THE CHANGING TASK OF DRIVER LICENSING

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There has been a growing trend in our society to look at a driving license as a right rather than a privilege. So much of our society depends on the automobile that many people could not continue gainful employment were they not able to drive. Likewise, large portions of our economy rely directly on the individual's use of the private automobile. Furthermore, the courts have moved in the direction of interpreting a driving license as more in the nature of a right than a privilege. In the face of such trends, the screening concept of driver licensing will no longer be defensible. Consequently we must consider the task of driver licensing in a new light.

We must first be concerned with improving methods of evaluating license applicants by developing more valid procedures than we can currently demonstrate. This improved evaluation would be combined with specific training programs aimed at meeting the deficiencies indicated in the evaluation. Second, we must move toward providing programs in which drivers who are not able to qualify for full-fledged licenses can drive under prescribed conditions until they are able to qualify at a higher level.

EVALUATION AND TRAINING

If licensing is more a right than a privilege, then we can no longer focus on granting only the fit driver a license. We must also be concerned with how we can improve the performance of those persons who do not measure up to the standards. We must combine a screening approach with a more in-depth diagnostic and training approach.

The first step in developing such a program is to identify from the literature those factors that correlate with driver performance (e.g., age, sex, driving experience, socioeconomic status, personality factors, physical characteristics, medical factors). Once key factors have been identified, they should be incorporated into a comprehensive evaluation and training program. For example, if biographical factors, medical conditions, level of driving experience, and personality factors are all found to relate significantly to driver performance, then an inventory designed to obtain such information could be administered to all driving license applicants. (Whereas questions concerning medical history are usually considered acceptable to the public, measures of personality factors are likely to raise hackles. If such measures are used, they must be employed judiciously.) It should be possible to obtain a usable amount of information in a relatively short period of time and with relatively little of the examiner's time being occupied by a single
applicant. (It is recognized that not everyone will answer truthfully, and indeed this is currently the case concerning medical and psychiatric questions. However, on the whole it should be possible to glean considerably more useful information than is now collected and at a minimal increase in cost.)

In addition to basic biographical information, all applicants should receive the more traditional tests, including a well-constructed rules-of-the-road examination, vision testing, and on-the-road performance testing.

An essential consideration in development of such a system of driver evaluation and training is public acceptance or political feasibility of implementing the program. It is one thing to identify high-risk groups; it is quite another to take any measures based on an individual's membership in such a group. Still there is more leeway here than might be anticipated. For example, discrimination on the basis of age is a time-honored practice. The founding fathers required that presidential candidates be at least 35; most public school systems impose minimal age restrictions. Because driving performance shows such a strong association with age, this is an area in which it should be possible to implement reasonable programs.

A comprehensive evaluation for driver licensing could be set up in such a way that portions of the evaluation could be weighted differentially and a person could qualify for licensure in a variety of ways. A certain minimum total score would be required as well as minimum scores on separate portions of the evaluation. The analogy of earning a college degree may clarify this point. A person may receive a bachelor of arts degree in any one of a number of ways. He may need a specified number of credits in each of several general areas such as natural science, foreign language, and humanities. Beyond these core requirements he could earn his other credits in electives, but he would still need a minimum number of total credits in order to graduate. In the same way the applicant for a driving license could be given credit for certain characteristics or experience. The middle-aged driver may be given a certain number of credits simply by virtue of his age. Driving experience may also earn an applicant credits. A teetotaler could be given some credits toward a driver license for his nondrinking status. There would still be a minimum number of credits that would have to be earned on the rules examination, the vision test, and the road test, but the drinker may need to score extra credits in other areas that the nondrinker would not.

The analogy is not complete. In the case of a college degree, the institution is prepared to offer training to meet deficiencies. Although this would be true to some extent in this system of driver licensing, it would not always be the case. Indeed, there are some instances in which deficiencies could not be overcome. Although denial of a license should be considered a last resort, there are times when it may be necessary for the protection of the greater society.

Such a system would have to be viewed not as penalizing certain groups but as allowing other groups some credit for the characteristics they possess that have been shown to be related to driver performance. Such a system would be based on empirical evidence and would be far more defensible than any system currently used.

To make such a comprehensive evaluative system even more defensible requires that, wherever possible, constructive programs be developed to deal with the problems of the high-risk groups identified. To some extent this is already done in that we provide driver education to the young driver and driver improvement programs to those who have had more than their share of trouble. However, should personality testing show that persons who feel that they have little control over their destiny run a higher risk of accident, perhaps we can develop methods of countering such feelings of powerlessness, at least in regard to driving behavior. If such techniques are developed, they could be applied in driver education and driver retraining.

The development of such programs would mean that most drivers who failed to qualify for licensure the first time would have the opportunity to better prepare themselves for licensure the next time.

GRADUATED LICENSING

The second major focus of this paper concerns the way in which the licensing
procedures could be used more extensively in the control and monitoring of driver behavior.

There is a great need to develop more effective programs for the young driver. It is recognized that the beginning driver is likely to have more than his share of accidents. Data from North Carolina show that young drivers experience greater accident risk, given their presence in the driving population (not just the licensed population). Their overrepresentation in accidents is highest at the earliest ages (≤16) and gradually decreases through age 24. Drivers from age 25 through 54 are underrepresented in accidents compared to their presence in the driving population. After age 54 there is a gradual increase in risk. These results are similar to those found elsewhere in the country. The fact that the young person shows a gradual decline in accidents suggests that experience is at least part of his problem.

The driver licensing program in North Carolina has recognized that beginning drivers are likely to have more difficulty. Driver education is a requirement for obtaining a license before age 18. Upon successful completion of an approved driver education course and upon passing the driving license examination, a 16-year-old receives an operator's license that entitles him to drive any time, anywhere, and under any circumstances allowed other drivers with a regular operator's license in North Carolina. The only distinction made between the young driver and an older driver is that the young driver is a provisional licensee. This means that if he gets into trouble, i.e., has a moving violation, he may be penalized much more severely than his older counterpart. In other words, we know that he is inexperienced and more likely to have difficulty, but the only recognition we make of this fact is to mete out harsher penalties for an offense. Surely we can provide a more constructive solution to the problems of the young driver!

The driver education program in North Carolina consists primarily of the standard 30 hours of classroom work and 6 hours behind the wheel. Traffic safety educators are well aware of the inadequacies of such a program. Major strides have been made to upgrade the training and qualifications of the driver education instructors in North Carolina and to extend driver education to a full semester course, including time on driving simulators and increased time behind the wheel, either on ranges or on the highway. In addition, it is recognized that special training in emergency procedures is desirable.

The need for expanded training is recognized, especially behind-the-wheel training, but financing is a major consideration. Behind-the-wheel training is the most expensive part of driver education. However, the appropriate licensing system could provide the young driver with an opportunity to acquire behind-the-wheel experience under monitored conditions at little or no cost to the state. The initial licensing of beginning drivers could be done in such a way that the beginning driver is introduced gradually into the driving population. Although the driver licensing authority cannot control the actual amount of driving done by a young person, it could control some of the conditions under which driving occurs over specified periods of time. For example, it could require that, once an approved driver education course is completed and the driver licensing exams are passed, for the first year (or 6 months) of driving the young person must drive only during daylight hours or only between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. and then only with a responsible adult (parent or guardian) in the front seat. After the initial time period had passed, driving would be allowed during these same hours without the presence of an adult. In successive stages the evening hours and finally the night hours could be added. Each time the adult could be required for the time period during the day that is added but could be eliminated for the time periods already completed.

To extend the period of time during which a driver is so limited immediately raises problems. Young people want cars, and many parents are only too eager to escape the role of chauffeur. It would be possible to lower the age of initial licensing (and hence driver education) so that behind-the-wheel experience could begin at age 14, for example, instead of 15 or 16. The requirements for graduation from one license level to another could be based on a combination of both experience (here based only on length of time licensed rather than actual driving) and demonstrated skill, i.e., a higher score on the road test. However, the latter would not replace the former. Even high scores would be required to wait a specified period of time before becoming eligible for a
higher level of license.

If the age of initial licensing is lowered, young persons could be eligible for a regular operator's license at the same age that they may now acquire one. The difference would be that by that time they would, on the whole, have much more experience behind them than is now usually the case, and this behind-the-wheel training would be at minimal cost to the taxpayer.

At the present time the newly licensed young person may immediately embark on night driving with other young people present in the car, a situation characterized by complexity. Experience in night driving is not included in most driver education courses. The inexperience in driving and the customary inexperience of young people in such complex social situations may be more than the novice driver can handle. If a beginning driver could acquire his initial driving skill under less complicated circumstances, he might be better able to handle more complex driving situations.

Such a proposal is by no means offered as a substitute for whatever innovations may be developed in driver education. Indeed, not every young person will have a responsible parent or guardian who can supervise his driving. Clearly for such youngsters a graduated system of licensing would have little merit. However, if parents can assume some of the responsibility for the acquisition of driving skill, driver education specialists could devote more of their efforts to those youngsters whose needs are greatest. This proposal is just one procedure that may provide considerable benefit for the cost that would be involved. Such a program would necessitate the cooperation of parents, license administrators, enforcement personnel, and driver education personnel.

Several license levels should be considered not only for the beginning driver but also for all drivers. It may be that greater use of restrictions would be appropriate for many drivers, particularly older drivers, to enable them to drive as long as possible under reasonably safe circumstances.

The implementation of such a program of graduated licensing should be combined with a system of identification so that the program can more readily be enforced. Some visible sign of a driver's status could be displayed, e.g., in the lower right corner of the windshield, during the time that that driver is operating a vehicle.

SUMMARY

The purpose of driver licensing should be not only to identify and license those drivers who are most likely to be able to safely operate motor vehicles on public highways but also to provide the unqualified applicant every opportunity to meet the minimum requirements for licensure. It is desirable, therefore, to move toward a more comprehensive evaluation of driver license applicants wherein greater use is made of information on the relationships between certain factors and driving performance. Such information could be incorporated into the licensing system to improve the predictive validity of the licensing procedures. In addition, wherever possible constructive programs should be developed to deal with special subgroups of drivers so that the applicant who fails to qualify for a license the first time would have the opportunity to participate in remedial activities. We do not have enough information to develop all the remedial programs that should be included, but we have enough information to make a respectable start.

In addition to expanding the evaluative function of driver licensing, we could also extend the function of monitoring and controlling driver behavior. Through a graduated system of licensing, young drivers could be introduced into the driving population in a way that decreases their risk of injury or death. By the same token, older drivers could be gradually phased out of the driving population so that a greater number of people could continue to drive for longer periods of time under conditions more conducive to their safety.

Such changes in driver licensing programs should not incur undue expense. The potential payoff per dollar spent may prove to be much greater than the alternatives, e.g., a significant expansion of behind-the-wheel training in driver education.

Although the need for research on important aspects of driving continues, we need not wait for additional research findings to begin to use the information currently available.