

How the Integrity of the Certification Process is Maintained

By Russell V. Carstensen, PE, NCE
NARTE Executive Director

Did you ever get that question? You know, the one where the person asking has an agenda but only wants to reveal a portion of his agenda to get you to commit to an answer that reinforces his preconceived notion? I had one of those about the integrity of the certification process with respect to collusion between an applicant and his boss.

The question went something like this: "I was wondering what the policy of dishonesty on one's application would lead to. Meaning if somebody has only one year in an accredited lab but his or her manager 'tweaked' the experience provided. If this person gets his certification, I will feel that NARTE was not stringent enough on their application process and does not stand behind the integrity of the certification. If you need any information from me, please feel free to ask. I just don't feel that somebody can study for three months, take the test and pass, and that's all you need."

My response was as follows. A large measure of the application process is based on trust, specifically that the applicant will respond with truthful answers to the questions asked. Every applicant signs an agreement to abide by the NARTE Code of Ethics as a part of their application package. The Code of Ethics is listed on the NARTE web site and includes six canons and 15 rules. The six canons list the ethical responsibilities of a certificate holder. The 15 rules are the processes for addressing a breach of the canons. To falsify a response is a breach of trust counter to the canons.

If a person "tweaked" their experience to show more time in practice than they really have and their management endorsed that record as a supervisory reference, then it would be very difficult for NARTE to independently discover the discrepancy. In a case like

that NARTE would have to depend on someone knowledgeable of the details to raise the issue. NARTE requires all complaints of such violations to be in writing signed by the complainant before we can act. Requiring a written complaint is not intended as an impediment to justice but rather as a necessity to narrow focus to the significant issues and to provide an incontrovertible basis for investigation.

The rules of the Code of Ethics provide for an orderly investigation of the complaint by the Ethics committee and hearings through which the accused can present his or her side of the story. If the complaint can not be sustained, it will be dismissed. If the complaint is sustained, certification of the individual can be withdrawn. If the certification is withdrawn, NARTE may post the withdrawal and reason for withdrawal on its web site. This can be very damaging to the career of the individual involved and thus is not entered into lightly.

The exam is only one part of the certification process. Candidates can sit for the examination at any time. They do not have to have all of the required professional experience to sit for it. In fact, NARTE staff encourages people to sit for the examination as soon as they can after completion of their education. Their test-taking skills will slowly atrophy over time making examination preparation harder the longer they wait. Even if they pass the examination, the candidate cannot be certified until all of the requirements (education, work experience, peer endorsement, passing the examination and those pesky 10 questions) have been met.

People are reluctant to file written complaints. That is as it should be. The complaint process should not be an avenue to harrass fellow practitioners for personal reasons. Filing a formal complaint is a serious undertaking but necessary to maintain the integrity of the certification process.