

Professional Licensing Is Rigorous for a Reason

By Skip Braziel

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There has been [a lot of discussion in recent weeks](#) around the bipartisan support for changing occupational licensing laws.

Observers are right to point out that too many barriers to entry exist for many occupations such as inconsistent licensing requirements that have little or nothing to do with preventing harm. At a time of intense political polarization, it is refreshing to read about even one area where the two parties might share common ground.

However, for all of the valid concerns and good faith, the recent push to overhaul state licensing laws risks a host of unintended consequences that reformers may not fully appreciate.

Namely, broad-brush proposals intended to relax licensing requirements for some jobs can also weaken the standards for unrelated professions if the legislative language is not carefully crafted.

Therefore, the conversation around licensing reform would be well-served to acknowledge that for some professions, rigorous licensing is not only appropriate but desirable and necessary to safeguard the public's health and welfare.

The [Alliance for Responsible Professional Licensing](#) (ARPL) was formed to educate policymakers and the public about the importance of rigorous professional licensing for highly complex, technical professions that are relied upon to protect the public's safety and enhance public trust.

Professions such as engineers, surveyors, architects, landscape architects, and certified public accountants (CPAs) are responsible for everything from the physical integrity of buildings to the fiscal integrity of financial systems. They design and build roads, bridges, and stormwater systems, and ensure the accuracy of business, personal, and public financial records, audits, and legally required filings.

The public rightly expects a baseline level of expertise and accountability for the professionals they entrust with these immense responsibilities. The best way to meet this expectation is to require rigorous and ongoing education, examination, and experience through professional licensing.

Unfortunately, current proposals intended to remove barriers to entry for workers would have the unintended consequence of diluting or removing the education, examination, and experience requirements for professional licensing.

One such proposal has been branded the "[Occupational Licensing Consumer Choice Act](#)."

In its current form, a more accurate moniker might be the “Let the Buyer Beware Act.”

A proposal such as this to eliminate licensing is extremely dangerous because it would severely undermine the ability to establish, verify, and enforce the necessary expertise in professions that impact public safety and trust. Without the rigor and oversight of professional licensing, the public would be exposed to greater risk when it is most vulnerable, such as motorists driving over a bridge, or when it most needs trustworthy information, like when starting or investing in a business.

Moreover, eliminating professional licensing would shift the burden of ensuring qualifications from expert licensing boards to consumers. This radical shift would put the public at greater risk of being harmed or taken advantage of by unqualified or unscrupulous practitioners.

A professional license tells the public that a person working in a highly complex profession has been determined by experts in his or her field to have achieved a minimum level of qualification to do their job safely and competently. It is simply unreasonable and unfair to expect a layperson to make that determination by themselves by relying solely on review sites like yelp.

Furthermore, proposed licensing overhaul bills focus only on reducing barriers of entry *into the occupation* and largely discount the critical role licensing plays in continued education, enforcement, compliance, and remedies.

These proposals would significantly weaken or eliminate the authority of regulatory boards to act to protect the public and enforce responsible licensing standards. Instead, the public would be left on its own to pursue enforcement through expensive litigation after a bad outcome and the hope that market forces would eventually weed out unqualified practitioners.

Professional licensing is the most efficient and effective way to *prevent* harm from being done to the public in the first place.

Waiting for the market to take corrective action *after* something goes wrong might be a way to punish bad practitioners, but it will be too late to fix the damage, pain, and suffering that has already been done to people.

Surely, the need to maintain rigorous licensing standards for certain professions is another common-sense idea that all sides can agree on in this important debate.

Skip Brazier is a board member of the Alliance for Responsible Professional Licensing (ARPL). He also serves as Vice President for State Regulatory and Legislative Affairs at the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA). You can learn more about the Alliance and the importance of professional licensing at www.responsiblelicensing.org.