure is that it is a very bad idea. Let me give you my background first. I have a BS in biology with a minor in mathematics. My education has served me well and I would recommend a college education to anyone and everyone, regardless of their aspirations in the surveying profession. One reason I'm against the state requirements for a BS in surveying is that it's ultimately exclusive to our industry. The May 2007 issue of this very magazine had an article entitled "[How Can We Attract Young People to Our Profession.](#)" This is a topic of discussion throughout the country, as I witness it in many publications, websites, and meetings. At our most recent professional association meeting a very amusing gentleman took 95, I mean 5 minutes to tell us about the difficulties that Metro State College of Denver is experiencing in attracting students into their program. MSCD, by the way, is the national leader in "distance learning," meaning you can take the courses from your home. At that same meeting a different presenter commented about how he fell into the survey profession "by accident." The resounding response from what appeared to be everyone in the room confirmed that most of us had apparently shared the same experience.

I contend that the vast majority of currently licensed survey professionals did not know they would be pursuing a career in surveying while in college and deciding on their degree program (if they attended college). There are many wise, worldly, and mature individuals among us who happened upon the survey profession later in life, perhaps as I did as a second career, and who offer that wisdom and maturity to the advancement of our profession. The bottom line is that we don't attract more people to our profession by excluding a huge number of them as a first step (the vast majority of young people don't or can't attend college for various reasons) or by excluding those of us who happened upon the profession after our college educations were completed. That alone should be enough to end the debate, but as you may have guessed, I have more.

My second point is that we all have our favorite "old timers" whom we may even have been mentored by. We look upon these pillars of our community with awe and admiration. How did they learn so much and become so adept at what they do? The same way we all can, by practicing our profession. Some of these people don't even have a high school education, yet they were able to become some of the most well-respected among us. By requiring a BS we are excluding the future "old timers" of our profession.

My next point is short and, I think, sweet. Who are these people who are proposing the legislation to require a BS, and how many among them have a BS in surveying? My bet is not many.

My last point is that there are a lot of bad surveyors out there just as there are a lot of great surveyors too. But it is my contention that the number of bad surveyors will not decrease, and may possibly increase, with the requirement for a BS in surveying. I believe that the future of surveying with a BS requirement will look like this, as it already does in a similar profession: A student will graduate from college at the tender age of about 22. This person will probably have had some summer jobs at a survey company, but will not have had very extensive experience. Having graduated though, he or she will be (and currently is) qualified to sit for the NCEES Fundamentals of Surveying exam and will most likely pass that and become an SIT (or whatever acronym your state uses). Having done this, he will apply for jobs, want and expect a certain level of pay, and I believe he'll get it because the company will justify his pay rate by putting them to work learning the fundamentals of *project management* in the office, a position of "responsible charge." Don't forget that because of the BS requirement this same company will have a full compliment of field personnel who are stuck in those positions because without a degree they are not qualified for advancement. (I don't even want to get into the effects this will have on the quality of field work because of a lack of motivation.)

So our former student will at some point become a Licensed Professional Surveyor never having spent any appreciable amount of time in the field. How many old and existing monuments will, as a result of this lack of experience, be overlooked? How many other aspects of their surveys will also be overlooked because they have not been given the opportunity to gain years of field experience? Their geomatics degrees don't provide this experience. This is, after all, a field profession. Is this the future you want for this profession? It's already happening in some instances.

Should a BS in surveying, or any other subject for that matter, contribute to a person's qualifications for licensure? Hell yes! But should a BS in surveying be the only path to licensure? Hell no! Many of us didn't even know we wanted to become licensed until we were party chiefs. Let's not be exclusive, but let us be inclusive. Let's allow everyone an opportunity to participate in this wonderful profession, regardless of their educational backgrounds. I think we should cultivate multiple paths to licensure and not just one. I think it's critical if we want to continue to be a varied group of professionals instead of becoming a homogenous mass of button pushers and formula fillers.

In [POB magazine, May 2007](#), Jason G. Racette wrote, "Gone are the days when a person would gain experience by working his way from rodman to crew chief." I have never been more saddened about, or frightened for, our profession as when I read those words. That same person could have continued to work his way from crew chief to PLS to president to owner. It is a scenario that has happened many, many times already. I want it to be a scenario that is still available to those who can't afford a college education but are willing to work hard and put in the time. Are those days truly gone? I certainly hope not.

But more importantly, what do you think and what are you willing to do about it?

About the Author



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