



## Review

## Professionalism: An exemplar for the sciences



Mary Wurm-Schaar

Office of Institutional Assessment and Accreditation, Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine 123 Irvine Hall, Athens, OH 45701, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 15 June 2015

Accepted 24 June 2015

Available online 20 July 2015

## Keywords:

Triggle

Science profession

Professionalism

Ethics

Mentoring

## ABSTRACT

The construct of a profession encompasses several core elements that guide the behavior of its members and the quality standards for the services they provide and products they produce: primarily, competency specifications for members of the profession, a code of professional and ethical behavior, and a commitment to serve the public good. Professionalism is the embodiment of a profession's expertise, ethos, and service to the public good. As an academic scientist, David Triggle exhibited an extraordinary mastery of professionalism in two domains: science and academic leadership in higher education. Sociocultural changes, including the commodification of knowledge, science, and higher education, are posing challenges to the professions and their traditional values. Whereas the effectiveness of ethics instruction is questionable, positive mentoring has shown promise as a means to help professionals maintain the ideals and the values of their chosen occupations. David Triggle was an extremely effective and revered mentor to numerous individuals in the sciences as well as in higher education, enhancing their professional enculturation and development. He fostered integrity of purpose in our respective professional lives and work, and was and remains an exemplar of professionalism.

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## Contents

1. Introduction .....	313
2. Professions and professionalism .....	313
3. Professional misbehavior and self-regulation .....	315
3.1. Ethics education .....	315
3.2. Professional autonomy .....	315
4. Conclusion .....	316
References .....	316

## 1. Introduction

David Triggle, Ph.D., has had an incredible career, marked by extraordinary achievements as a scientist, an educator and an academic administrator. He holds the titles of State University of New York (SUNY) Distinguished Professor, SUNY's highest faculty rank, and "University Professor" which is presented by the SUNY Board of Trustees and typically reserved for former university presidents or chancellors. He has served in a variety of capacities throughout his 50 year career at the University at Buffalo (UB), ascending from a faculty member in Biochemical Pharmacology to University Provost. Leadership roles he held while employed at UB include Chair of the Department of Biochemical Pharmacology,

Dean of the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences (SoPPS), Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Graduate Education, and University Provost.

David deftly navigated in the world of two professions, science and higher education, and emerged as a notable leader in both. He exemplified the ideal values of those professions and his professionalism was exemplary. Fittingly, the professionalism construct offers an invaluable lens for contextualizing David's work and contributions to science, higher education, and the individuals he taught, mentored, and worked with as a colleague.

## 2. Professions and professionalism

While the term profession is readily associated with an occupation, it also refers to a sociological construct for which there is no generally agreed upon definition [1,2] and "no

E-mail address: [wurm@ohio.edu](mailto:wurm@ohio.edu) (M. Wurm-Schaar).

single . . . explanatory trait or characteristic . . .” [3,p. 33]. However, there is consensus around several core features associated with the construct: (1) a specialized knowledge base needed to practice the profession; (2) a formal, typically extensive training program that entails some form of credentialing standards that are the prerequisite for entering professional practice; (3) autonomy or self-regulation of the profession; and (4) a commitment to serve the social good [2,4]. All professions hinge on what Kovak [5] calls two bargains, one that entails the internal responsibilities associated with training and credentialing members' competence as well as the development of a formal code of ethics and another that mandates obligations to society to ensure that its expertise will be put to socially responsible uses. Society grants a profession the autonomy to control its training, work, and membership but that autonomy is contingent upon the group's self-regulation.

Whereas medicine and law are considered classical professions, science, particularly academic science, can be viewed as a profession [6,7]. Academic scientists control entrance into the profession via the university admissions process; set academic degree requirements and competence standards; train and enculturate new members; determine which individuals are granted the right to practice in the profession via degree conferral; and, control or greatly influence the employment of individuals within their ranks.

David was ultimately responsible for the school's manpower contributions to the pharmaceutical sciences and the pharmacy profession during his tenure as Dean of the UB SoPPS. During this period, he was extremely active in training, professionally socializing, and mentoring undergraduate, graduate, and pharmacy students as well as postdoctoral trainees. Concurrently, he contributed to the educational programming offered by several other schools and departments at UB, maintained an active and productive research program, and produced prolific scholarly works nationally and internationally. Whereas most Deans, even those at institutions like UB that hold membership in the American Association of Universities, tend to relinquish many of their teaching, research and service activities when they assume the school's leadership, David was untiring in his commitment to science, pharmacy, his colleagues, and trainees.

David's performance standards served to role model the professional work ideal. A subsequent dean at the UB SoPPS introduced David as the school's 2011 commencement speaker and noted some of the highlights of his distinguished career (e.g., published over 300 peer-reviewed papers, several books, and over 150 chapters and reviews; presented over 1000 invited lectures worldwide; helped establish educational institutions and programs in numerous countries; and, was recognized as one of the most cited authors in pharmacology, to name a few) [8]. Despite his level of productivity, he made time to foster the professional development of the school's faculty and staff, often by informal and incidental learning opportunities, consistent with best practices [9]. For example, he was extremely well read and generously shared articles that corresponded to the needs or interests of various faculty and staff members. I heard several recipients of these articles express appreciation for the thoughtfulness and also muse aloud, “he must never sleep”.

Professionalism can be conceptualized as the “occupational or normative value” of a profession. [10,p. 782] A salient feature of professionalism is role-differentiation which entails a distinction between personal and professional ethics [11]. While role-differentiation does not pose notable ethical challenges in many professions, it can in others (e.g., defense attorneys in the legal profession). It is during the professional training process that new or novice members learn, and master, the occupation's specialized knowledge, skills, norms, and code of ethics; and hopefully, the

tacit is made explicit. Skeptics of the professionalization process likely concur with Ozar who claims that most professionals “. . . are inarticulate about their profession's ethical standards . . . and most professions, as collective voices of their members, are inarticulate as well.” [12,p.149]

Identifying the core values of a profession is complicated by the differing norms and ethical standards of its factions and subgroups. In medicine, the American College of Physicians, American College of Surgeons, and the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons have separate, and somewhat differing, professional and ethical codes. The sciences have the same issue with differing paradigms of professionalism and ethics among the disciplines.

The American Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology's Code of Ethics specifies obligations to three groups (i.e., the public, other investigators, and trainees) [13]; the American Chemical Society' Chemical Professional's Code of Conduct includes responsibilities to numerous stakeholders within and outside of the profession as well as to broader interests such as the science of chemistry and the environment [14]; and, the American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists' Code of Ethics almost exclusively targets issues of concern to the research enterprise (e.g., scientific integrity, protection of human subjects, disclosure of financial support, and accuracy in reporting) [15]. Most of the sciences' professional and ethical codes reflect Merton's classical codification of the principles that should guide good science (i.e., universalism, communalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism) to some extent [16].

A useful way to foster learning about the core values of a profession, its subgroups, and associated occupations is by interdisciplinary training. If done properly, it provides a useful structure under which individuals can learn the integrity of purpose that their profession and others bring to the service of society. This type of training is increasingly common in health sciences and is amenable to applications in other professions e.g., 82% of American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) members consider their disciplines to be interdisciplinary [17,p. 72].

During his tenure as Dean, David developed, coordinated, and served as a lead faculty member in the first interdisciplinary ethics course for students from the traditional health sciences' professional schools (e.g., medicine and pharmacy) as well as graduate students from the various scientific disciplines (e.g., medicinal chemistry and pharmacology). In doing so, he addressed a notable element of the “hidden curriculum”, specifically, the value message conveyed by the topics that are not covered in the formal curriculum or the “null curriculum” [18]. Making an ethics course a degree program requirement conveyed a positive value message about the content. Furthermore, the course was ahead of its time. Since then, there have been increasing calls for a common set of professional and ethical standards to unite the various disciplines [19,20] and even a consolidation of educational oversight in some professions [21]. Over 15 years after David's ethics course, the health care professions collaboratively developed core competencies for interdisciplinary training that include common professionalism and ethics standards targeted in what is now referred to as “interprofessional professionalism” [22,p. 17].

Professionalism provides an environment which “encourages intellectual innovation—the development of new knowledge, skills and ideas” [6,p. 176] and requires reciprocal trust between the profession and the public. The public must be able to trust the work of scientists since their products and services are ubiquitous, affecting health and healthcare, the economy, the environment, and society. Concurrently, scientists' must be able to trust the integrity of their colleagues. Their knowledge depends on trusting the moral character of other scientists since their efforts are built on the work of others; although, this issue is “rarely discussed

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