

The
**SHORT
TALK
BULLETIN**®



**Nebraska's Return
to Proficiency**

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Nebraska's Return to Proficiency

It is newsworthy that the Grand Lodge of Nebraska has succeeded in putting the "toothpaste back in the tube" after previously letting go of the requirement of proficiency of candidates.

In a move rarely seen in Masonry, delegates at the Grand Lodge of Nebraska's 2019 Annual Communication abandoned 30 years of candidates memorizing a meager number of words to advance in the degrees and voted to return to learning full-form proficiency.

While it may be surprising that two-thirds of the voting delegates approved the longer proficiency, sentiment has long been building for the full-form version that sustained Nebraska Masonry for over 125 years.

In 1989 the requirement for learning the full-form answers ended, replaced with a short manual that focused on Freemasonry's history and philosophy. It contained readings about each degree, questions to answer, and very short proficiency memorization.

Masonic leadership justified this significant reduction citing the greater potential to attract men because of an easier memorization requirement.

From 1986 to 1988, the number of men raised averaged 277. Then

from 1990 to 1992 an average 443 men were raised, a 62 percent increase.

However, between 1992 and 2017, except for coincidental spikes, the number of men raised began a steady and drastic decline. It wasn't unusual for seasoned members who learned the full-form proficiency to reminisce with candidates about their time spent with a mentor. That relationship, they were often told, created a strong bond between them as well as with the lodge.

Many new members, especially in recent years, recognized what they missed. They felt deficient because they weren't offered the opportunity to form that same close bond with a mentor. Some felt strongly enough that they memorized the answers with a mentor anyway and presented them in lodge.

After seeing more and more suspensions for nonpayment of dues, then-Deputy Grand Master Dean Skokan developed an Enrollment Program. It relied on lodges to assign a mentor to serve as a teacher, advisor, and friend for each candidate. "But nothing compared to the mentoring received through 'posting,'" MW Scott Krieger said, referring to learning the full-form answers for proficiency. "Lodges never fully embraced our substitute mentoring program."

In 2014 MW Thomas Hauder recommended a by-law change authorizing lodges to increase their own proficiency requirements. Numerous lodges in Lincoln, Omaha, and other cities across Nebraska increased their proficiency requirements.

New members of those lodges gained self-confidence and interest in performing ritual work. A larger number of brothers in the state began seeing how these changes had a positive impact. Lodges regained the ability to confer degrees without outside help.

Nebraska's corps of Deputy Grand Custodians (DGCs), who examine lodge ritual performance, faded fast after 1989. With less than one Mason per year becoming certified "Individually Proficient" in the work, DGC ranks dwindled. As many aged, they held onto their position in hopes others would replace them. Unfortunately, that rarely occurred, and many Nebraska districts didn't have a DGC for years. Thus, no one coached those lodges on ritual work.

After a survey by DGCs of Nebraska's 130+ lodges in 2017, two-thirds were found unable to confer degrees because members didn't know ritual. Many believed this was because of the "then-long-standing" shorter proficiency. As experienced ritualists died, there were not enough

others willing to memorize the parts, creating a major void in the work of lodges.

In response, then-Grand Junior Deacon Patrick Garger, a DGC and later Grand Master, was appointed to address these ritual challenges. After assessing the status of lodge ritual, he implemented a strategic plan establishing several Grand Lodge ritual programs.

It began with the first-ever Individual Proficiency School, convened in five cities over a year and was taught personally by Brother Barger and his DGC Apprentices. This initial class generated over 50 new Masons certified in memorizing the esoteric words of Nebraska ritual. In the following years and to this day, Brother Barger's Apprentices and other DGCs conduct them.

As an augmentation to the Individual Proficiency School, Grand Master Barger created the Grand Lodge College of Ritual featuring DGC instructors teaching extended lectures such as the "Middle Chamber," "Second and Third Section Entered Apprentice," and "Second and Third Section Master Mason."

Lastly, Brother Barger created the Full-Form Answers School for all three degrees. Led by WB John Herbolsheimer with assistance from other DGCs, this class focused on the "Questions and Answers."

In 2018, Grand Master Barger established a Grand Master's Coin for Full-Form Proficiency Excellence in all three degrees. He bestowed his coin on new Masons who voluntarily chose to learn and do an excellent job in reciting the full-form answers. With the overwhelming success of this program alone, MW Barger was inspired to make a Grand Master's Recommendation to restore the full proficiency requirements to historical standards.

Also, in 2018, MW Barger created the new Deputy Grand Custodian at Large program. With the 2017 repeal of a by-law requirement limiting the number of DGCs in Nebraska, the Grand Lodge of Nebraska is poised to assist lodges anywhere in the state. The requirement for DGCs to live in or near their district (which left many districts without one) no longer exists.

All these efforts to recapture the brotherhood, a greater understanding of Masonry, and the Hiramic Legend had a tantalizing effect on the brothers who participated.

Prospects for passing MW Barger's recommendation to return to the full-form proficiency at Nebraska's 2019 Annual Communication were promising. A year earlier, the required two-thirds majority barely failed with 62 percent of the delegates in favor.

In 2018, the need for full-form proficiency was advocated through a massive statewide public relations campaign during visits to lodges and in statewide leadership classes. Articles in the monthly *Nebraska Mason* and on the Grand Lodge website also raised awareness of the need to restore the mentoring aspect of learning full-form proficiency.

Leaders of Nebraska's lodges were reminded that the bond created when a new Mason is mentored in the catechism by a seasoned brother is something neither forgets. It ensures candidates understand the nature and purpose of the Fraternity and makes them less likely to walk away from it because of a lack of emotional depth.

"Making it quick and easy to become a Mason only makes it quick and easy for them to leave us," MW Barger said. "Full-form proficiency ensures a candidate invests something of himself in the Fraternity, making him much less willing to throw it all away by leaving."

At the Annual Communication in February 2019, delegates pushed the vote above the required two-thirds majority.

Congratulations are due to the brethren of Nebraska who recognize the value of instilling the tenets of Masonry in men who come to our fraternity in search of it!