

## THE FUTURE OF DRIVER LICENSING: THE NEED TO GET IT ALL TOGETHER

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**W**hat is the future of driver licensing? Some proposals indicate a driver incentive program and licensing on the basis of a nationally standard, more comprehensive examination than those currently administered in most states. It is clear, however, that such proposals cannot be realistically evaluated or effectively implemented without the conscientious consideration and cooperative efforts of all groups involved in the problems of driver licensing.

There is need to unify efforts to respond to the differing viewpoints of the groups involved. For instance, some of the following concerns are typical: The public questions the necessity of a rigid licensing standard that imposes some inconvenience. In turn, legislators are concerned that comprehensive and lengthy testing could be perceived as an infringement on individual rights. Driver licensing administrators at local and national levels need to be convinced that the costs of implementing and monitoring a sophisticated diagnostic testing and training program are justified by the benefits to be derived. Finally, researchers involved in the scientific evaluation of alternative approaches need to be advised of the practical constraints affecting research application; needs, goals, and priorities must be more carefully defined

before their findings can be translated into administrative, operational, and cost-effective terms.

Although increasingly sophisticated studies defining the driving task and bearing on the development and evaluation of training procedures, improved restraint systems, vehicle and roadway design, and mass communication techniques have been conducted in the 7 years since enactment of the Highway Safety Act of 1966, basic philosophical, legal, and administrative issues remain to be resolved. Some of these follow.

1. Is driving a privilege or a right?
2. To what extent are the public, private enterprise, and government agencies committed to developing safer highways and willing to provide the necessary resources, given competing domestic problem areas?
3. How committed are local and national governments to developing more effective licensing standards?
4. What are the priorities in the field of transportation, and to what extent do various goals (e.g., efficiency, economy, convenience, safety) interact?
5. To what extent should the development of licensing standards take into account the problems of enforcement and judicial process, traffic design and engineering, and automobile design?

During the past 7 years, driving-related research has been funded, and committees, seminars, conferences, symposiums, and workshops have met to share ideas and generate constructive criticism in the planning stages of research projects. These activities suggest that progress is being made. However, when the participants at these meetings return to their own work environments and are confronted with their daily activities and operational programs, they seem to lose the sense of unity and purpose. This discontinuity, which impedes further progress, can be overcome in several possible ways.

One possibility is for NHTSA to require that the states comply fully with the driver licensing standards it establishes. There are two difficulties in this approach. First, the states may resist implementing standards that are forced on them, arguing that each state has some unique problems. Second, they may argue that standards should not be imposed until they have been proved effective.

A second possibility is for NHTSA to provide guidelines and depend on the states to develop their own licensing standards. This approach to a comprehensive program implies a degree of cooperation and coordination between agencies at all levels that, unfortunately, has not occurred thus far and is unlikely to in the future.

A third possibility is for the states to continue to conform to basic licensing procedures until a cost-effective system can be developed and tested. A concentrated pilot effort in one or a few states might ultimately lead to a comprehensive program.

Each of these approaches implies that meaningful direction can occur without prior resolution of basic philosophical, legal, and administrative issues that bear on the formulation of national policy in driver licensing. A fourth alternative is for these issues to be resolved before efficient and effective implementation of proposed measures is begun.

A group representing all interests involved in the problems of driver licensing should be assembled on a full-time basis to seek consensus and supportive legislation defining the needs, goals, and priorities of a comprehensive driver licensing program. Private industry, foundations, and government agencies (e.g., insurance companies, safety organizations, the Department of Transportation), as well as the public at large should provide support for this activity. It is especially important that cross-sectional representation and support be sought to help ensure highly comparable levels of involvement on the parts of representatives whose interests may often be in conflict. Ideally, the participants in such a task force would possess public relations as well as technical skills and would actively seek contact with the news media as a means of relating current research activities and national driver licensing concerns to the public. The interaction stimulated and pursued by full-time task force representatives would lead to clarification of licensing needs, goals, and priorities and would enable research and implementation activities to impact more rapidly and effectively on the problem.

## Discussion

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McBride's prior experience as a researcher in the California Department of Motor Vehicles enables him to state in a rather direct manner the direction he considers necessary when viewing the future and research needs in driver licensing. His suggestion that researchers, motor vehicle administrators, and legislators join forces in scientific efforts to improve driver licensing is hindered by one major obstacle: the absence of sustained unity of purpose by these participants to review existing programs and incorporate new knowledge and experiences. Realistically this obstacle may simply be due to limited funds and interest in changing the existing licensing system.

McBride offers three possible courses of action to achieve an improved future in driver licensing. Cognizant of the reactions these possibilities face, he urges a

coalition of the varied interests concerned with problems in driver licensing.

The critical factor in McBride's approach is the necessity for a powerful demand for improved performance. Responsibility fixed by an authority such as the Congress has indirectly brought attention to driver licensing, but not in the public arena. More attention might be given if the collective dollar value of efforts committed annually to this function was compared to the research effort for its development.

In addition, those believing research results can bring change through implementation must realize the practical facts that implementation requires recognition of differences in state laws, training needs of personnel, revision of policies and procedures, development of public information, and consideration of the impact 40 to 50 million drivers will create on field facilities when they try to comply with what is requested of them.

From McBride's presentation there is indication that resistance to improvement is not characteristic of driver license administrators. There is a desire for operationally sound improvement that does not require massive changes that destroy the existing system before the new one is ready for 100 percent service.

McBride reflects the desires of many administrators, but only highly regarded authority can bring about success. Cooperative relationships between researchers and practitioners must be developed, as suggested in this presentation. The precise mechanism may be different from that proposed, but certainly it indicates that some valuable lessons have been learned in department of motor vehicle research activities. McBride states it very well: "There is need to unify efforts to respond to the differing viewpoints of the groups involved." The major issue may be, what or who is the unifying force?

Future research in driver licensing may not save drivers from error, may only reduce error, or possibly, and more important, may enable drivers to discover the criticality of recognizing the consequence of error in hazardous situations.