

PERSPECTIVE

Tag Line, You're It: A Frank Discussion of the Need for a National Credential for Environmental Professionals

Gary F. Kelman

A much taken for granted portion of NAEP's letterhead is the "tag line": "Committed to achieving the highest standards in professional ethics and practice for the environmental professions." Unfortunately, it is not only these few words on the letterhead that are assumed, it is also the concept behind these words. An explanation is in order.

There has been a lot written about the decline in the morality of our society. From the language used in everyday conversation, the violence in movies and TV and our schools, to the failings of our chief executive, society is deteriorating. We used to be able to trust professionals to uphold some sort of ethical standard. Now even medical doctors tend to work for the money and not for the Hippocratic oath, sacrificing our health to pad their pockets. The same is true of many other professions and I only single out medical doctors because people can relate to the degradation in the quality of the practice of medicine over the past twenty years, especially since the creation of Health Maintenance Organizations.

I propose that this is also true in the environmental profession. For professionals such as us, you would think that it is relatively easy to determine which responders meet the minimum qualifications for a particular job when reviewing the proposals submitted by contractors and consultants, but it is not. It is similar to reviewing the resumes of job applicants. The proof is in the pudding. Recommendations submitted by the candidates are checked as to how they performed in similar projects. But, can you be sure from the recommendations whether or not the contractor will perform well on your project? Not really!

So how can we be sure? For that matter, how can the public or other untrained purchaser of services be sure when confronted by numerous individuals vying for the project?

Credentials help separate those individuals having certain training from those not. But, at last count, there were over one hundred credentials in the environmental area alone, not to mention quasi-environmental areas. Some credentials, such as PhD and MS, measure education; some, such as PE, measure experience; and then some measure whether you have submitted money to get on a register—I won't list these. Other credentials point to training the individual has received in a particular area such as in hazardous waste. Again, the public and the uninformed professional cannot differentiate between which credential is meaningful for a particular situation and which is an acronym for potential problems. How is one to be sure of which credential to request?

Once we solve the matter of who has the qualifications to perform the job, we get into the arena of ethical practice. How does anyone determine the ethical qualifications of the candidate who has passed the tests of training and credentialing? Recommendations and experience seem to be the barometer in this case. But again, how can we be sure that a good recommendation does not mean that the employer is not trying to get rid of a less than average employee or that a competitor is trying to undermine the reputation of its competition?

I propose that an excellent start in providing a credential that can guide entities in search of personnel to implement environmental contracts has been around for 22 years, the Certified Environmental Professional (CEP). This credential not only differentiates between individuals as far as education, experience, and ability, but also fills the gap concerning the question of ethical practice. Candidates for this credential must pass a thorough application process that includes review by a panel of environmental professionals, the Certification Review Board. The application process requires recommendations from eight pro-

fessionals, confirmation of the candidates' educational qualifications and responses to several practical essay questions. The CEP application also requires candidates to sign the NAEP Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Environmental Professionals. This statement is included in another section of this publication and, I believe, is the basis for the CEP being the premier credential for professionals with over nine years of experience.

Several years ago, NAEP initiated a process to bring a nationally recognized credential for professionals to practice in the environmental profession into being, much the same as a MD or similar credential is necessary to practice medicine. This would separate those who aspire to practice in the environmental field from those who possess certain educational and experiential qualifications. Talks with other associations with junior credentials for individuals with less experience, such as the QEP (Qualified Environmental Professional, sponsored by the Institute for Professional Environmental Practice) resulted in a loose connection between the two credentials. This connection brings about the logical progression from QEP to CEP. Other credential combinations might also be possible.

A problem with making any credential a requirement nationally has been with lobbying campaigns from other organizations, which want their credential to be the "MD" for the environmental profession. Once a national credential is required, the sponsoring organization would benefit through increases in membership and national recognition. Again, the ugly face of politics appears.

I feel that a dialog must take place among the various sponsors of reputable credentials for environmental professionals, including the National Association of Environmental Professionals and the Academy of Board Certified Environmental Professionals. Part of this dialog must include a consolidation of credentials into which minimum credential is necessary in order to practice in the environmental profession in general as well as to identify the credentials necessary for specialization, i.e. for

those individuals dealing with hazardous waste. It is only in this way that the public and other entities needing to use the services of environmental professionals will have confidence in the profession, both in our knowledge, standards of practice, and ethics.

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