

# Point of View

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## Professionalism: A Matter of Personal Initiative

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Several years ago I was serving as president of one of the state counseling organizations and decided to use "A Commitment to Professionalism" as my theme for the year. A simple question, "What do you mean by professionalism?" launched me into a lengthy investigation and exploration of the term. The following ideas are a reflection of my search for the meaning of professionalism.

A *profession* is an occupation that has gained its status by meeting certain criteria. *Professionalism*, however, is an attitude that motivates individuals to be attentive to the image and ideals of their particular profession. Jago (1984) suggests it is an "ideology that serves as a substitute for institutionalized structures for guaranteeing continued work competence" (p. 122). That is, professionalism is an internalized mechanism that should complement such similar external monitoring mechanisms as credentialing.

Authors (e.g., Borish, 1983; Dvorkin, Himmelstein, & Lesnick, 1981; Jago, 1984; Thomison, 1984) have written about the dangers of not attending to professionalism. However, Thomison (1984) is characteristic of those authors, in that he argued for professionalism but offered no clear definition of it. In fact, the literature provides relatively few definitions, resources, and guidelines to aid counselors in developing and maintaining this desirable quality.

The lack of acceptable literature to clarify the concept of professionalism provides a sufficient rationale for this article. As Goodyear (1984) stated in his inaugural editorial in this journal, "we have reached a stage in our evolution as a profession where professionalism should become an explicit focus for our Journal" (p. 5). The purpose of this article is to provide a working definition of professionalism, to examine the significant progress counselors have made in attaining professional status, and to propose challenges for counselors to consider in examining their own professionalism.

Counselors have worked diligently in recent years to have the counseling field recognized as a true "profession." For example, McCully (1962) outlined strategies for the professionalization of school counselors, after first distinguishing a profession from an occupation. Borrowing from the classic definitional criteria, McCully stated that a profession provides a unique social service by well-trained members of an organized group that enforces standards and monitors competence via certification and ethics committees. Members of a profession should possess autonomy and have personal responsibility in conducting their professional duties. Their emphasis should be on service rather than on mere economic gain. McCully

concluded his article with the challenge to constantly seek professional development. McCully's assertions are compatible with other accepted definitions of a profession (Sills, 1968; Pietrofesa & Vriend, 1971; *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, 1971; Fairchild, 1976; Weissman, 1984; Kirshner, 1986). Over the past four decades, counselors have charted a course for attaining a status that could be recognized by other professionals, as well as the general public. Through role statements, codes of ethics, accreditation guidelines, competency standards, licensure, certification and other standards of excellence, the counseling profession has reached the threshold of acceptance as one of the "professions."

The American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) has certainly maintained a focus on the knowledge, skills, organization, and standards of counselors, while responding to the needs of society. With Goodyear's challenge to focus on professionalism in mind, the following ideas are presented to help counselors move beyond their status and to reflect on a higher level of involvement in the profession.

Professionalism means different things to different people (Jago, 1984). To some it may mean altruism or dedication to service or a high level of competence in their work. The *-ism* suffix suggests that professionalism includes behaviors and attitudes that are characteristic of "true" professionals.

Professionalism is the intrinsic motivation that helps build on the foundation of a counselor's educational training. The concept of professionalism must be individualized or personalized; counselors must understand that no one else has control over that attribute but themselves. Borish (1983) states that "the element of personal responsibility is at the essence of the organization of professions" (p. 18). Therefore, whether or not the occupation itself has attained the status of profession, the individual can attain the attribute of professionalism.

Professionalism is a complex attribute, and there may not be total agreement on its definition. Based on my reading of the literature, however, I would offer the following working definition. Professionalism is:

1. the way in which a person relies on a personal high standard of competence in providing professional services
2. the means by which a person promotes or maintains the image of the profession
3. a person's willingness to pursue professional development opportunities that will continue to improve skills within the profession

4. the pursuit of quality and ideals within the profession
5. a person's sense of pride about the profession

These five components of professionalism are not mutually exclusive. One's professionalism would be diminished, however, if any of the components were not addressed in his or her professional development.

The AACD *Ethical Standards* (1981) provide one of the best resources counselors may possess to examine their competence as it relates to professionalism. The challenge that the *Ethical Standards* provide by stating that "the member neither claims nor implies professional qualifications exceeding those possessed" (p. 1) is one on which counselors should reflect regularly. Furthermore, the credentialing standards that have been developed by AACD and its divisions establish a mechanism for measuring competence and a means for objectively assessing that competence. More important, however, professionalism demands that the counselor learn "the content and the processes so that they become a part of your being rather than as something to be forgotten after examinations" (Peterson & Nisenholz, 1987, p. 168). A personal standard of competence suggests that credentials are merely minimum standards on which to build.

Competent counselors are also aware of the social, cultural, psychological, and circumstantial environments surrounding their professional activities. They try to see the big picture, even when acting in advocacy situations. Because responsible behavior is grounded in personal decision making and because the ethical standards cannot tell counselors what to do in all situations, "action should be based on careful, reflective thought about which response is professionally right in a particular situation" (Tennyson & Strom, 1986, p. 298).

Competent counselors also are better able to appreciate and even assume certain counselor functions for which they have no particular affinity because they know it is essential to the overall functioning of a program or a particular counseling service. For example, a counselor who dislikes writing case reports still agrees to submit these records because of the accountability procedures established by the agency; neglect of such duties would adversely affect other counselors in a team effort. Competent counselors try to go beyond their own value systems and experience to provide the best possible services for clients.

Counselors should seek feedback about their competence from professional peers. Supervisors' ratings, staff meetings devoted to peer feedback, and informal requests for subjective evaluations are some alternatives for reflecting on one's competence.

The responsibility for building the image of the profession rests as much with the individual counselor as it does with the professional organizations. While AACD, APA, and other human service organizations may be involved in publicity efforts, lobbying, and setting standards to promote counseling, those efforts may be undermined at the local level by the inept behavior, nonchalance, or careless practice of a particular counselor. This is not to say that the efforts of the professional organizations are unimportant; on the contrary, counselors should believe that active involvement in committee work and other functions of these groups are also critical to the profession's image. However, a cumulative effect is generated by each incident where a counselor's lack of concern or awareness for the image of the profession results in the public perceiving counselors in a negative light. "The conduct of the professional man [*sic*] has far-reaching and subtle implications in that it

sharpens and clarifies the concept of professionalism in the public mind" (Borish, 1983, p. 21). One's sense of professionalism should serve as a reminder to counselors that they are all caretakers of the profession's image.

There are several considerations for the counselor who attempts to uphold a model of professional behavior. For example, the language of the counselor provides several subtle, as well as direct, messages to the public. If the counselor were to use sarcasm, sexist language, poor grammar, or incongruent messages, it may create roadblocks to that person's services before even beginning to focus on the needs of the client. The counselor's personal appearance and that of his or her facilities and work settings are other factors to consider. An unkempt appearance conveys a particular image to clients; clients may also view a messy office or resource room as a sign of disorganization, lack of awareness of the needs of others, or just poor personal habits. The issue is not whether the counselor has the right to maintain a particular life-style, but whether that life-style carried to work has some negative effect on the public's image of the counselor. Individuality should be honored, but only to the extent that the professional group of which the individual is a member is not offended or discredited.

Of course, the most significant aspect of image building is the counselor's ability to perform competently. "The most important single ingredient in the establishment of power bases is likely to be our effectiveness. In order to increase that effectiveness in the eyes of others, it is necessary to give focus to our activities . . ." (Shaw, 1977, pp. 344-345). In an age of accountability we must be able to demonstrate that the things to which we have committed ourselves have been done and done well.

Professional involvement and self-renewal make it possible for counselors to grow and improve as professionals (Drier & Axelrod, 1980). It is through this professional development that counselors "take positive steps to update competency by keeping abreast of relevant technical literature, research, and participation in meetings of the corporate group of members" (McCully, 1962, p. 466).

AACD has been highly visible and active in promoting counselors' professional development (Counselor Renewal and Development Professional Preparation and Standards Committee, 1978; Walz & Benjamin, 1978). Excellent resources and opportunities are provided for inservice training, individualized enrichment through reading and collegial support groups, requirements for continued credentialing, advance degree programs, and other special services. It is professionalism, however, which motivates a counselor to take advantage of and to use the opportunities that are provided in these areas. Mandated, generic staff development programs are not sufficient for counselors with professionalism; a personal plan of action is valued and pursued.

Although membership in professional counseling organizations is becoming more and more expensive, it is an expense that reflects the growing status and complexity of the profession. As new developments, issues, ideas, and concerns evolve within the profession, counselors must keep abreast of this information and, at times, be actively involved in promoting and influencing action that will affect the future of the profession. It is difficult to comprehend how a counselor can "grow" with the profession without belonging to professional organizations and taking advantage of their resources and services.

The quality of programs and services and the pursuit of ideals in terms of counselor performance have been the focus of many activities at the local, state, and national levels. All

the credentialing efforts reflect this focus. The individual counselor who possesses professionalism, furthermore, always should be trying to live up to the existing standards of the profession and critically looking to see in what ways improvements may be made to pursue a higher ideal. Active membership in professional organizations should be viewed as a means of promoting quality and ideals. There is strength in numbers as new approaches are advocated. Only through the bylaws, role statements, legislative actions, policy statements, and other professional activities of the organization can major changes be effected in the profession.

On an individual level, a person must set high standards of performance and seek excellence, not mediocrity; demonstrate eagerness, creativeness, and curiosity, not complacency. Professionalism should impel us to go beyond our own ideals and to encourage high standards from colleagues, as well.

Pride in the profession comes from an appreciation of its past, a dedication to its current practices, and a belief in its potential for future refinements. Pride may evolve from a counselor's commitment to the other four components of professionalism, since the knowledge and skills addressed in those areas should, in turn, help the person appreciate the traditions, the diversity, and the depth of the counseling profession.

Counseling is still an emerging profession. The continued growth and development of the profession are dependent on many elements, one of the more important elements being the professionalism of its members. Both individuals and groups of counselors should examine tangible ways to address their professionalism.

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