



How Beauty Schools Have Failed Us

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The Nail Extension Jaime Schrageck

(Part 1)

I started writing this column 6 months ago, and shelved it. What's happened in the intervening months has rightfully taken precedence. Now when tasked to write about something other than the coronavirus pandemic, I can't help but approach this subject from a more critical perspective. Frequently cited as justification for reopening salons, our beauty school education deserves renewed scrutiny. Based on my expert opinion, it does not hold up.

Beauty School Education Has Failed Our Industry

For the sake of transparency, allow me to share some of my educational background, both academic and vocational. I earned a PhD in Education with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction from the University of California at Davis (Class of 1996) as part of the first cohort of graduate students eligible to do so. Before graduate school, I attended beauty school at Career College in Seaside, California (summer of 1991) through the federally-funded Regional

Occupational Program (ROP). Early January 1992, I became licensed as a manicurist while spending that academic year teaching ROP classes (not beauty related) at a local high school. Doing nails paid for my 4 years of graduate school.

These details highlight the parts of my educational background most relevant to my current status as a licensed manicurist/salon owner and expert educator. My perspective has been shaped by my experiences as a student, but more so by teaching at every academic level, in vocational programs and even for test preparation (GRE, LSAT and SAT). No doubt, your perspective will differ based on your personal experiences.

As licensed professionals, we all share the experience of completing beauty school as a prerequisite for licensure. I say "all" assuming a certificate of completion was earned through attendance and participation, and not fraudulently obtained through mere payment.

Nonetheless, a shared experience is not equal experience. Even within a particular state, the quality of beauty school education varies considerably.

Despite completing their educational hours, not every student learns the basic knowledge and skills necessary to meet the minimal standards for licensure. We know this because many struggle to pass the licensing examination. These pass/fail rates should be public information available from your state board.

In the case of California, a significant number of applicants fail their initial exam. Note that the following results account for applicants across 5 different exams (Barber, Cosmetologist, Esthetician, Electrologist and Manicurist) available in 4 different language options (English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Korean). Reviewing the most recent data available for initial exams only (FY 2017-18), approximately 23% of applicants failed the written and 20% failed the practical on their first attempts.

Taking tests can be very stressful; so what happens when applicants retake the exam months later? The failure rates actually increase to 57% written and 30% practical. This poor performance on subsequent attempts explains why failure rates for initial exams and retakes combined (33% written and 22% practi-



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cal) exceed the rates for initial exams only. More current data (FY 2019-20) for initial exams and retakes combined show no improvement, with failure rates of 35% written and 23% practical.

How should we interpret these dismal results?

Let's make this simple. After spending up to 1600 hours (depending on the license type) in beauty school, if only 4 out of every 5 graduates get licensed on their first exam attempt, and even fewer succeed on later attempts, that's not good enough.

State governments grant beauty schools, private and public, an exclusive role in the licensing process: prepare students for the licensing exam.

I will concede that some beauty schools do an admirable job of preparing students for both the exam and the realities of salon work.

Differences in student aptitude, teacher competence, quality of instruction and resources, testing standards, etc. factor in determining outcomes, but focusing on these particular and variable factors obscures the primary problem.

Given the cost and time invested, the current system of educating future beauty professionals does not produce justifiable results.

Why does this matter once someone gets licensed? First, regardless of the quality of that education, every licensee obtains the same license; and second, unless states require continuing education (CE), licensees never have to attend a class, study a textbook, demonstrate any skills or pass another examination as long as they pay renewal fees on time and don't lose their license through disciplinary action taken by the state's regulatory agency.

For the sake of argument, let's focus on the 1600-hour cosmetology curriculum in California because it's fairly standard, and you're smart enough to compare this to your own beauty school experience. Can you, or any licensee, attest to spending all 1600 hours engaged entirely in learning and practice? Absolutely not, and time spent surfing the web and scrolling through social media does not count.

In part 2, I'll review the curriculum, particularly the requirements for health and safety, and discuss the merits of continuing education.

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