SECB Passing the Torch

By the SECB Board of Directors

In March of this year, SECB will conclude its 20-year mission to establish an identity and practice-specific credentialling for structural engineers. NCSEA spearheaded certification in 1999 by establishing an ad hoc committee to study the feasibility. Chaired by Fred Cowen, this committee was made a permanent committee by a vote of the NCSEA membership at NCSEA's 8th Annual Conference in September 2000. The committee included Gene Corley as the liaison to SEI and Jim Trant as the liaison to CASE. In addition, 12 state member organizations were represented. Upon issuance of their final report in 2002, 75% of NCSEA's membership voted to proceed with establishing a structural certification program. At the time, there was not universal support for separate licensing, and certification was viewed as a precursor to licensing and the only path available in the near future to establish uniform credentialing of structural engineers.

In 2003, the Structural Engineering Certification Board (SECB) was established with a simple mission with 3 straightforward goals: Promote structural engineering licensure (SE) in all jurisdictions; determine the unique and additional qualities (beyond a professional engineering license) necessary to practice structural engineering; and provide the engineering profession, the public, and other stakeholders with a way to identify engineers with these unique and additional qualifications. Originally formed through a group of NCSEA past presidents as an interim step towards SE licensure, SECB eventually became a financially stable organization with certificate holders in all 50 states and a roster of more than 1,200 certified structural engineers. While states would not initially recognize this new SECB certification, the vision was to create momentum within the structural engineering community for higher credentialling that would serve as a model or bridge for SE licensure adoption in more states.

Now, almost 20 years later, the time has come for the profession to reaffirm its focus on our end goal of nationwide SE licensure. Starting a new chapter is always challenging, as it begins by ending one. But the first chapter, SECB's work, has helped us figure out where we want to go - and now is the time to go there. In September of 2021, the SECB governing board, in conjunction with the governing boards of SEI, NCSEA, CASE, and SELC, agreed that the need for the interim step no longer exists and that it is now time for our profession to focus solely on a

direct path toward SE licensing. SECB will therefore be closing its doors, effective March 31, 2022, coinciding with the expiration of all current dues.

Although its progress has been slower than desired, SECB has had some success in reaching its goals. Its initial efforts—starting with its very creation—brought the SE licensure into broader awareness within the profession. Position papers, webinars, and articles brought the issue into focus and spurred a lively debate. Increased inclusion of the thoughts and opinions of practicing structural engineers allowed SECB to define the benefits of an SE designation better, and refine its certification criteria.

Significantly, SECB was instrumental in establishing the national SE exam. After first considering a suggested minimum curriculum for structural engineering degrees, the board decided instead to specify any accredited engineering degree in conjunction with passing a 16-hour structural engineering exam, to be taken by candidates after passing their fundamentals of engineering (FE) and principles and practice (PE) exams. This accommodated the variety of widely available degree programs and, not coincidentally, those represented by engineers already practicing.

But at the time, only the state engineering boards in California, Washington, and Illinois offered a 16-hour structural engineering exam, which made the testing requirement problematic. Creating a new exam was beyond the resources of SECB—not to mention its desired timeframe—so the board looked to other organizations for assistance. The UK-based Institution of Structural Engineers, whose membership exams are rigorous and demanding, was consulted with the idea of authorizing SECB to administer the IStructE exams.

Eventually, the board turned to the National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying (NCEES), which follows a similar mission of promoting engineering and surveying, and develops uniform standards for state licensing of these disciplines (in fact, NCEES's Model Engineering Law was an early inspiration for SECB's work). NCEES had already developed national FE and PE exams and administered the tests for most state licensing boards. NCEES now offers the 16-hour SE exam to any state that chooses to use it.

As for separate licensure of structural engineers, 12 states (Alaska, California, Georgia, Idaho, Nebraska, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, and Washington) have either a partial practice act or a title act (restricting what types of building require a structural engineer's design, or restricting the use of the SE title, respectively). Hawaii and Illinois have full practice acts. Additionally, 13 states, (Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, and Wyoming) maintain a roster designation of engineers whose professional license was obtained with a structural emphasis, usually through an NCEES structural examination.

And yet, there is still much to be done. In addition to instituting SE licensure in the states and territories that do not have it now—the most apparent goal—it remains critical to establish and promote the value of a structural engineering license. Structural engineers are not merely highly

educated and trained technicians but motivated professionals who are devoting their careers to increasingly complex solutions to their clients' needs while advancing the state of their art. Recognition of the specific expertise and contributions that structural engineers can offer elevates the profession and brings a better understanding of its importance to public safety and well-being.

So, with all of these missteps, was SECB, a success? Beyond a shadow of a doubt, just look at what has happened since it started. In the 20 years since the program was established, several states have adopted separate licensing, which is a great accomplishment, but even more of an accomplishment, 13 states recognize structural engineers with roster designations. Also, during this period, the Structural Engineer's Licensing Coalition was formed and CASE, SEI, and NCSEA have all wholeheartedly endorsed the concept of structural licensing, while NSPE's opposition has withered along with their membership. Did SECB cause all of that to happen? Probably not, but for 20 years engineers in states without any recognition of structural engineers had practitioners that could use the SECB acronym and at least have one degree of separation from the rest.

And now, the time has come for SECB to pass the torch to SEI, NCSEA, CASE, and SELC in the quest for national SE licensure. As a final act, the SECB governing board urges all structural engineers, individually and especially as members of professional organizations such as SEI, NCSEA, and CASE, to continue the discussion in all available venue to give the profession the prestige it deserves.