



## **Developing Professionalism in a College of Business: The Implementation of a Professionalism Recognition Program**

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### **I. Introduction**

Like art, professionalism is hard to define, except to say “you know it when you see it.” Moreover, it is often the absence of professional behavior, as with a setting devoid of art, that is conspicuous. Indeed, because the concept can be so nebulous, traditional methods of specifying curriculum and expecting deliverables from students may be ill suited for raising the topic, despite it being highly relevant to the success of business-school graduates and, therefore, to the institutions themselves. This paper introduces a program developed to raise the topic within and beyond the curriculum, in a flexible and widely applicable way.

Seen from the perspective of graduates’ future employers, desirable qualities and behavioral attributes are difficult to grasp or validate from bullet points on résumés (Barr & McNeilly, 2002). Recruiters can reasonably expect that a degree from an accredited school connotes the necessary technical training, basic knowledge, and generic attributes (Barrie, 2006), or simply “book smarts.” Similarly, lists of work experiences provide solid indications of applicants’ background, capabilities, and ambitions. But at least as important as those two categories of applicants’ qualities is a category that may best be encompassed by the term “professionalism,” yet few colleges of business strive to help students substantiate their credentials in this area nor help employers validate them.

Executives interviewed for a *BizEd* article titled “What Business Wants from Tomorrow’s Leaders” (Shinn, 2009) cite as the most important characteristics for career progression: attributes like attitude, initiative, creativity, flexibility, and openness to opportunity -- none of which is well reflected on résumés nor specifically addressed in typical undergraduate business courses. These characteristics, and many more detailed later in the paper, constitute a concept of behavioral professionalism which is distinct from the sense of occupational identification (Bartol, 1979) exemplified in the professions of medicine or law. Relating this behavioral view to business students fits with criticisms of the management education industry (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004) asserting that career success depends on character and behavior far more than on technical knowledge.

Business educators share an interest in enhancing and qualifying their students in these behavioral areas, not just to improve the “product” being offered to the job market upon graduation, but also to facilitate increased fulfillment, character development, and progress toward graduation for all students along the way. Accreditation agencies such as the American Association for Higher Education & Accreditation have also explored students’ unprofessional behaviors in classroom (Gonzales & Lopez, 2001), but mainly with a focus on reducing “disengaged, disinterested, disrespectful, disruptive, defiant, and disturbed” behavior rather than on increasing more professionally appropriate behaviors.

In light of these issues, a “Professionalism Recognition Program” (PRP) grew out of a consideration of the importance of professionalism and the means available to faculty and administrators for effecting positive change. The PRP was developed as a co-curricular activity in our College of Business (COB), which is AACSB-accredited and within a mid-tier state-university in the Western U.S. This paper describes the development of the program and its subsequent implementation, and discusses the lessons learned. The paper presents the PRP in terms of its effectiveness in creating structural support and incentives for raising the professionalism behaviors of undergraduate students, and in terms of the political/institutional processes to design and implement it. We also highlight key aspects of the program’s implementation and operation noting potential advantages and drawbacks, with the intention that the insights communicated in this manuscript may help others to successfully develop and implement related programs in order to recognize and improve the professionalism behaviors of students.

### **II. Background**

Success in the workplace, especially for junior employees, depends on navigating reciprocal social exchanges of “organizational socialization ... the process by which a new member learns and

adapts to the value system, the norms, and the required behavior patterns” (Schein, 1967, p. 220), above and beyond technical knowledge and productivity. The preparation of graduates for facing these challenges has gained considerable attention of researchers in medical and legal spheres (Shah, Anderson, & Humphrey, 2008) and in pharmacology (Hammer, 2000), with attention to the bedside manner and client relationships of those fields’ professionals. In some business-management literature, the concepts of professionalism and its antonyms regularly appear with respect to the moral conduct of certain notorious executives, but seldom with respect to the behavioral and “soft” qualities that could or should be desirable among graduates from our institutions.

With respect to teaching, behaviors described as “classroom incivilities” are on the increase (Boice, 1996; Buttner, 2004; Feldman, 2001), and addressing them is among educators’ responsibilities (Jackson, 2009, Morrisette, 2001). Studies have been performed to learn about students’ perspective on the issue (Bjorklund and Rehling, 2010) and to explore ways to handle incivilities in the classroom (Nordstrom and Bartels, 2009), but mainly with an intent to curb undesirable behavior rather than to incentivize desired behavior.

### **Approaches to Enhance Professionalism in Business Schools**

Students within business schools can receive information about professionalism and help preparing skills in a number of ways. Some business schools offer stand-alone courses or segments of courses dedicated to teaching “soft skills.” In this context soft skills are defined as “skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge” (Moss and Tilly 2001; 44) and are conceptually related to professionalism skills. To the extent that soft skills are taught in this way, the emphasis is on conceptual knowledge reinforced with academic exercises and examples.

Students are also exposed to professionalism skills as members of professional business fraternities such as Beta Alpha Psi, Delta Sigma Pi, and other field-specific groups that foster interaction with business professionals, such as through lectures and office tours. In these cases students are exposed to professionalism at some practical level and encouraged to interact with professionals appropriately.

A third approach to foster professionalism behaviors among business students has emerged, involving co-curricular programs that emphasize the recognition, assessment, and reward of professionalism behaviors exhibited by students. This entails rating and tracking students’ exhibited professionalism behaviors, thus going beyond instruction and example. This was the novel approach taken by the authors’ COB, and is detailed below.

## **III. Implementation of a Professionalism Recognition Program (PRP)**

### **Developing Objectives and Design**

The fundamental idea for what became the Professionalism Recognition Program (PRP) was developed as a semester-long example in the Strategic Management class of one of the authors. During that semester the author began teaching as an assistant professor at this mid-tier, state university in a small city in the Western U.S., where a high percentage of first-generation college students presented stark contrasts with the author’s prior experiences teaching at a large, private university in the Eastern U.S. This contrast of student characteristics, with aspects such as assertiveness, initiative, ambition, and etiquette, prompted this author’s use of the topic as a strategic management challenge for the COB and eventually led to his further exploration of professionalism in terms of both research and service.

As with any manifestation of strategic management, alignment of goals and objectives flow from mission and vision statements, which refer primarily to aspects of character. Further, strategy optimization occurs with capitalization on an organization’s unique and valuable competencies -- foremost among which was the COB’s relatively small classes and close relationships between faculty and students.

At a regularly scheduled research presentation before a subset of faculty in November 2009, this author presented the initial idea of a program conceived to incentivize students to direct some attention to matters of professionalism, both in classroom settings and in extra-curricular activities. General reactions of faculty present included a sense that a lack of student professionalism behaviors was a significant and growing problem that most faculty attempt to address in their own way, with varying degrees of success or exasperation, and that a more comprehensive program could facilitate a common language and approach that could be highly beneficial.

### **Assembling a Task Force**

It was determined that to move such a program forward, a cross-college task force should spearhead the development and implementation tasks. The task force was formed from volunteers and included several members of the faculty, including tenured professors and non-tenured, teaching-focused lecturers, as well as staff from the college's own advising office, information technology (IT), and career development office (CDO). It was viewed as critical to include members from each of these areas in the college because the success of the program required the coordination and insights from all areas. Faculty would play an important role in developing the conceptual basis of the program and provide assessments of student professionalism in the classroom. Staff from the advising office and CDO would provide insights into employer needs and be involved in promoting the program to both students and employers. The IT staff would play a critical role in the implementation effort as Web-based interfaces would need to be designed to facilitate students who sign up for program participation and for faculty to input assessments of students' professionalism performance in the classroom. Administrators from the dean's office expressed support, but stayed on the sidelines to preserve the faculty-driven nature of the initiative.

### **Guiding Principles and Program Objectives**

Guiding principles shared by the members of the task force stemmed from the presumption that trying almost any type of program to address professionalism in the student body would be a worthwhile experiment, and would likely be a noble effort even if not immediately successful. The general theory adopted for guidance derived from Giddens' sociological masterwork titled "The Constitution of Society" (1984), in which he posits that a recursive dyad results from individuals' tendency to consider their interests and options among constraints, and act within and upon the social context around them. Resulting social orders and norms, therefore, become the constraints and influences for future individual action, in a process of continuous, recursive evolution. In essence, the question of what came first -- the individual actions of social agents, or the structure of social norms in which their actions are prompted -- is about as unresolvable as whether chickens precede eggs, since both elements are in constant, recursive interplay. But faculty and/or administrators who acquiesce to student-bodies' social norms as if they were given and unchangeable are missing opportunities to positively influence culture, which is the fundamental challenge this COB undertook.

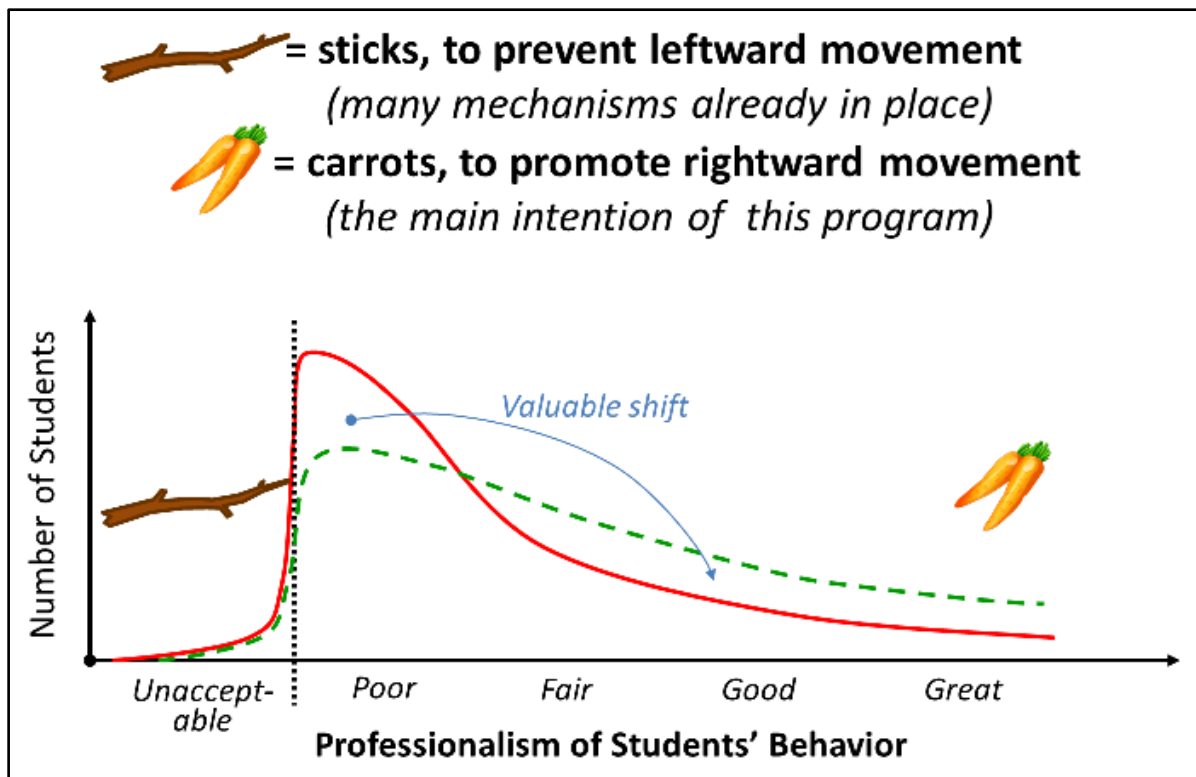
Educators' common reaction to perceived deficiencies in student-agents is to alter structure, such as requiring new course content and/or formally test knowledge. For behavioral issues, faculty and administrative reactions tend to focus on establishing minimum requirements, along with consequences for poor performance. But such "sticks" are of limited use in positively changing behaviors and culture (Bruner, 1985; Elton, 1999; Rand, et al., 2009), since they tend to focus on disincentivizing poor performance rather than on incentivizing improvements. A key impetus for the task force developing the focal COB's program was the unanimous belief that stick-type incentives alone cannot address the problem, and would benefit from augmentation by carrot-type incentives. Moreover, since this problem was part of the college's structure, improvement was considered to be a responsibility of faculty and administrators.

As shown in the solid-line curve in Figure 1, sticks tend to result in aggregate behavior that largely complies with minimum requirements, preventing further leftward movement from "poor" to "unacceptable." But sticks, alone, offer little incentive to move rightward on the behavior scale, causing

compression near the minimum threshold, just out of reach of the stick. On the other hand, the dashed-line curve indicates the theoretical result of the introduction of carrot-type incentives, which tend to shift behavior rightward all along the range. In contrast to sticks, carrots provide incentive for students to move rightward from “poor to fair,” “fair to good,” and “good to great.” Whatever the exact shape and proportions turned out to be (if it could even be accurately measured), any shift from the area under the solid line to that under the dashed line would indeed be a valuable shift, serving the interests of students, faculty, and all other stakeholders of the college.

**Figure 1**

**Graphic representation of intended incentive effects from adding new “carrots” to existing “sticks.”**



The design phase of the program was largely complete by the end of the first semester that the task force met, Spring 2010, and refinements were made during a development process leading to launch that following Fall. The agreed upon objectives were that the program would:

1. Stimulate more frequent discussion of the concept of professionalism, both within the student body as well as with and between members of the faculty.
2. Provide a tool to enable those discussions to use a common language, even when allowing for the broad variation in people's conceptions of professionalism.
3. Incentivize students to improve their recognition of the constituent behaviors and value of professionalism, and provide those students that distinguish themselves with formal recognition of having done so. From this dual use of the word "recognition," the name of the program was settled as the Professionalism Recognition Program (PRP).

4. Work in congruence with, and augment, traditional efforts to regulate student norms of behavior. These traditional efforts, which themselves are always evolving as faculty adapt and experiment, rest on a foundational student code of conduct (see Appendix A), which was developed with extensive stakeholder input and which all students must sign before formal admission to the upper-division business school (in their junior year), along with course modules on appropriate professionalism taught primarily in lower-division courses.
5. Be voluntary, for both student and faculty participation, at least initially. This provision enables much greater expediency and experimentation in development and implementation. Also, by requiring initiative from students to participate and benefit from the program, it challenges the entitlement mentality.

**Pre-Implementation Survey**

A pre-implementation survey was carried out to capture perceptions of the faculty and COB students as to some of the key objectives of the PRP outlined above. The survey data was collected in Spring 2010, several months before implementation, using a Web-based survey tool. A solicitation was sent by e-mail to all members of the COB faculty and to all declared business majors. A total of 41 faculty members (a response rate of about 48%) and 148 students (a response rate of about 10%, concentrated mainly among the “target market” of upper-classmen ) completed the survey. There were two primary objectives of the pre-implementation survey: (1) to determine if faculty and/or students think professionalism behaviors should be explored and influenced in the COB, and (2) should a program to recognize professionalism behaviors be established in the COB. An analysis of the data as summarized in Table 1 revealed general support from both constituencies.

**Table 1**  
**Pre-Implementation Survey Results**  
 7-Point Likert-Type Scale: 1 = Strong Agreement, 7 = Strong Disagreement  
 Mean Values (Standard Deviations)

	<b>Students</b>	<b>Faculty</b>
<b>Survey Objective: Should professionalism behaviors be emphasized and influenced in the COB?</b>		
1. Students who don't learn to behave professionally in college will be disadvantaged in the workplace.	2.1 (1.7)	1.7 (1.0)
2. Faculty and administrators have a responsibility to Influence behaviors as well as teach curriculum.	2.8 (1.4)	2.7 (1.0)
3. The COB should attempt to influence and improve professionalism behaviors among students.	2.9 (1.4)	3.4 (1.7)
<b>Survey Objective: Should a program to recognize professionalism behaviors be established in the COB?</b>		
4. A new program that would recognize and track professionalism behaviors among undergraduates would likely be an improvement over the status quo.	3.0 (1.7)	3.1 (1.6)
5. A new program to recognize professionalism should only be voluntary for faculty to participate if they wish.	3.0 (1.7)	2.0 (1.6)
6. A new program to recognize professionalism should only be voluntary for students to participate if they wish..	3.5 (2.0)	5.0 (2.1)

The mean values for question 1. indicate that both students and faculty perceive that students who do not learn professionalism behaviors will be disadvantaged in their future careers. This result provides some validation for the effort to provide some form of a professionalism learning experience. When combined with the results for questions 2. and 3., a positive reception was indicated for some formal professionalism program within the COB. The mean value of the response to question 4. provides further support for the development of a program. The mean values for questions 5. and 6. indicate general support for the voluntary nature of the program for faculty but not students. Also statistically significant, and interesting while not surprising, faculty members tended to feel more strongly about their own participation in the program being voluntary than about the students' participation.

The generally positive results from the pre-implementation survey provided validation and support for the deployment of the PRP in the following semester. The Task Force then moved forward to develop operational systems for implementation. This included defining the key categories of professionalism activities, student and faculty communications and information (e.g., FAQs), and the required information and Web-based technologies to track and record student and faculty participation.

### **Program Operation**

Following the key objectives listed above, the PRP was designed to provide formal recognition to students who consistently distinguish themselves in the program. Students enroll voluntarily in the program and their professionalism-related performance is tracked over their academic career in the COB. Upon graduation, those students who have distinguished themselves receive a letter from the Dean of the college acknowledging their commendable level of professionalism behaviors. Whereas letters of recommendation offer "snapshots" of good working relationships with particular individuals, these PRP letters are intended to show consistency in students' behavior across numerous contexts with numerous people, which may prove to carry enhanced validity for employers.

Of course, a professionalism certification offers no guarantee of future behavior – no more than a student's high GPA guarantees high technical knowledge on the job – but the likely strong correlation provides prospective employers with a useful additional indicator.

Earning such formal recognition is expected to be valuable by enabling distinctive "bullet points" on graduates' résumés attesting to a key criterion by employers. But value is intended to be realized for students throughout their years of participation in the program, and concurrently for faculty and the rest of the college's stakeholders.

Students who choose to participate in the program are tracked as they strive to earn professionalism points ("props") through coursework and through extracurricular activities. Coursework props are earned in regular courses from faculty who choose to participate. Keeping participation entirely voluntary, for both students and faculty, enables a much less cumbersome planning and implementation process (i.e., obviating more extensive communications or involvement of central administration, a formal faculty vote, and/or extended political processes).

Enrollment in the PRP is open to any business major in the COB, though is intended to appeal most strongly to juniors and seniors. Students enroll in the program through a sign-up form on the college's Website. Information about the program is provided on the Webpage, highlighting the voluntary nature of participation and noting the key objectives of the program as listed above. The enrollment process is quick, as students simply enter their name and student ID on screen and click an "enroll" button once they've acknowledged understanding the terms and conditions. A database maintained in the COB's information technology center tracks student enrollment and records props earned by each enrollee and the faculty evaluations of each student's professionalism behavior in class. Enrolled students are asked to participate in an hour-long orientation program that introduces students to the rules, expectations, and processes, and fosters discussion on the inherently subjective nature of evaluating professionalism through small group discussion, video presentations, and even how-to and how-not-to skits.

Faculty members participate simply by clarifying for their students what they consider, and how they will distinguish, certain professionalism-related behaviors of their choosing. These attributes differ

between various professors, but no more so than requirements for earning certain letter grades differ across courses. The variation leads to inevitable uncertainty, which is an intended part of the lesson since students will have to adapt throughout their careers to the similarly varied preferences of different bosses and colleagues, to whom professionalism norms are critical though even less specified. Suggestions of relevant professionalism qualities are provided to professors, in various communications and using various diagrams and verbiage ideas. (See Appendices B, C and D for sample conceptualizations of relevant professionalism qualities, sample passages from participants' syllabi, and for "frequently asked questions" for faculty, respectively.)

The program structure makes no attempt to stipulate particular professionalism attributes to faculty, rather only to provide tools from which they can identify attributes of key concern and how to clarify those expectations for students. Participating professors may pick from any relevant behavioral attributes, so long as their preferences and evaluation intentions are made clear to students. Workshops for faculty also focus on becoming comfortable with the subjectivity inherent in the program – recognizing that subjective evaluations are ubiquitous in society, especially in workplaces, and that helping students to adjust to that fact is preferable to only leaving them to sink or swim after graduation.

All of the professionalism attributes reflected in the appendices are likely concerns of most faculty members in most schools, so a program like this one provides value mainly by facilitating attention being paid to them in a formal, consistent way. Of course, any reasonable subset of attributes from Appendix A could be chosen by any faculty member, and they have full discretion as to how to communicate their expectations, either expressed as what to do or what not to do, or a combination thereof. Some faculty members may also choose to integrate professionalism evaluations into their course grading, such as tying props to up to 10% of final course letter-grades. Or, props evaluations can remain entirely independent of letter-grades, per choices each faculty member is free to make on a class-by-class basis. Some professors even choose to mention students' attire among their professionalism considerations, if they feel they can sufficiently explain their preferences and criteria for evaluation (the difficulty of which is why many more professors avoid consideration of attire, at least for regular class sessions). A rule of thumb for clarifying expectations holds that, whatever a professor's areas of concern and ways of evaluating professionalism behaviors, no student should be surprised by their resulting evaluation.

Early each semester, all faculty members receive automated e-mail messages containing lists of students in each of their classes that have enrolled in the program, along with reminders, tips, and resources for faculty participation. Then, following completion of coursework each semester, all faculty members receive another email asking them to evaluate and categorize each of their students who had opted-in to the program. Professors who choose not to participate in the program need not respond to the message (and such non-responses, by not entering the numerator or denominator of students' database tallies, will not count for or against those students). But for participating faculty, they rate participating students as either:

- highly professional (approximately the top third of participants);
- professional (approximately the middle third of participants); and
- participation without distinction (approximately the bottom third of participants).<sup>1</sup>

In the rating process, faculty members categorize participants approximately into thirds in a sort of rolling "curve," which obviates the need to invent some objective scale. Those participants who are enrolled but have not distinguished themselves, perhaps such that the faculty member cannot even connect a face with the name, will easily fall into the mere "participant" category. Similarly, top students are likely to be easy to evaluate and categorize. For those in the middle, "borderline" cases will occur near

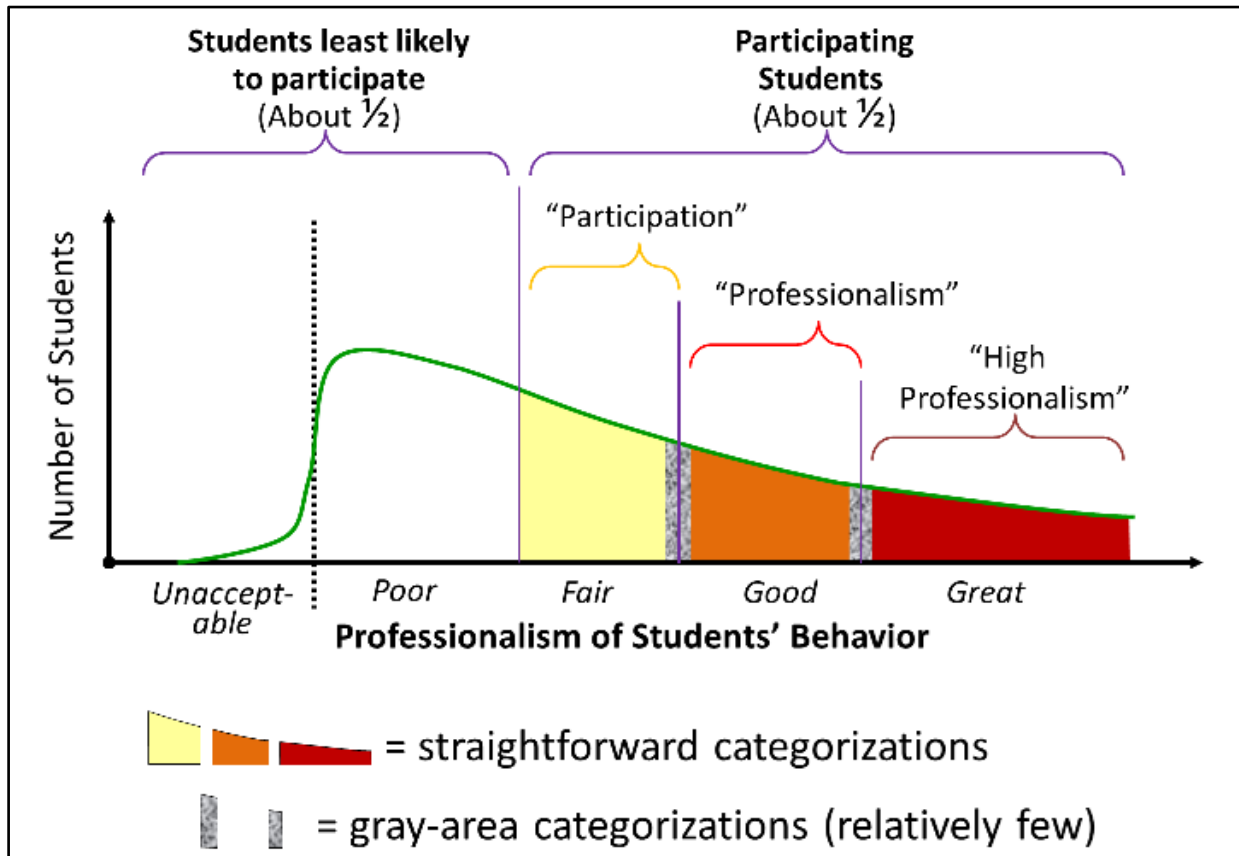
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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a category of "unprofessional" is available, though expected to be used rarely, for enrolled students whose behavior is actually deemed counter to the program intentions, and for use in cases where administrators may decide to dis-enroll certain students.



the “gray areas” near the category boundaries, but these are expected to comprise a relatively small proportion. This is reflected graphically below in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
**Faculty evaluations of the approximately half of students that participate.**



A “comments box” is also provided in the rating system, so that faculty can choose to elaborate in ways helpful for student comprehension, and any such comments may also inform administrators for borderline cases arising at a later time. Faculty ratings and any comments, as well as students’ standing in the program, are made visible following completion of faculty inputs each semester-end. The simplicity of faculty evaluations is indicated in the mock-up of the semester-end screen, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

**Semester-end “screen” for faculty evaluations of participating students.**

Dear <Faculty Member>,  
 By <date>, please rate the following Professionalism Recognition Program participants, based on your factors and impressions during your classes.

	High Prof. (~top-third)	Professional (~mid.-third)	No Distinction (~bot.-third)	Unprof. (rare)	Comments (optional)
<b>ACC 234, sec 1</b>					
Angie A.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Bobby B.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<u>Wonderful...</u>
Claire C.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
~					
<b>ACC 234, sec 2</b>					
David D.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<u>Helpful.....</u>
Eric E.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Frank F.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
~					
<b>ACC 456, sec 4</b>					
Gail G.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Hank H.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<u>Disruptive....</u>
Ingrid I.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
~					

These faculty evaluations populate the database such that a running total is accrued for each participating student. Across the 8-12 classes in which most participating students will obtain faculty evaluations, anomalies, false positive errors and false negative errors in course-by-course evaluations will tend to offset and resolve to an aggregate props score with considerable validity. Furthermore, final categorizations (upon graduation) will also be based on terciles, with approximately one-third of each cohort being categorized into each of the three rating tiers, such that a percentile effect will move with trends and should tend to moderate any systemic effects.

**Professionalism Ratings**

Within the database, initial values are set at 30 props for achieving high-professionalism in a three-credit-hour business course, 20 props for professionalism, and 10 props for participation without distinction, with proportionally fewer props for shorter classes or modules. These props valuations are meant to correspond to the approximate amount of effort participating students incur to achieve each level, and were settled upon after extensive scenario modeling. However, various props levels and other variables can be adjusted easily within the database as one of many tools for subsequent program refinement. These props tallies allow for calculating each student’s comparative standing within their cohort, upon graduation as well as throughout their preceding years in the program, based on the algorithm explained below.

In addition to faculty evaluations from coursework, students gain professionalism skills from a range of extracurricular activities, and therefore earn comparable incentive and/or recognition through this program. These activities include attending general presentations and outside speakers, which are typically scored with one prop simply for attending. Active participation in a formal mentoring program

(for lower-division students by upper-division students) earns up to 10 activities props per semester. Students also earn props from leadership or managerial roles with relevant campus clubs or university organizations, in the range of 1 to 10 props per semester of activity based on students' degree of involvement. An "other" category is meant to capture otherwise unclassifiable activities, such as for students who study abroad, thus losing the opportunity to earn conventional props but nonetheless gaining considerable professionalism understanding. Additional activities props being considered for future tracking include such student initiatives as prompt completion of all their course evaluations, pro-active and well-reasoned submissions to the COB's suggestion box, and participation in surveys and focus groups that will research and help refine programs such as this one. For activities with variable props-earning value, students enter directly into the database a summary of their activities and presumed props valuations each semester. These submissions are then reviewed once per semester by an administrator in the career development office and accepted as is or with a modified props value. The administrator is familiar with most extra-curricular activities and groups, but may also check on details or contact references on certain props submissions, and may reject submissions. It is expected that student creativity will flourish with respect to the types of extracurricular activities submitted for props – which will be welcomed as a "good problem," signifying rising interest in the program.

For each graduating cohort, the database provides a simple calculation to finalize each student's relative standing and resulting professionalism category. Standing within the three ranking categories will also be approximated each semester for any student prior to graduation, to give them a sense of their relative productivity that could also be cited in their job-hunting efforts for employment prior to graduation. Just like the periodic coursework-props evaluations from professors, participating students will settle into three categories: "high professionalism" for approximately the top third of participants, "professionalism" for the middle third, and a distinction of only having shown "participation" in the program for the bottom third. This is calculated by first determining each student's prop scores as a multiple of their cohort's average. For coursework, each student's props earned are divided by props possible (particular to their unique course schedule and how many of their professors participated), then that percentage is compared to their cohort average and a multiple is calculated (like the beta coefficient in finance,  $>1$  signifies higher-than-average,  $1.00 =$  average, and  $<1$  signifies props earned below the cohort average). Similarly for extracurricular activities, a multiple is determined based on each student's accrued props relative to their cohort's average. The multiples for coursework props and activities props are then combined through a weighted average, where coursework is initially worth double the value of extracurricular activities (to correspond to expected levels of student effort and time investment; though this variable could be adjusted easily in later refinements). From this combined multiple, each student's percentile standing is determined and is readily categorized into the top-third, middle-third, or bottom-third of participants, corresponding to the three professionalism categories. Students who change cohorts (such as by taking a semester off) have their standing recalculated based on their new graduation cohort. Students who transfer in late in their college career may not compare favorably to cohort peers who've been accruing props for four years (nor, accordingly, would they be as likely to have learned the commensurate lessons and habits), but they can see their relative standing on a semester-by-semester basis and refer to these as notable credentials. Students who find themselves on an undesirable side of a borderline between categories and wish to petition their standing upon graduation may do so through the dean's office, with the tie-breaker depending, quite fittingly, on the professionalism with which the student communicates his or her case.

The formal recognition obtained by graduates amounts to fairly simple form letters (Appendix E), printed on letterhead in the dean's office and signed. Such letters provide distinction for inclusion in job applications, alongside bullet points on earners' résumés. These letters are not limited to mere confirmation of a student's designation – they also capitalize on the opportunity to promote the program as a unique quality of the education offered by this particular COB, which is an additional strategic objective of the program.

### **Program Feedback and Promotion**

Before proceeding with development as the program designed by the task force, a considerable amount of political groundwork was laid to both address potential roadblocks and to build momentum around a favorable consensus of the program's intentions. Most notably, the dean of the college invited founding faculty members from the task force to present the concept to the college's National Advisory Board, comprised of executives from high-profile firms around the region who gather twice yearly to evaluate the COB's initiatives and progress. At this presentation and many similar ones on smaller scales, the reaction from working professionals was almost unanimously positive. Especially to those that recently have been involved in entry-level hiring, the PRP's intentions were aimed squarely at what they considered to be highly important yet notably deficient in higher education currently. Constructive criticism centered on how the program would be portrayed to employers, so that they could make the most valid and valuable use of the professionalism distinctions earned by students.

Following development of the minimum requirements of the database algorithm, parallel outreach to both students and faculty commenced in earnest. Student outreach included several mentions in regular and in special e-mail correspondence, announcements, and presentations; visibility in the form of flyers on bulletin boards and images on display screens; written materials surrounding the online enrollment/login system; and, most importantly, faculty-initiated discussions in classrooms. To encourage more faculty members to participate than just those already involved on the task force, outreach included presentations at the semi-annual all-hands meetings, informal workshops, focused one-on-one conversations, and substantial written materials posted onto a central drive and a poster display in the faculty lounge. Key among the written materials were sample paragraphs for adaptation into syllabi and faculty "FAQs" about the program (Appendices C and D, respectively).

No exact number of participants was defined to comprise a necessary threshold to get the program rolling, but the first semester's actual results of 220 students (about 15% of those eligible, mostly upper-classmen) and about 30 faculty members (about one third, also concentrated in the upper division courses) was more than sufficient for system testing and proved that the idea was viable. Those numbers increased to 353 and 47, respectively, in the second semester of the implementation. This trajectory is favorable for such a new, unusual, and entirely voluntary program, and is expected to comprise a critical mass on the program's way toward durable institutionalization.

### **IV. First-Year Implementation**

Data regarding faculty and student participation in the program after the first year of implementation reveals a favorably high percentage of faculty involvement, which is expected to be a key to growth of student participation. Forty-seven of 85 members of the faculty (55%), concentrated mainly in upper-division courses, participated in the program by providing professionalism ratings for their enrolled students, in at least one class during the academic year. The highest participation rates were among the members of the accounting faculty (80%), the computer and information systems faculty (77%), and management faculty (75%). The actual participation rate of 55% exceeded the prior informal expectations of the Task Force, which were anticipated to be about 50%.

Actual student participation totaled 365 students enrolled in PRP during the first year of implementation. This represents 26% of the approximately 1,424 declared COB majors (including double-majors), though the program's "target market" is mainly the approximately one-third of these that are juniors and seniors. All of the enrollees took multiple courses in the COB during the academic year and some of those courses, though not all, were taught by faculty who also participated in the program. Therefore, a given student participant could receive no faculty ratings if they happen to be in courses taught by non-participating faculty, or multiple faculty ratings if they are in courses taught by participating faculty. Three hundred and seventeen students enrolled in the PRP received at least one rating from a professor and there were 761 total ratings in the system for the academic year or an average of 2.2 ratings per student participant. In addition, 36 students received no ratings to date. Of the 761 total faculty ratings, 353 were "highly professional," 285 were "professional," 107 were "participating," and

16 were “unprofessional.” The disproportionately high percentage (46%) of highly professional ratings is most likely due to a self-selection result whereby those students who enroll in the PRP and know they will be evaluated are more likely to be cognizant of good professionalism behaviors as well as more motivated to exhibit these behaviors in class. However, the tercile system for final classifications of participants in each graduating will yield exact thirds, moderating the effect of high ratings much like a continuously adaptive curve in grading.

**Post-Implementation Survey**

A survey was carried out in Spring of 2011, roughly a semester and a half into program implementation, in order to gain a better understanding of both those members of faculty and students who did and did not choose to participate in the PRP. Objectives of the post-implementation survey included: (1) determining perceptions of the program’s general intentions, (2) and determining how outreach and program details were received and/or could be improved. The survey instrument was deployed via a Web-based subscription service. A solicitation was sent by e-mail to all members of the COB faculty and to all declared business majors via e-mail. A total of 28 faculty members and 150 students completed the survey. Of those faculty members who completed the survey, 64% were participating in the PRP while 36% were not participating or were undecided. Of the 150 students who completed the survey 45% were participating and 55% were not participating or were undecided. An analysis of the data as summarized in Table 2 revealed some interesting findings regarding PRP participants.

**Table 2**  
**Post-Implementation Survey Results**  
 7-Point Likert-Type Scale: 1 = Strong Agreement, 7 = Strong Disagreement  
 Mean Values (Standard Deviations)

	<b>Students</b>	<b>Faculty</b>
<b>Survey Objective: Are the program’s intentions/outcomes appropriate?.</b>		
1. The PRP has increased awareness and attention paid to professionalism concepts.	3.2 (1.6)	2.6 (1.3)
2. Improvements in professionalism have already occurred because of the PRP.	3.6 (1.5)	3.0 (1.1)
3. Formal recognition of consistently good professionalism will provide valuable distinction for employment.	2.4 (1.5)	2.4 (1.3)
4. The COB should attempt to influence and improve professionalism behaviors among students.	2.4 (1.4)	2.2 (1.0)
<b>Survey Objective: Is the PRP well understood</b>		
5. Information provided about the benefits of participation in the PRP has been clear and thorough.	3.7 (1.9)	2.1 (1.0)
6. I understand the PRP sufficiently well to decide about participating.	3.6 (1.9)	2.0 (1.2)
7. I understand the PRP sufficiently well to discuss benefits of the program/participation with others.	4.1 (2.0)	2.5 (1.8)

Responses to the post-implementation survey indicate that participants and non-participants alike support the general intentions of the program. Even among faculty and students that were not participating or were undecided (not broken-out in Table 2), it appeared that “the PRP has increased awareness and attention paid to professionalism concepts,” which might be worthwhile even if that were all the program ever achieved. Further, faculty indicated that “improvements in professionalism have already occurred because of the PRP,” as did participating students (though not non-participants). Respondents also indicate that “formal recognition of consistently good professionalism will provide valuable distinction for employment.” The findings also supported the notion that “the COB should attempt to influence and improve professionalism behaviors among students.” Most notably, this last question (#4 in Table 2) was also asked in the first survey run a year earlier as the program was being developed, and both students and faculty respondents indicated much stronger support for this key philosophy one year into program implementation (student means [and standard deviations] moved from 2.9 [1.4] to 2.5 [1.4], with  $p < .01$ ; faculty means [and standard deviations] moved from 3.4 [1.7] to 2.2 [1.0], with  $p < .01$ ).

Post-implementation survey results also reveal that, in general, students were less informed regarding the nature and features of the program than the faculty. This is not surprising, as the faculty received more focused information about the program both prior to its implementation and after the program was underway. The relatively less outreach received by students also appeared to get lost in a sea of messages, as many open-ended comments (complaints) attested. The responses received from non-participating students in the post-implementation survey indicate that a lack of knowledge about the program among students was the primary cause, rather than any particular objections to the program’s intentions or processes. It is expected that the student participation rate will grow progressively, as faculty participation rises and especially as more faculty members emphasize the importance of ratings in both intrinsic (learning) and extrinsic (grading) terms.

## **V. Insights on Running a Successful Professionalism Recognition Program**

### **A. Startup**

A crucial ingredient for a successful implementation of a program that attempts to change an entrenched culture of keeping status quo is care about the institution and its stakeholders. It is widely agreed among the faculty in the COB that the general faculty body has the students’ best interest in their own goals. Another ingredient for success is the desire to change to the better originated from that care about the institution. There will always be some who do not want to change, so others must accept that some will join in change attempts and some will not. Hopefully, the support from the advisory board and the students on the program will eventually change the attitude of the skeptical faculty to come aboard.

1. **Program champions:** As a bottom-up initiative, it is crucial to have a champion for the program. The PRP discussed in this paper was championed by one of the authors who was new to the college, possessed a fresh perspective and vision coming from very different institutional environments, and was willing and able to communicate extensively. This relatively new faculty champion was supported by two senior faculty members who are sensitive to the college’s culture, enthusiastic toward both its opportunities and challenges, empathetic in times of struggle and success, and efficient in using key resources to accomplish changes. Another reason for success is the inherent desire of the faculty in the college to want to provide the best education to the students.
2. **Oversight committee:** The program received support from the various stakeholders from the outset: advisory boards, administration, faculty, staff, and students. Our Task Force was comprised of all of the previously mentioned stakeholders except student representatives.
3. **Initial data collection:** Baseline data were collected via surveys early in the development process, to allow for the incorporation of varied ideas. Those early responses also indicated

strong support for doing *something* about professionalism, which provided a boost to the committee and the process.

## B. Implementation

1. **Promotion:** Promotion of the program targets all the stakeholders mentioned above. Administrators bought into the idea of the PRP from the outset, and promised full support from the dean's office. Presentations and updates on the program were made to the national advisory board during the early phase of the design of the program. Student outreach was mainly conceived and carried out by the staff in the CDO. Outreach to the faculty was conducted by the faculty members in the Task Force.
2. **Administration:** Since this is a faculty-driven initiative, the dean and associate dean deliberately kept a low profile during the conception and implementation phase of the program. Nonetheless, the dean had been using the program as a major talking point with advisory boards, parents of potential students, potential donors, community leaders, and in college literature. It is intended that administration will increasingly take over operations of the program, as the program stabilizes and matures.
3. **IT:** As mentioned in the Assembling a Task Force section, the IT department played an important role in the implementation of the Web-based interface for students' enrollment and checking their progress in the program, assessment of students' performance by the faculty, and implementation of the rating algorithm. Having the IT director in the task force had helped facilitate a more seamless communication.
4. **Ongoing data collection and research:** Part of the driving force behind the PRP is the authors' desire to study the results and refine the program along the way, not just to realize the intended benefits in the college's culture but also to write and publish on the topic. This provides the necessary will to run and analyze surveys, for example, and to oversee follow-through toward success throughout the program's development and implementation.
5. **Ongoing refinement and administration:** Research results will help inform ongoing task-force members as to how to refine and improve the program. Basic glitches must be fixed of course, but broader concerns often must be diligently uncovered before they can be decided upon and corrected, and original assumptions about variables like the relative value of coursework versus activities props must be objectively reconsidered. Over time, program governance is moving toward periodic oversight by a faculty-led committee, with staff increasingly managing functional elements.

## VI. Discussion and Conclusion

The distinguishing value of formal recognition of professionalism is expected to be realized primarily in students' employability as regarded by recruiters, though meanwhile the benefits for classroom discourse and learning progress is likely to be significant as well. Even a slight increase in attention given to the subtleties of behavior likely to foster career success is expected to trickle through the student-body consciousness, and the program's common language increases the likelihood that more faculty will raise the topic and in ways that make connections for students. As the program gains critical mass, in participation by students and faculty, responsiveness to these issues is likely to grow, possibly to become as natural as any other aspect of the school's culture.

While benefits to pedagogical progress are a central purpose of the program, it also provides opportunities for strategic differentiation of the school itself. Beginning with visits from prospective students and their parents, and extending through long-term alumni relations, promotion of the school's efforts and successes in raising the level of behavior among students – and even building character – is expected to resonate as a valuable message. In time, derivations of the program may be launched in related schools across campus, likely starting with the colleges of engineering and health sciences, such that it will grow to become a distinguishing element of the entire university.

The program offers a distinction for the school and university, but like any good strategic initiative, this derives from resources and strengths that may be unique. Relatively small class sizes, for example, are virtually prerequisite for a program of this design to succeed. Upper-division classes in the focal COB average fewer than 40 students, allowing faculty ample first-hand knowledge about the behavior of any participating students in their classes. Indeed, for the lower-division classes that typically enroll more than 50 students, participation rates by those faculty members are expected to be lower. Therefore, colleges where class sizes are smaller than average have better opportunities to leverage that distinction and to create a more viable program of this nature. Furthermore, online courses and degree programs would have little ability to integrate such observations, since they are largely derived from in-person interactions, providing differentiation for those programs in traditional colleges. Thus, where classes are conducted in-person and sizes are relatively small, a program like this leverages those strengths with strategic differentiation.

While the logistics of the program seems to be going over well with most COB faculty, ongoing concerns tend to focus on the philosophy of it. Some believe, for example, that the program rewards behaviors that are already clear in the student code of conduct and that should not be singled out for special rewards. Others are concerned about the pressure it may put on faculty to take-on additional teaching responsibilities and accountability (Feldman, 2001; Buttner, 2004). But advocates of the program intend for its focus to be on voluntary acknowledgement of the right behavior, such as from consistently high-performing students who get little recognition traditionally, as a way to augment the established processes for responding to instances of the wrong behavior. Faculty for whom this philosophy resonates may choose to implement aspects of the program in their own classes, while others are under no overt pressure to change. The extent of embrace of this philosophy would, of course, vary widely across the political contexts of other institutions. Other colleges of business might incur more resistance to change, requiring added resources to devote to overcome it.

Beyond the background, theory, and practical program introduced in this paper, numerous future research opportunities are apparent. Already, ongoing research is occupying three main streams: 1) what constitutes professionalism?, which will refine and validate the diagram in Appendix B with input from various types of professionals in various industries; 2) what do employers want in recruits?, which will explore weightings of those professionalism qualities against technical knowledge and work experience, with potential differences arising between certain industries and managerial levels, and, therefore; 3) what could or should business schools do?, for which this manuscript describes one important undertaking, and about which follow-up research will explore empirical evidence of outcomes from both the college's and employers' perspectives. Other research streams are possible, with inter-institutional opportunities for contextualization and validity-building, including with other fields such as medical and legal mentioned above. Though professionalism research in the business fields is presently scarce, it is possible that the gap will be filled such that it takes a place beside such bodies of literature as those on leadership and teamwork.

The program introduced in this paper may not succeed, of course, no matter what adaptations are made. But whatever course it takes, the more important trend may be simply undertaking efforts to influence a structural element of the school's culture for so imprecise a metric as professionalism and for so imprecise an outcome as behaviorally better-qualified graduates. This recognizes that students' agency, alone, cannot be expected to produce sufficient gains in behavior, especially when so many other socio-cultural forces are pulling our students the other way. With a little help from subtle changes in structure, agency can be expected to recursively respond. In this interactive dyad, culture does and always will evolve, one way or another. Whether this professionalism program ultimately yields the intended benefits in measurable ways, or could be adapted to do so in other institutions, will be an ongoing project without a definitive finish line.



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## Appendix A

### College of Business Code of Conduct

**Responsibility:**

I will be on time, prepared, attentive, and professional in my scholastic endeavors. I will take responsibility for my actions and make every effort to learn as much as possible from the educational opportunities presented to me.

**Respect:**

I will meet my commitments to others and treat everyone with respect and civility. I will respect our learning environment and help preserve its physical condition.

**Integrity:**

I will be a reliable and honest contributor to individual and group assignments. I will not seek or help others gain unfair advantage in completing academic requirements. I understand that there are severe consequences for academic dishonesty.

### Expectations about Behavior

**Responsibility:**

- Attend all classes and meetings on time
- Do not wander in and out of classes
- Participate but don't dominate
- Pay attention

**Respect:**

- Turn off cell phones when you are in class
- Do not use computers during lectures for non class-related purposes
- Make sure language and conversations are appropriate to the classroom setting
- Behave in a polite and professional manner

**Integrity:**

Do not engage in any act of academic dishonesty, including but not limited to:

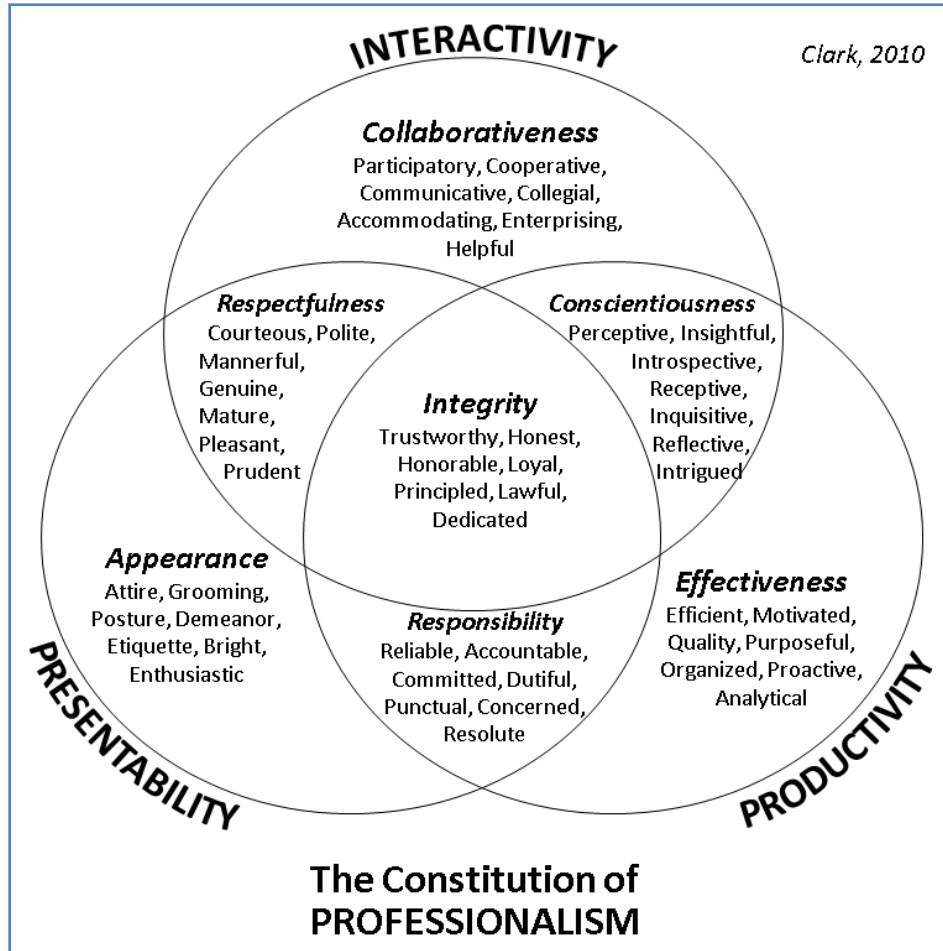
- sharing a calculator during a quiz or exam
- pre-programming a calculator for use during a quiz or exam unless specifically authorized by the instructor
- using notes or books during an exam unless specifically authorized by the instructor
- looking at another's exam or allowing another student to look at your exam
- exchanging exams, passing notes or text messages
- discussing answers during an exam
- having another take an exam for you or taking an exam for another
- unauthorized possession of or access to examination materials by any means, including electronic transmission, theft, photocopying, electronic or failing to return exams
- altering exams or assignments while in student's possession for review in an attempt to obtain a more favorable grade

- unauthorized collaboration on assignments
- submitting the same paper or substantial portions of a paper for multiple classes
- fabrication of information and citations
- submitting other's words, ideas, materials or work without properly acknowledging and appropriately referencing them
- altering, forging or misusing an academic record
- electronic theft of computer programs, data, or text belonging to another

## Appendix B

### Conceptualizations of Professionalism

The following diagram was developed from an initial list of over 200 words drawn from the extensive bodies of literature on teamwork, leadership, and employer selection. Through faculty surveys, these words were refined into the seven groups, which were then located in the Venn diagram through surveys of professionals and groups of students (Clark, 2011). This diagram is provided as a tool for faculty, and found useful by many for identifying ratable qualities and communicating them to their students.



## Appendix C

### Sample Verbiage for Use in Syllabi.

Among the tools provided in faculty communications and workshops are generic text like the following, as well as specific examples of syllabi text like the three paragraphs below.

#### **PROFESSIONALISM**

Professionalism points are assigned based upon your relative performance in class. Professionalism involves your behavior and interactions in and out of class and includes attributes such as participation, preparation, responsibility, and enthusiasm. In order to earn 15 out of the 45 possible professionalism points you must stop by my office and see me between the first and second midterm examination. This meeting will allow us to review your work to date, discuss your performance, and provide you with appropriate feedback. This evaluation will also be linked to the new Professionalism Recognition Program the FCB is introducing.

#### **Professionalism Recognition Program:**

I am participating in the FCB's Professionalism Recognition Program. Students who demonstrate professional behaviors in class are eligible for high ratings through that program. Students who receive overall high ratings in the program will receive a letter from the Dean indicating that they exhibited high professional conduct – a useful tool to distinguish yourself as you look for a job. In order to receive high ratings in this course, students must be prepared with the material, must participate in class in meaningful ways (including fully participating on team projects), and must make an effort to interact with the professor outside of class. Components of this include timeliness, appropriate attire for class and for presentations, appropriate language (both written and spoken) and so forth. The determination of ratings for professionalism is a subjective determination by the faculty member.

#### **Professionalism:**

This highly subjective element (which is why it's considered bonus instead of salary) refers to virtually every aspect of classroom behavior, but my key areas of concern include attentiveness, collaborativeness, initiative, preparedness, and respectfulness. Being rated relative to your peers in these areas may be unsettling, but it will occur throughout your career, so this is meant to better prepare you and also to provide a more productive learning environment. Half of possible professionalism compensation will be allocated in mid-October, and half at the end of the semester. These evaluations will also link directly to my formal ratings of participants in the new Professionalism Recognition Program that FCB is introducing. I recommend participating in this program, though it is students' challenge/responsibility/opportunity to distinguish themselves as professionals.

## Appendix D

The following frequently asked questions (FAQs) and their answers are circulated made available as part of the outreach to faculty who are considering participation.

Frequently asked questions (by and for faculty):

Q1: How do I participate in the Professionalism Recognition Program?

A: If you decide to participate, just let your students know that you plan to rate their professionalism, and how. You'll get automatic messages a few times during the semester listing which students in your classes are enrolled in the program. Toward the end of the semester, an automated message will prompt you to go into the database and make your ratings – which is surprisingly simple and quick. That's it!

Q2: How much extra time and effort will my participation take?

A: Actually, it should provide a net reduction, because investments in raising classroom professionalism tend to pay off in higher efficiency and productivity all semester. Even the “problem” students find themselves surrounded by more aware and concerned classmates, and peer pressure tends to raise everyone's game.

Q3: What should I tell my students about the program and their participation?

A: No need to say much more than that syllabus verbiage. For more details, just direct them to the <student resources web links>. Also, the student mentors, in the advising office, are well versed in the program.

Q4: But aren't professionalism ratings highly subjective and variable?

A: Of course! Here in college there's lots of subjective evaluation going on below the surface, and students' future careers will be loaded with even more subjectivity by a wide variety of colleagues and bosses. This program helps them prepare for that social reality, and allows for some subjectivity to be surfaced without the tension associated with official grades.

Q5: How is a professionalism letter any different than regular letters of recommendation?

A: Individual letters of recommendation provide some evidence of good interactions with individual persona, but success in the PRP requires consistently professional behavior across a number of contexts with a range of rater types and interests. Any letter may provide a useful distinction, but employers will be most impressed by the broader validity and generalizability resulting from consistency in a larger program.

## Appendix E1

### Sample professionalism recognition letter, for graduates attaining “high professionalism”

<Letterhead of ABC University, XYZ College of Business, Office of the Dean>

<Date>

To All Concerned:

<Student full name> has earned a rating of “high professionalism” through participation in the professional-development program for students in the XYZ College of Business. This is more than an accolade – this accomplishment reflects consistently high performance in demonstrating the kinds of behavior and initiative befitting a highly proficient business person.

Faculty at the COB outline for students what types of behaviors they consider as constituting professionalism, and rate each participating student along the way and at the end of semesters. Noted behaviors include such qualities as being collaborative, punctual, and proactive, and showing integrity and enthusiasm, but each professor chooses their own parameters. Concerns about different professors listing a widely differing professionalism attributes are neutralized by noting that adapting to such variation in supervisory expectations will be a reality throughout graduates’ careers. Additionally, participating students advance in the professionalism program by attending extracurricular seminars, holding leadership positions in relevant organizations on campus, and being active and reliable members of the COB community in many other ways.

As such, success in this program offers you a highly credible indication of a graduate’s “soft skills” and their capacity to perform well in challenging conditions. We at the COB are proud to be able to offer our students and their future employers this program, both as enrichment to their education and as a boost to their career progression.

If you have any questions about this program or this graduate’s accomplishments within it, please reach anyone in my office through the contact information above.

Sincerely,

<signature>

Dean

## **Appendix E2**

### **Letter for graduates attaining “professionalism”**

Differs only in the first paragraph, which reads:

<Student full name> has earned a rating of “professionalism” through participation in the professional-development program for students in the XYZ COB. This is more than an accolade – this accomplishment reflects consistent performance in demonstrating the kinds of behavior and initiative of a proficient business person.



**Appendix E3**  
**Letter for graduating participants**

Differs only in the first paragraph, which reads:

<Student full name> has participated in the professional-development program for students in the XYZ COB. This activity reflects consistent attention to the kinds of behavior and initiative befitting a proficient business person.