

THE STATE ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE

Postsecondary Quality Assurance Considerations for Occupational Licensure Boards

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Background

Occupational licensure systems establish state-specific education and training requirements to work in specific professions and provide oversight for postsecondary training providers. Occupational regulations protect consumers by establishing minimum competence requirements to safely practice and removes unsafe practitioners and training programs from the field. Licensure boards play a key role in approving and regulating the institutions that provide occupational training as well as the essential curriculum elements for these programs. They are a vital state authority in the triad of higher education oversight, which includes the state, accreditors, and the US Department of Education. There are a variety of professional and regulatory considerations in the oversight of these state boards, but one key connection that is often overlooked are the ways in which regulatory structures can better align on oversight of postsecondary training programs. There are a few key opportunities and challenges for state leaders to consider for this type of governance alignment that can ensure stronger state quality assurance and consumer protection for learners in professional programs.

Alignment of State Agency/Board Governance Structures

Governance challenge:

1. State licensure systems are complex and at times disjointed. Some states have umbrella agencies that house most of their licensure oversight authority while other states maintain separate boards for each occupational area. The requirements to enter a profession in one state could vary widely from a neighboring state.
2. States have licensure and certification processes in place for dozens of occupational areas. The diversity of occupational program areas and diffused leadership can complicate efforts to coordinate cross-sector alignment.
3. Individual licensure boards may have limited staff capacity or data collection capability, which can hinder efforts to implement plans for strategic collaboration and program evaluation.

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Governance opportunity:

1. While regulatory models differ from state to state, this reality can provide the space for innovative and creative approaches to system connection during program review and approval processes. There are opportunities that exist in each model, and the first step is [understanding the state licensing landscape](#).¹
2. Licensing boards are primarily made up of practitioners from the occupational field. Tapping this group of professionals as a valuable source of expertise is a model that should be replicated by other postsecondary quality assurance systems in the state. Practitioner insights would be valuable to other oversight entities and their approaches should be informed by other quality assurance efforts in the state.
3. Licensure boards closely connect with another forgotten player in the triad of higher education oversight: the programmatic accreditor. This connection, as well as the alignment with national industry standards, provide an ideal place for state higher education agencies to access expertise and information to inform their program approval and review processes.

Quality Assurance Considerations in Occupational Licensure

Occupational licensing boards establish criteria and approvals for postsecondary and non-degree training programs necessary to ensure minimum competence to safely practice. These requirements often cite approval by the U.S. Department of Education, the state regulatory authority for non-degree training programs, and/or other profession-specific national accrediting agencies.

Equity Challenge:

Occupational regulation establishes the level of education required to enter a profession as well as experience and exam requirements among other considerations. While the intent is to ensure only qualified individuals receive the authority to practice, some current requirements could have unintended consequences by marginalizing certain segments of the population such as low-income workers, veterans, military spouses or individuals with criminal convictions.

Equity Opportunity:

Pathways: Occupational licensure can facilitate entry to a profession by providing for a formalized pathway designed to reach traditionally underserved populations. To strengthen their equity focus, licensure boards can align review processes with other state

¹ Data collection and analysis conducted by the Council on Licensure, Enforcement and Regulation (CLEAR) for a project funded by the Occupational Licensing Policy Learning Consortium: the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the Council of State Governments (CSG), and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center)

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entities to ensure that only high-quality training programs, with strong passage rates and workforce outcomes, are approved to operate and receive state and federal training funds.

Workforce Data: Occupational licensing boards house important data elements concerning the workforce. As these data sets have largely moved to electronic platforms, states have a meaningful opportunity to bolster workforce and postsecondary priorities by sharing and analyzing these data sets and evaluating their performance in serving vulnerable populations. This data can be leveraged to inform program review and the development of sector strategies to support emerging workforce needs.

Removing Unsafe Programs: State licensing boards can disallow certain schools or programs from qualification for licensure. These decisions are intended to protect students and consumers.

Questions a Governor Should Ask:

- How can the state occupational licensure system better connect to strengthen quality assurance oversight?
 - What are the existing communication mechanisms? Are they based in process and policy or are they reliant upon agency relationships?
- How is licensure data collected and disseminated across state agencies and to the public?
 - What would be needed to improve or support these data collection systems to connect, disaggregate and analyze licensure data?
- How is licensure data currently used within other planning processes? With credential attainment goals? With workforce development?
- How can licensure board appointments be leveraged to ensure a stronger industry/practitioner voice to postsecondary program review and approval?
- What lessons have been learned from the review or closure of poor-performing training providers that could inform the development of inter-agency policies to address this issue?

Occupational Licensure During COVID-19

The combination of a shifting labor force landscape and an economic recession may present new and significant challenges for occupational licensing boards. Higher demand for relatively new credentials and new actors attempting to meet this demand make the oversight role of licensing boards especially critical. Moreover, any creation of new programs has the potential to stretch the already thin capacity of licensing boards. It will be especially critical for licensing boards to strike a balance between being flexible enough to enable students to expeditiously enter the workforce while maintaining programmatic and licensing integrity.