



**NORTHERN ARIZONA
UNIVERSITY**
The W. A. Franke College of Business

**Qualities of Professionalism Sought by Employers:
Exploring, Validating, and Incentivizing Them in
Business Undergraduates**

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Timothy S. Clark

Assistant Professor of Management

Chris Lockwood

Professor Emeritus of Management

&

Craig E. Bain

Professor of Accounting

The authors hail from
The W.A. Franke College of Business
Northern Arizona University
20 W. McConnell Dr.
Flagstaff AZ 86011-5066

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INTRODUCTION

Credentials of business schools' graduates can be divided into three general categories:

- technical knowledge, specific to particular majors, along with general literacy and numeracy; which are reflected in GPAs from accredited programs,
- work experience, both general and discipline-specific (internships); which is reflected on résumés and validated through reference-checking, and
- professionalism, comprised of a wide range of behavioral and character qualities of varying importance to particular employers; which is difficult to detail or validate, therefore is often left to interviewers' opinions.

This paper is an exploration of professionalism. It is axiomatic that professionalism is of high importance to prospective employers, for employees at all levels but especially for new hires in entry-level jobs. The research questions relate to what constitutes employers' understanding of professionalism, how they perceive and validate it, and how business schools could better contribute to any gaps identified.

Qualities and characteristics that are prioritized for students' progress through business schools' curricula aren't necessarily those most sought by their prospective employers. In a sense, employers are the customers of business schools, and graduates are the products going to market, yet conspicuously little scholarly research has addressed any discrepancy between demand and supply in terms of the behavioral qualities sought in graduates. The topic has received more attention in other fields, such as in medicine where behavioral training for physicians includes bedside manner and compassion for patients (Stephenson, Higgs & Sugarman, 2001) and where training for nurses includes interpersonal comfort, confidence with patients, and responsibility-taking (Williams & Day, 2009). Legal scholars have focused on the necessary "dignity and honor" of young lawyers (Rhode, 1998) and certain behaviors appropriate for client interactions (Maynard, 1999). Business scholars, however, have largely limited their consideration of professionalism to the occupational form that refers to inter-industry cadres of like-minded experts in particular fields like modern-days guilds (Andrews, 1969).

Management researchers have studied the qualities sought and perceptions made by interviewers (Caldwell & Burger, 1998; Barrick, Shaffer & DeGrassi, 2009), finding intuitive associations between self-presentation skills and interview success. But while it is clear that interviewers seek particular qualities beyond technical knowledge and work experience, little academic research has focused on precisely what qualities are desirable in new prospective employees or how business schools might better impart the appropriate educational exposure and experiences. This paper is aimed at that gap.

A large study commissioned by a liberal-arts college undertaking a new strategic focus on "transforming students into professionals" (York College, 2012) shed light on precisely what qualities were sought by employers (Polk-Lepson Research Group, 2009). The study, featuring a sample of 520 mainly human resources managers, found widespread preference for behavioral qualities such as courtesy, respect, listening skills, work ethic, motivation, and appropriate appearance. These findings echo those from a European study titled "Graduate Employability: What do Employers Think and Want?" (Council for Industry and Higher Education, 2008), which found that the top qualities that distinguish professionals were communication skills, teamwork skills, and integrity. But beyond such lists of largely overlapping qualities, improved clarity to define the concept of professionalism is overdue, both for sufficient preparation of our graduates to embark on their business careers, but also for more effective pedagogical progress along the way.

The intended contribution of this paper is to provide a framework to better conceptualize professionalism, both as a useful tool for working professionals to assist in hiring processes and for business educators to assist in curricular and extra-curricular program development. In the following sections, findings from a series of exploratory surveys and a confirmatory focus group are presented. This leads to discussion of one business college's novel program recently created to raise professionalism in undergraduates. In the paper's conclusion, limitations of the present study are considered, implications for business educators are raised, and potential for further research is discussed.

METHODOLOGY

This study originated with a survey conducted in an accredited school of business, within a large public university located in the Western United States, where a professionalism-focused program for undergraduates was under consideration. The first exploratory survey queried primary stakeholders (students, faculty, administrators and staff) on perceptions of the need to address what a majority of respondents indicated was steady decline in the professionalism of students and what aspects and approaches deserved attention. Input from 179 respondents (comprised of about 50% of faculty and a representative 10% of students) also provided insight into what aspects of professionalism were seen as most important and relevant, and provided the core data for subsequent steps.

Next, follow-up surveys were run in an attempt to converge on a manageable set of words reflecting relevant aspects of professionalism. Responses from about half the members of the faculty, spanning years of tenure and disciplines, were processed. One-hundred ninety-six words, drawn from a broad review of literatures on leadership, teamwork, recruiting, and human-resource management, were divided into random sets of words that respondents ranked by importance. Through a series of rankings of response-averages, with elimination of effectively synonymous words (based on dictionary and thesaurus cross-checks), the word list was resolved into 10 potential category words and 49 relevant and distinctive descriptor words that could encompass the meaning of professionalism.

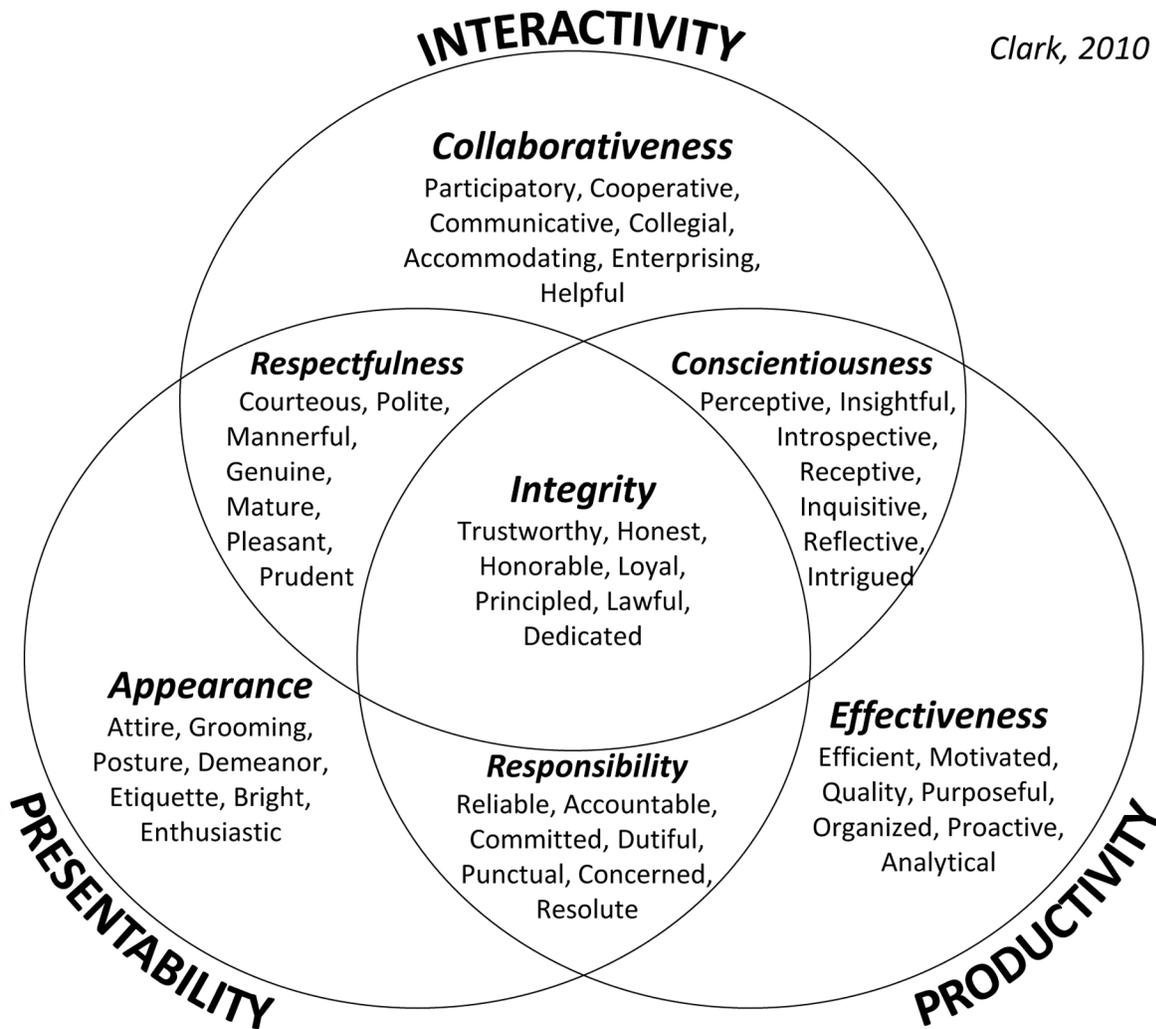
These words and categories were developed into worksheet, shown in Appendix 1, which was then completed by more than 50 undergraduate students working mainly in collaborative pairs or trios. Most of the student-completed worksheets were done in the context of regular meetings of Delta Sigma Pi and Beta Alpha Si; business-specific undergraduate fraternities in which exploration of professionalism is a regular topic. The worksheet presents the 49 descriptor words in alphabetical order on the left, with steps 1 and 2 entailing sorting the words into appropriate categories then ranking them in perceived importance in hiring decisions and steps 3 and 4 entailing ranking the resulting categories and locating them in the diagram at lower right. Appendix 1 includes aggregate respondent data in italics, showing the resulting categorizations and ranking of words (steps 1 and 2) along with numerical results of the categorization rankings and location data (steps 3 and 4). Aggregate responses from the worksheet established the Venn diagram in Figure 1, which is meant to encompass the qualities that constitute professionalism. Querying the validity of this resulting diagram became an objective for the focus group of accounting professionals, described in the next section.

Focus Group

In September 2011 at the authors' business school, members of the Accounting Advisory Council (AAC), comprised of alumni and recruiting-oriented professionals from accounting firms located around the region, gathered for their semi-annual meeting. These individuals are either partners in firms, HR-focused managers, or both, and all participants were involved in hiring at several institutions encompassing public accounting, industry, and governmental recruiting. They were considered an ideal focus group for exploring the constitution of professionalism, not just because of their own professional credentials but because the accounting industry, in particular, requires an especially high degree of professionalism in its new hires. From the first week on the job, most new accounting associates spend their workdays in clients' offices, where every behavior, action and inaction reflects on the firm.

Figure 1: The Constitution of Professionalism

Clark, 2010



In addition, there is a direct linkage between these AAC members and the Accounting students they are recruiting. As a condition for membership, all of the AAC members have demonstrated significant interaction with the Colleges' Accounting program and with the students themselves.

Following outreach to the Chairwoman of this Council, the HR-focused manager at a major metropolitan office of a big-four accounting firm, an hour of the meeting's agenda was readily devoted to a set of focus group activities. Thirteen members the AAC attended (a representative half of all members) and contributed throughout the session. Their modal demographics centered on 16 to 25 years of experience, CPA certification, "frequent" involvement in hiring decisions and "high" personal interest in hiring decisions.

Following an inductive design for focus group activity (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007), and in order to reduce the likelihood of attendees reflecting only the predispositions of the researchers or each other, attendees were asked to individually do a brief worksheet that began with general and open-ended questions. For example, two highly exploratory questions that proved rich for subsequent discussion required respondents to complete sentences that began much like an Irish limerick, specifically "There once was a new employee that exemplified high(poor) professionalism, who ____."

Findings from this first element of the focus group, compiled from completed focus-group worksheets and from detailed notes taken from the subsequent group discussions, proved highly

convergent within the group and with results compiled from prior faculty- and student-based research. Indeed, most words and phrases captured were present verbatim or in the form of close synonyms on the student-done worksheet in Appendix 1. Notable differences include a concept of professionalism entailing “worldliness,” and a surprisingly high frequency of the phrase “self-awareness,” specific definitions of which could be research streams in their own right.

Also in the first element of the focus group activities were questions about professionalism’s importance in hiring decisions, followed by the difficulty of assessing and validating it. Almost without exception, respondents conveyed very high importance – referring to the discernment of professionalism qualities as the essence of the hiring decision, once basic requirements of technical competence (as evidenced by degree, GPA, etc.) and evidence of career ambition (as shown by work experience lists) are satisfied. Further, they were nearly unanimous in indicating that professionalism is very hard to validly assess in candidates. The one exception came from a partner at a large firm, who wrote “[gauging recruits’ professionalism is] fairly easy – after 4 hours of interviews, it comes out.” However, even this seems to converge with the others’ input, since anything that takes such a large resource allocation as four hours must not be easy, and it must be important to demand so much of a time commitment from numerous people. After a group discussion on these points, during which the facilitator and the note taker were able to explore and clarify nuances, the attendees moved to further specifics.

The second element of the focus group activity called on attendees to complete lists of words, separated into adjectives and actions, then rank them in terms of the degree to which they exemplify professionalism as they understand it. On average, 11 words or phrases per respondent were recorded, with 80% of those being words that appear on the worksheet in appendix 1 and the balance being phrases that were effectively synonymous with others. Further, respondents were asked for exemplar words or descriptions of poor professionalism, which were generally antonyms with the findings above and provided a further sense of convergence.

Last on the focus-group worksheet was a request for broad categories or classification of professionalism, as understood by the respondent. After collecting and coding these responses, it appeared that categories along the lines of 1) integrity/honesty/honor, 2) politeness/maturity/respectfulness in communication, and 3) organization/focus/responsibility were common to nearly all respondents.

Prior to that coding on these category words, the Venn diagram that resulted from the authors’ previous research was incrementally revealed on a screen in the focus-group room. Having just completed their own worksheets to independently record their unconstrained thoughts, each attendee was asked which aspects of the model were in congruence with their own thoughts and which were incongruous. Instances of variance were typically revealed to be merely a matter of degree or, more often, a matter of alternative perspective that converged on essentially the same target concept.

The resulting framework in Figure 1, developed through our exploratory series of surveys and worksheets with faculty and students, was thus refined in this confirmatory fashion with the focus group of highly relevant professionals.

The framework in Figure 1 represents how a person’s professionalism manifests in three primary ways: how they *interact* with others, how they *present* themselves, and how *productive* they are. These three spheres have unique areas, three areas of overlap with each of the other three, and one area of overlap that is common to all three at once. It is in this central area that the category of integrity lies, since its constituent behavioral attributes like honesty and loyalty arise in all three areas of a person’s interactivity, presentability, and productivity. Although the framework is neither definitive nor fully comprehensive, the accounting professionals that comprised the focus group summarily praised it as the most effective representation of professionalism that they had seen, and they all-but demanded copies to use with their staffs. Thus recognized as being of key interest to practitioners, the framework is also expected to be useful for academicians, both in research and for faculty and administrators involved in the development of the identified qualities in their students. The implementation of such a program is discussed in the next section.

ONE B-SCHOOL'S PROFESSIONALISM RECOGNITION PROGRAM

Stemming from the initial survey results indicating that undergraduates' behavior was generally trending away from the expectations of faculty, administrators, and even recruiters, and informed by the framework for professionalism described above, our College of Business (COB) developed what came to be called the Professionalism Recognition Program. The name is an intentional double-entendre, meaning that the program is intended to incentivize *recognition* of the elements and importance of professionalism, while also offering formal *recognition* for students who distinguish themselves doing so. This program works in congruence with and augments other efforts to elevate student norms of behavior, such as

- A student code of conduct signed by all incoming students,
- The Pathways to Professional Leadership Program, a series of seminars, workshops, and lectures that complement the Business degree coursework, with completion required prior to admission to upper division/major status, and
- Course modules on aspects of appropriate business etiquette taught primarily in lower-division courses.

In essence, the Professionalism Recognition Program offers recognition, throughout their college years but particularly upon graduation, for students who consistently distinguish themselves with regards to professionalism. The formal recognition comes in the form of a letter from the Dean's office certifying and explaining the student's accomplishments in the program. These letters amount to a sort of cumulative letter of recommendation from the entire faculty, indicating consistently professional behavior across multiple contexts over many semesters -- which carries more validity than individual letters from singular faculty members. Such recognition is expected to have significance in students' job hunting efforts, providing recruiters with a new tool to credibly verify certain necessary behavioral qualities. With that connection to future employability, the program is administrated by the COB's career development office, with a steering committee comprised of faculty and administrative staff. Students who choose to participate in the program strive to earn professionalism points ("props") mainly from faculty who choose to participate. Making participation entirely voluntary, for both students and faculty, enabled a much less cumbersome planning and implementation process, such as obviating a formal faculty vote.

Participating faculty clarify for their students what they consider, and how they will distinguish, certain professionalism-related behaviors. These attributes differ between various professors, which is part of the lesson intended for students who will have to adapt to the similarly varied preferences of different bosses and colleagues throughout their careers. Suggestions of relevant qualities are provided to professors, in various documents and workshops, in the form of diagrams like that shown in Figure 1 above. Participating professors may pick from these or any other qualities, so long as their preferences are clear to students, preferably in the syllabus. Some professors integrate professionalism evaluations into their course grading, while others make theirs entirely independent of grades. A rule of thumb for clarifying expectations holds that, whatever a professor's areas of interest and ways of evaluating professionalism behaviors, no student should be surprised by their resulting evaluation.

Following completion of coursework each semester, all faculty members receive automatic messages from the program's IT system (custom built, though quite simple) asking them to "check boxes" for each of their students who had opted-in to the program. Professors who choose not to participate need not respond to the message (and such non-responses, by not entering the numerator or denominator of subsequent calculations, won't count for or against those students). Participating faculty rate participating students as:

- Highly professional (approximately the top third of participants)
- Professional (approximately the middle third of participants)
- Participating (approximately the bottom third of participants)

These evaluations populate the database such that a running total is accrued by each participating student. Though subject to refinement, values are presently set at 20 props for achieving high-professionalism in a three-credit-hour business course, 10 props for professionalism, and 5 props for a participation-without-distinction evaluation, with proportionally lower props value for shorter classes or modules. These props tallies allow for calculating each student's comparative standing upon graduation as well as throughout their preceding years in the program.

In addition to earning props from participating professors, students gain professionalism skills and, therefore, comparable recognition through this program from a range of extra-curricular activities. These include attendance at general presentations and outside speakers, which are typically scored with one prop simply for attending. Tying such a "carrot" to attendance, rather than incentivizing these types of activities with only "sticks" for not attending, is intended to change not only students' attendance patterns but also their appreciation of such presentations. Students also earn props from leadership or managerial involvement with relevant campus clubs or groups, in the range of 1 to 10 props per semester of activity as determined by the program administrator. Student creativity has flourished with respect to the types of extra-curricular activities petitioned to be counted. But this is welcomed as a "good problem," signifying rising interest in the program, for the administrators and/or steering committee to work through.

For the graduating cohort of students, the database provides a simple tally from which to calculate relative standing in the three categories of the professionalism program. Rank within these categories is also approximated for any student prior to graduation, to give them a sense of their trajectory but also so they can cite the distinction in their job-hunting efforts for summer employment, for example.

The recognition obtained by the graduating students amounts to nothing more complicated for the COB to produce than form letters, printed and signed on letterhead. These letters are not limited to mere notification of a student's designation – they also capitalize on the opportunity to promote the program as a unique quality of the education offered by the COB, which is a further strength of the program. As a mid-tier, state school in the Western U.S., the school competes with a variety of other colleges, including some that are run primarily on-line. The COB's uncommonly low student-to-faculty ratio enables the requisite familiarity, which much larger schools or distance-learning schools cannot match. This strategic distinction is explicitly leveraged for student recruiting and retention, and in alumni outreach.

Two years since its pilot semester, nearly 700 students had voluntarily enrolled (approximately one-third of those eligible, but appropriately skewed toward upperclassmen), despite relatively little promotion and no requirements. Faculty participation had risen to nearly one-half, also skewed toward upper-division courses (since earlier courses, which are larger and include many students not yet decided on their majors, are less suited anyway). This comprises a critical mass that has the program's administrators feeling the program is viable. However, ongoing research into outcomes will attempt to measure the program's effectiveness in terms of both faculty and recruiter perceptions, to inform continuous refinements.

CONCLUSION

Why the fields of medicine and law have produced more scholarly research on the topic of professionalism among their graduates, while business scholars have left the topic relatively untouched, is a question worthy of its own research. Certainly, most would agree that poor professionalism is associated with poor outcomes for customers, colleagues, firms' bottom lines, and therefore for society as a whole.

Limitations of this research may be why similar research is so scarce in the business disciplines. No two working professionals may precisely agree on what constitutes professionalism, and would be even less likely to agree on how to assess or validate it in recruits. We purport that these findings from surveys and worksheet exercises, the output of which is validated by a focus group of relevant professionals, comprises a contribution toward filling a conspicuous gap in the field. A comprehensive,

authoritative definition of professionalism would require qualitative research with an 'n' that was orders-of-magnitude greater than what was possible for this study, and yet any definition would still entail considerable variation by industry and geography, among other possible factors. Still, based on the positive reaction to our efforts and to the framework in Figure 1 from members of the Accounting Advisory Council professionals, this research is worth pursuing despite imperfections.

The Professionalism Recognition Program described above, and any similar efforts at other business schools, should produce a trove of data and research opportunities. But what would be the ultimate dependent variable for determining whether it is improving graduates' professionalism? Self-reports? Faculty surveys? Job placement? Starting salaries or even long-term career trajectories of graduates? Although imperfect and fraught with confounding variables, these are all potential avenues for research. Discoveries on the frontiers of social science often require pushing forward in the face of uncertainty, only after which new clarity and knowledge may emerge.

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APPENDIX 1:

Worksheet for research into words constituting professionalism, with aggregate responses shown in italics.

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Use one worksheet per group or business-person iteration.

THANK YOU!

WORKSHEET for research into "The Constitution of PROFESSIONALISM"

STEP 1: Place each of the 49 words at left into one of the 7 categories below.

STEP 2: Rank the words within each column according to your perceptions of their importance in hiring decisions (1=most important, 7=least).

PROFESSIONALISM QUALITIES	INTEGRITY		EFFECTIVENESS		RESPONSIBILITY		COLLABORATIVENESS		CONSCIENTIOUSNESS		RESPECTFULNESS		APPEARANCE	
	Rank	Word	Rank	Word	Rank	Word	Rank	Word	Rank	Word	Rank	Word	Rank	Word
Accommodating		Intrigued												
Accountable		Introspective												
Analytical		Lawful												
Attire		Loyal												
Bright		Mannerful												
Collegial		Mature												
Committed		Motivated												
Communicative		Organized												
Concerned		Participatory												
Cooperative		Perceptive												
Courteous		Pleasant												
Dedicated		Polite												
Demeanor		Posture												
Dutiful		Principled												
Efficient		Proactive												
Enterprising		Prudent												
Enthusiastic		Punctual												
Etiquette		Purposeful												
Genuine		Quality												
Grooming		Receptive												
Helpful		Reflective												
Honest		Reliable												
Honorable		Resolute												
Inquisitive		Trustworthy												
Insightful														

STEP 3: Rank the seven categories according to your perceptions of their importance in hiring decisions (1=most important, 7=least).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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STEP 4: Assign each category to one of the seven segments in the diagram, at lower-right, which portrays professionalism aspects and overlaps.

7	5	4	1	6	2	3
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STEP 5: Indicate the demographics of respondent(s) with checkmarks (or #s of group members).

Specialty area:

11 Accounting 0 Senior professional 0 African

0 Economics 0 Junior professional 1 East Asian

5 Finance 0 Academic - faculty 3 European

4 Hotel-Rest. Mgt. 0 Academic - admin./staff 9 Latin American

3 Info Systems 1 Masters student 0 Middle Eastern

3 Management 30 Undergrad Jr.-Sr. 23 North American

9 Marketing 5 Undergrad Fr.-So. 0 South Asian

1 Other: _____ 0 Other: _____

Comments?: _____

--PROFESSIONALISM--