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Trends in geoscience professional ethics indicated by National Association of State Boards of Geology (ASBOG®) surveys of the practicing profession

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ASBOG® was founded in 1988 to facilitate cooperation and coordination among states with licensing of practicing professional geologists--currently 29 states and Puerto Rico. ASBOG® creates national exams which are used by all of the states granting licensure. Periodic surveys of the practicing profession every 5 years are used to determine the skills and knowledge needed for professional practice and are used to generate the exam blueprints.

Thirteen professional ethics issues in the geosciences were included on the Task Analysis Surveys (TAS) in 2005, 2010 and 2015. Professional geologists rate the seriousness of and the frequency of contact with these ethics issues. Topics include such items as gift-giving, whistleblowing, plagiarism, etc. The respondents are grouped into one of three categories: practicing licensed geologists in the United States, practicing licensed geologists in Canada, and geologists employed in the academic sector. Regardless of the employment sector, the responses to the professional ethics questions were statistically very similar (r values - Seriousness - USA vs. Academic +0.81, USA vs. Canada +0.94, Academic vs. Canada +0.86; Frequency - USA vs. Academic +0.71, USA vs. Canada +0.85, Academic vs. Canada +0.72). Some differences were detected. For example, plagiarism is regarded by practitioners in the academic sector as more important than this issue among licensed practicing geologists in the United States and Canada. The professional ethics issues asked on the 2010 and 2015 surveys are identical to facilitate detection of any temporal changes in response patterns. Statistically, the responses from practicing geologists in the USA in the 2010 and 2015 surveys are nearly identical, indicating that the profession has maintained virtually the same attitudes with regard to professional ethics (Seriousness $r = +0.99$, Frequency $r = +0.99$).

A small percentage (<1%) of survey respondents indicate that their professional work occurred exclusively outside North America (US and Canada). For the professionals practicing outside North America, the correlation between TAS 2010 and TAS 2015 responses on the Frequency rating scale is high (+0.84). The correlation between 2010 and 2015 is lower on the serious rating scale (+0.61). It reveals a moderate degree of consistency from 2010 to 2015 for geoscientists practicing outside North America. Correlations between ethics mean values for practicing geologists in the USA and geoscientists who spent most of their time conducting geological activities outside North America indicate a high degree of consistency between practicing geologists in the USA and outside North America on the Frequency rating scale (+0.84), and a moderate degree of consistency on the Seriousness rating scale (+0.66).

Among ASBOG® member states, there is similarity in penalties that may be imposed for violations of state codes of ethics ranging from monetary penalties, continuing education requirements to revocation of licenses and possible criminal prosecution. ASBOG® surveyed its state members to determine the number of complaints for ethical violations received by the states and the number which had been adjudicated. Between 2011 and 2014, 237 complaints were received and 93% were adjudicated.

Stimulated by the profession's expression of the importance of professional ethics, ASBOG® actively encourages candidates, state boards, and academic institutions to participate in and enhance educational opportunities in professional ethics. Currently questions on professional ethics are included on the national licensing exams.

