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Recognizing and Raising Professionalism Behaviors within the Culture of Business Undergraduates

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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 art or professionalism that is conspicuous. But difficulty in defining professionalism and its associated behaviors would be insufficient justification for business-school faculty and administrators to neglect a pedagogical interest in raising the matter. Indeed, because the concept can be so nebulous, traditional methods of specifying curriculum and expecting deliverables from students may be inadequate for the challenge. But because the topic is relevant to the success of our graduates and our institutions, management educators must "dare to care."[1]

Interest in improving students' professionalism behaviors is central to the missions of colleges and schools of business. Such mission statements typically do not focus on studying texts and cramming for exams, rather they refer to more lofty goals like growth in character, employability, and potential for managerial success of graduates. Indeed, the mission statement of this paper's focal College of Business specifies the "primary goal" as being preparation of students to "make valuable contributions to their chosen profession and their communities," while "high-quality, business-related training" is noted as a secondary goal. The program introduced in this paper grew out of reconsideration of this and similar collegiate mission statements, and the means available to faculty and administrators for fully realizing such goals, to create structural support and incentives for raising the professionalism behaviors of undergraduate students.

Seen from the perspective of graduates' future employers, professionalism qualities extend far beyond what can be sufficiently addressed in traditional training or bulleted on résumés (Barr & McNeilly, 2002). Recruiters can reasonably expect that a decent GPA from an accredited school assures requisite knowledge and the necessary technical training, generic attributes (Barrie, 2006), or simply "book smarts." And lists of prior work experience 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 called professionalism. Fitting into this category are what executives interviewed recently 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 initiative, creativity, flexibility, attitude, and openness to opportunity -- none of which is captured on typical résumés nor specifically addressed in typical undergraduate classes. These characteristics, and many more detailed later in the paper, align with the exhortations of various critics of the management education industry (Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005), who point out that career success depends on character and behavior far more than on technical knowledge. Success in the workplace, especially for junior employees, depends on 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" (Schien, 1967: 220). In contrast, behaviors described as "classroom incivilities" (Boice, 1996; Feldman, 2001; Buttner, 2004) are on the increase and are among educators' responsibilities.

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 to facilitate increased fulfillment, character development, and progress toward graduation for all students along the way. Yet business scholars have paid relatively little attention to this issue to date. Professionalism is a larger topic among writers 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

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[1] ***Dare to Care: Passion and Compassion in Management Practice and Research***, is the conference theme of the 2010 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management.

opposites regularly appear with respect to the moral conduct of certain notorious executives, but seldom with respect to the "soft" qualities desirable in our institutions' students.

This paper offers an introduction and discussion of a professionalism recognition program meant to address this deficiency, which has recently been launched at the College of Business (COB) of a large, public university in the Western United States. The intent of the paper is to share perspectives and develop collaboration among other business educators; those that may have taken-up the professionalism challenge already, as well as those who are struggling with whether or how to do so. It introduces the program with sufficient detail such that concepts could be considered for adoption or adaptation to other institutional contexts, while subsequent research will report on outcomes realized through empirical measurement and analysis.

The paper's next section grounds the program's aims in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), to argue the need for students' agency to be better directed and supported by institutional structures. This is followed by specifics about the COB's nascent program, and the processes still unfolding for deploying and continually refining it. Following that, particulars of the program's origins are considered alongside its possible suitability for other institutional contexts. Next, forthcoming empirical research is outlined, with research questions and propositions relating to actual outcomes of the program. Finally, potential for this or similar professionalism programs, in terms of pedagogy and ongoing behavioral research, are discussed just before the paper's conclusion.

STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Individuals 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. This duality is the essence of structuration theory, as introduced so provocatively as "the constitution of society" by Giddens (1984). The question of what came first, the individual actions of social agents, or the structure of social order in which their actions are prompted, is about as unresolvable as whether chickens precede eggs. Like that enduring metaphor, both elements are in constant interplay.

A common reaction to perceived deficiencies in student-agents within educational institutions 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), since they tend to focus on disincentivizing poor performance rather than incentivizing good. The assumption that this approach alone is insufficient was foundational for the focal COB's program strategy, and is reflected graphically in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: Graphic representation of intended incentive effects from adding
new "carrots" to existing "sticks"
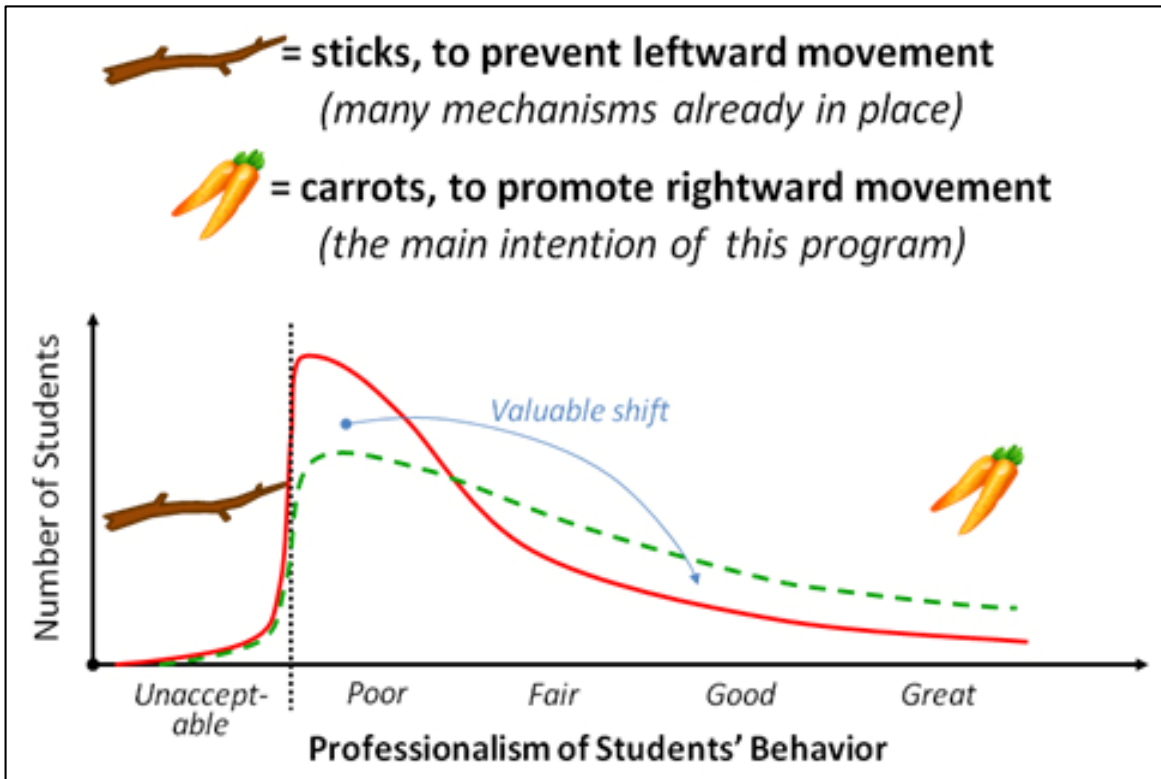
A key impetus for the developers of the focal program was the unanimous belief that stick-type incentives, in the absence of complementary carrots, are part of the problem – and, as part of the college's structure, are the responsibility of faculty and administrators to improve. As shown in the solid-line curve in figure 1, sticks tend to result in aggregate behavior that largely complies with minimum requirements, preventing leftward movement at the threshold. But sticks, alone, offer little incentive to move rightward on the behavior scale, causing a grouping near the threshold, just out of reach of the stick. Instead, 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 from "poor to fair," "fair to good," and "good to great." Whatever the exact shape and proportions, any shift from the area under the solid line to that under the dashed line would indeed be a valuable shift, for both students' and the college's interests. Measurement of student behavior and any rightward shifts – the intention of the program – is discussed later in the paper.

Recognizing students' movements in the rightward direction, in addition to (or instead of) penalizing shortcomings, may reward strivers and put the onus on the rest to wise up and catch up. With time and a critical mass, this type of structure may significantly shift the collective agency within an educational institution's student-body culture. Those responsible for structure, namely faculty and administrators, can develop not just regimented rules and disincentives (sticks) but also cues and incentives (carrots) in order to influence agents' culture. This is the strategy behind the program detailed in the following section.

PROFESSIONALISM RECOGNITION PROGRAM

Prompted by anecdotal observations that much of undergraduates' behavior was trending away from the expectations of faculty, administrators, and most worrisome, recruiters, a strategic initiative at the focal College of Business (COB) led to what is being called the professionalism recognition program. The name includes a double entendre: the program is meant to facilitate *recognition* of professionalism elements and the value thereof, and offers formal *recognition* to those students who distinguish themselves doing so.

This program works in congruence with, and augments, 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, which was developed with extensive stakeholder input and which all students admitted formally admitted to the upper-division business school (in their junior year) must sign, along with course modules on appropriate professionalism taught primarily in lower-division courses. But these measures may be sufficient only for preventing declines in some students' behavior to unacceptable levels, while they may do little to promote improvements in most students' behaviors from acceptable to something much higher.

Basically, the program provides formal recognition to students who consistently distinguish themselves in the program, in the form of a letter from the dean's office awarded upon graduation (see appendix 1 for draft letter-templates). This may amount to little more than a metaphorical "gold star" on a diploma, but it is one with considerable extrinsic value in employability, on top of the intrinsic value to students' learning and maturation. Earning such letters is expected to be valuable as "bullet points" on graduates' résumés attesting to a key criterion for employers. But value is intended to be realized for students throughout their years participating in the program, as understanding of relevant issues in how workplaces function inevitably rises, and for the college as a whole, as the culture of professionalism across the student-body concurrently rises.

Of course, a professionalism certification offers no guarantee of future behavior – no more than student's high GPA guarantees intelligence – but the likely correlation provides prospective employers with a useful, additional indicator. With that connection to students' future employability, the program is administrated by the business schools' career development office, with a steering committee comprised of faculty and the associate dean.

Students who choose to participate in the program are tracked as they strive to earn <u>pro</u>fessionalism <u>p</u>oints (props) through coursework and through extra-curricular 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 discord).

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, of course, but no more so than requirements for earning certain letter grades differ between courses and professors. This inevitable variation and uncertainty is part of the lesson intended for students, as they will have to adapt to the similarly varied preferences of different bosses and colleagues throughout their careers. Suggestions of relevant professionalism qualities are provided to professors, in various documents and workshops, in the form of lists like that shown in Table 1, below.

TABLE 1: Some behavioral attributes of professionalism,
as refined from a survey of faculty, administrators, and students (n=200).

"Importance" Ranking*		"Relevance" ranking*	
Integrity	87%	Courtesy	87%
Responsibility	86	Attitude	82
Reliability	85	Communicativeness	82
Respectfulness	81	Participation	82
Preparedness	79	Dedication	74
Punctuality	79	Enthusiasm	62
Attentiveness	77	Posture/body-language	58
Initiative	73	Attire/appropriate dress	45

*Percentages indicate respondents who chose "important" or "very important," or "relevant" or "very relevant," for each attribute.

Note: the eight attributes rated on "importance" appear on the student code of conduct, thus were assumed to be important. Eight words rated for relevance derived from additional research.

Additional attributes submitted in the survey as "other":

Cleanliness	Mutual respect
Confidence	Non-discrimination
Consideration	Positivity
Discipline	Timeliness (w/ deadlines)
Maturity	Tolerance
Motivation	

The program structure makes no attempt to recommend particular professionalism attributes to faculty, rather only to provide tools from which to identify attributes of key concern and how to clarify expectations for students. Participating professors may pick from these or any other 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 postponing the lesson. Among the documentation available to faculty members is some sample text for use in syllabi, such as that shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Sample verbiage for use in syllabi.

"During this course I will evaluate participants in the Professionalism Recognition Program based on my <u>subjective</u> interpretations of the following attributes:"

These behaviors…………		in contrast to these
Attentive	. .	Distracted, bored
Enthusiastic	. .	Disdainful, aloof
Initiative-taking	.	Reactive, lethargic
Punctual	. .	Tardy, missing deadlines
Respectful	. .	Intolerant, rude

All of the attributes shown in tables 1 and 2 are likely concerns of most faculty members in most schools, so a program like this one facilitates attention being paid to them in a formal, consistent way. Of course, any reasonable subset of attributes like those in table 1 could be chosen by any faculty member, and they have full discretion as to how to communicate their expectations (such as with contrasting antonyms listed in table 2). Some faculty members may also choose to integrate professionalism evaluations into their course grading, such as tying props to approximately 10% of points possible toward 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 day-to-day 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.

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 and tips for faculty participation. Then, following completion of coursework each semester, all faculty members receive asking them to "check boxes" 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' tallies, won't 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)
- Participation without distinction (approximately the bottom third of participants)

(Additionally, a category of "unprofessional" is available, though expected to be used rarely, for enrolled students who actually seemed to retard the program, for use in cases where administrators may decide to dis-enroll certain students). Additionally, a "comments box" is provided for each student, 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. The simplicity of faculty evaluations is indicated in the mock-up of the semester-end screen, as shown in figure 2.

FIGURE 2: 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)
ACC 234, sec 1					
Angie A.	○	●	○	○	
Bobby B.	●	○	○	○	Wonderful...
Claire C.	○	○	●	○	
~					
ACC 234, sec 2					
David D.	●	○	○	○	Helpful........
Eric E.	○	●	○	○	
Frank F.	○	●	○	○	
~					
ACC 456, sec 4					
Gail G.	○	●	○	○	
Hank H.	○	○	○	●	Disruptive....
Ingrid I.	●	○	○	○	

Faculty members that find additional, subjective evaluations to be complex and/or burdensome need not participate. But at least half of those teaching upper-division courses are expected to find the incremental increase in workload/complexity to be less than the gains realized from more straightforward communication on the topics and from a generally more professional and productive classroom. Similarly, those students who find the program objectionable for any reason need not enroll. But about half of all students are expected to find the benefits outweigh the costs and enroll by their junior year. This half of students is likely to be those who are, by nature, more likely to be on the upper side of the behavior scale in the first place. From this half, faculty will then categorize participants approximately into thirds. Those who are enrolled but have not distinguished themselves, perhaps such that the professor can't 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 the "gray areas" near the category boundaries, but these are expected to comprise a relatively small proportion. This is reflected graphically below in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3: Faculty evaluations of the approximately half of students that participate.
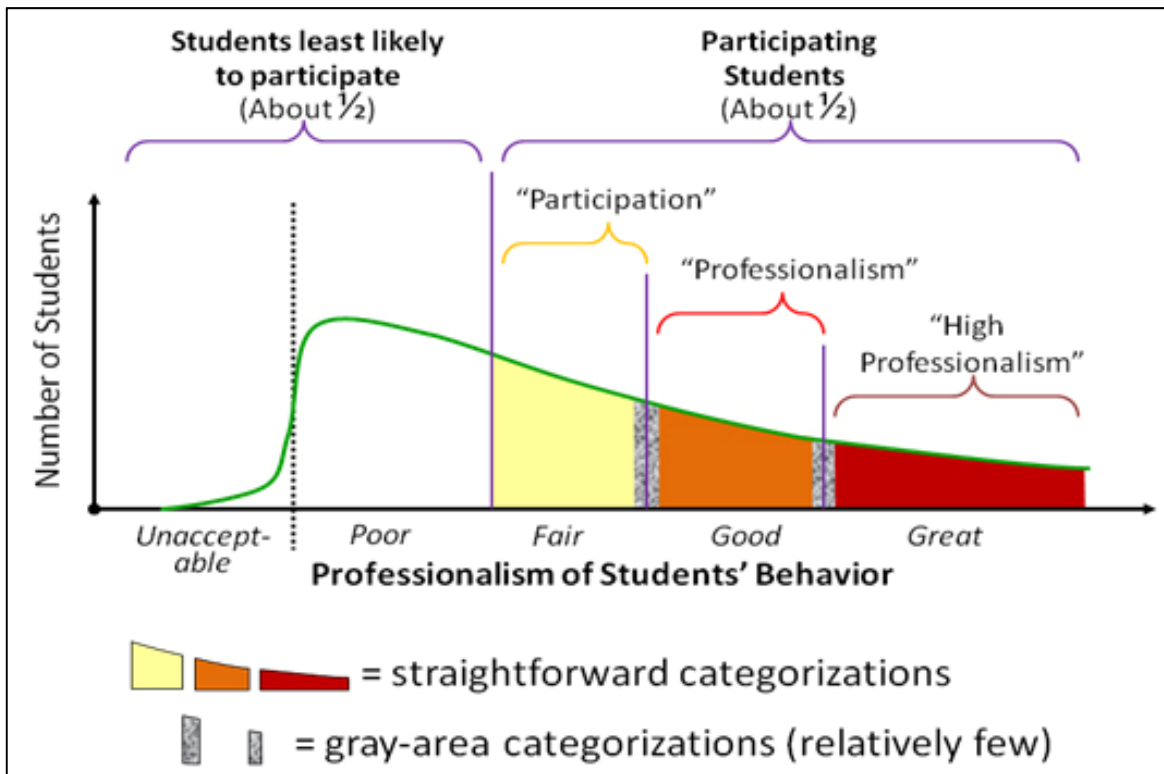
These faculty evaluations populate the database such that a running total is accrued for each participating student. Across the 8-12 classes in which most participating students will obtain faculty evaluations, anomalies, false positive errors in evaluation, and false negative errors will tend to resolve to an aggregate props score with considerable validity. Furthermore, final categorizations (upon graduation) will also be based on thirds, such that a percentile effect will move with trends and should tend to moderate any systemic effects.

Within the database, initial values are set at 20 props for achieving high-professionalism in a three-credit-hour business course, 10 props for professionalism, and 5 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 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. Active participation in a formal mentoring program (for lower-division students by upper-division students) earns 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. 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 either accepted as is or the props value is modified and finalized into the database tally.

Additionally, any member of the faculty, administration, or staff may contribute comments to student records or even nominate students for bonus props if they distinguish themselves in any other type of interaction outside of class, which is an element of the program meant to raise accountability and elevate conduct in all types of school business. It is expected that student creativity will flourish with respect to the types of extra-curricular activities submitted for props – which will be welcomed as a "good problem," signifying rising interest in the program, for the student professionalism council and administrators to work through.

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 categories will also be approximated for any student prior to graduation, to give them a sense of their relative productivity but also so they can cite the distinction in their job-hunting efforts for summer employment prior to graduation, for example. 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 extra-curricular 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 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 is determined each student's percentile standing, which can be 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 have learned the commensurate lessons and habits), but they can see their relative standing on a semester-by-semester basis. Students who find themselves on the wrong side of a borderline between categories

students who 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 nothing more complicated for the dean's office of the COB to produce than form-letters (appendix 1), printed on letterhead and signed. (Staff in the dean's office will also have ready access to the database, to confirm any queries from employers or recruiters unsure of a graduate's claim about participation in the program.) 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 an additional strength of the program discussed below, following a section on the empirical-research potential of the program.

OUTCOMES AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The faculty members on the task force which developed this program did not participate just for the service contribution but for the fascinating and likely fruitful research questions the new program opens up. Until a semester or two of program activity has been realized, these questions are only propositional. But outlining them here is meant to provide stronger indication of the structure and objectives of the program and how outcomes can be measured.

First, and independent of the program itself, a stream of research is embarking from the question "what do employers want in our graduates?" Of the three criteria mentioned in the introduction -- book smarts, work experience, and professionalism – it is surmised that colleges of business heavily allocate resources to the first, somewhat to facilitating the second, and only peripherally to the third. So the hypotheses related to this question are likely to include "employers' priorities differ from COB allocations" and "employers concern for recruits' professionalism is greater than COB attention to it." This research will include scale development of what comprises professionalism for employers, which is expected to include more of the behavioral elements of professionalism listed in table 1 than the traditional "generic attributes" include (Barrie, 2006), and how the assess it in the recruiting and/or management-development processes.

Second, and following development of a scaled construct of professionalism, employers will be engaged to evaluate the program's effectiveness for addressing it. This will likely involve extended, longitudinal study not just of trends in the professionalism quality of each graduating cohort, but of the year-over-year career progression of randomly selected members of each cohort. Graduate's category of professionalism earned in the program is hypothesized to correlate positively with employers' evaluations and with career progression. If such a hypothesis were supported, the relatively modest investment in the program would be shown to have substantially positive return.

Third, another dimension of program outcomes is entirely internal. After a few semesters of use, will stakeholders notice any resulting changes in pedagogy, performance, or even culture? Administrators and faculty will of course render nuanced opinions on this question, but so will students themselves. And differences will be explored between faculty members who do and don't participate, and students who do or don't enroll. Matched-pair analysis will track changes in particular respondents' views across time periods. For this purpose, baseline data has already been gathered, before open discussion of this program affected people's awareness and opinions, in the survey that also provided the data in table 1.

These three avenues of empirical research are likely not exhaustive of the potential afforded by this program, whether it proves "successful" or not. Additionally, faculty from other colleges at the same university as the focal COB, as well as from other COBs around the United States, have already expressed interest in launching derivative programs based on this one, which would combine or stand alone to produce additional research insights with consideration of varied outcomes from varied contexts. Factors of fit for other institutional contexts are discussed in the following section.

DISCUSSION: PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS AND GENERALIZABILITY

The distinguishing value of distinction in professionalism is expected to be realized primarily in students' employability as regarded by employers, 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, especially as new carrots will challenge and expand thinking beyond the sticks-focused paradigm (Bruner, 1985). As the program gains critical mass among both students and faculty members that participate, attention and responsiveness to professionalism issues is likely to build, possibly to become as natural as any other aspect of the COB's culture. In simplistic terms, the program is intended to be instrumental in progressively changing students' inter-peer sensibility with respect to striving to behave well in school, such that it becomes "cool." Equally important, disruptive or disrespectful behavior more akin to high school is expected to be more readily regarded by peers as "uncool." Facilitating such adjustments to student's sensibilities during college, rather than assuming they understand it or hoping they will be receptive to it only once their careers begin, is considered to be a valuable step toward achieving the COB's goal of preparing students to "make valuable contributions to their chosen profession and their communities."

While benefits to pedagogical progress and graduate's employability are the central purpose, the program 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 and character among students 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 could become a strategic differentiator of the entire university.

But like any good strategic initiative, the professionalism recognition program offers a valuable distinction that derives from resources and strengths that are uncommonly enjoyed by this college. 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, few professors are likely to consider their participation to be viable. Therefore, in colleges of business where enrollments of 100 or more students are more common across all classes, a program of this design might not be viable. Furthermore, courses and degree programs conducted primarily on-line would have no ability to integrate such inter-personal observations. But where moderately sized classes are conducted in-person and faculty have a chance to get to know their students, a program like this capitalizes those strengths and develops a strategic differentiation from competitor colleges.

Other colleges and universities would also have varying experiences with the political processes of instituting such a program. The focal COB enjoys a fairly flat organizational model across its approximately 65 full-time faculty, with discipline-areas coordinated under single budgets instead of departments that could become isolated from one-another. The resulting collegiality facilitated cross-discipline exploration of the original professionalism idea, from initial conversations through all-faculty meetings, allowing a high degree of embrace (or at least tolerance) of the experiment. (Frequently asked questions and their answers, developed to help introduce faculty to the program, are attached as appendix 2.) Similarly, students at the focal COB may be uncommonly adaptable and willing to experiment. Many of them seem to share the concern that being located in a relatively remote town without much nearby industry, we should welcome any chance to improve graduates' prospects to distinguish themselves with employers. (FAQs used in outreach to students are included as appendix 3.) Other colleges of business might incur more resistance to change, and the requisite added resources to devote to overcoming it.

But while the logistics of the program seemed to go over well with 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 responsibilities and accountability, which have been discussed both as responsibilities and as extra burdens of faculty (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 relatively less attention traditionally, in order to augment the already established processes for responding to instances of the wrong behavior. Indeed, the established code of conduct, like the Biblical Ten Commandments and so many other constraints in modern life, is comprised mainly of what thou shall not do. Along those lines, some faculty members called for the professionalism program database to also tally "negative props," as a punishment tool to provide a complementary kind of motivation to participating students. But the settled-upon design of the program, at least in its initial phase, is meant only to augment sticks already in place by providing new carrots with clear intentions. Faculty for whom this philosophy resonates may choose to implement aspects of the program in their own classes, while others are under no pressure to change in any way (except, perhaps, from students who ask them for opportunities to earn more props). The extent of embrace of this philosophy would, of course, vary widely across the political contexts of other institutions.

CONCLUSION

The presumed value of raising the standard of professionalism behaviors among business undergrads is not expected to be controversial in this day and age. It is rooted in insights like those articulated in Mintzberg's *Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development* (2004), Bennis & O'Toole's *How Business Schools Lost Their Way* (2005), and related works specific to undergraduates in a variety of disciplines. The point is, behavioral characteristics matter – at least as much as book smarts and work experience -- at least to some recruiters and to many of our students' future bosses and colleagues.

The program introduced in this paper may not succeed, of course. But whatever course it takes, the most important step may be simply beginning to undertake 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 exhibits recognition 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 recognition program's influence yields the intended benefits will be an ongoing work-in-progress, with subsequent research answering the questions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1a: 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 extra-curricular 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 an enrichment to their education and as a boost to their career progression.

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

Yours sincerely,

Dean

Appendix 1b: 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 befitting a proficient business person.

<u>Appendix 1c</u>: 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.

Appendix 2: Frequently asked questions (and answers) for faculty outreach.

Q1:   Is this yet another top-down, administrative mandate?
A: No, this is an entirely bottom-up initiative, developed by several faculty members that sense a growing need to address unprofessional behavior by some students – not just for the sake of better teaching environments and faculty satisfaction, but for the benefit of the students themselves.

Q2:   Where did this program come from, and why now?
A: It's entirely home-grown by COB faculty, in response to growing concerns about classroom etiquette. In fact, it has become a significant research opportunity, as research reflects the problem is widespread but this type of innovation is novel. Ideas have been developing since Fall 2009 to better influence professionalism behaviors through a program that would offer "carrots" to create more awareness and progressively shift the student-body culture. The first exposure of the original idea was in a brown bag session just before Thanksgiving 2009.

Q3:   How is the program supposed to work?
A: Just by having the topic of professionalism raised more regularly, it is expected to heighten awareness and, thus, affect the student-body culture progressively. In the frame of Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1994), the agency (choices) of the all the individual actors (students) can be influenced recursively by adjusting institutional structures (policies and programs by faculty/administration). For example, the simple structure of this program will raise the important points contained in the FCB student code of conduct far more often than in the status quo situation, thus students' agency can be expected to shift accordingly, to some degree, in self-reinforcing reaction. Various policies presently used to limit UNprofessional student behavior are important and essential "sticks" – but they can be more effective if augmented with the guidance and "carrots" that this type of recognition provides.

 Q4:   Will this program become another increase to faculty workloads?
A: The intention is to REDUCE workload – or at least to shift the load from less productively addressing poor student professionalism, toward student conduct that's conducive to much greater productivity for all. The program is designed to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness for any faculty members who struggle with this issue.

Q5:   What does the program require of faculty members?
A: Nothing is required. Participation is entirely voluntary, and pedagogical methods of using the program can vary widely. Faculty members can participate for one or all of their classes, in any or all semesters. Basic participation would entail rating participating students as demonstrating either "high professionalism," "professionalism," or "participation." More involved use of the tool might include tying some amount of course grading to those categories, or even structuring certain assignments and projects with professionalism content. These faculty ratings will occur at the end of each semester, simply in response to an e-mail that will direct each faculty member to a web page with a list of each class's participating students and quick check-boxes for each. At any level of use, faculty would need to provide their students with some indication of what factors they will consider for their professionalism evaluations, and participating faculty can expect considerable (but valuable!) discussion on the topic during the semester.

Q6:   How much participation does the program require for it to be successful?
A: It's expected that the program will "work" even if only about 25% of faculty and students participate initially, and this appears likely.   If it seems effective on this kind of trial basis, and doesn't have too many glitches, it would follow that participation could build to a long-term level in excess of 50% participation. (Alternatively, if it's found to be ineffective, the sooner it dies the better.) Of course

faculty members who don't participate still stand to gain as "free riders" of raised professionalism awareness in the college, but participants are likely to gain more and sooner.

Q7:   What factors of professionalism could faculty members evaluate?

A: It's entirely up to each individual faculty member's determination, just like their design of syllabi, assignments, and grading systems. Attributes of high professional relevance include the eight listed in the student code of conduct: Attentiveness, Initiative, Integrity, Preparedness, Punctuality, Reliability, Respectfulness, and Responsibility. These could be clarified by explaining what NOT to do, with each word's antonyms. Additional attributes could include: Attire, Attitude, Communicativeness, Courtesy, Dedication, Enthusiasm, Participation, and even Posture, among many other possibilities. Which attributes are focused upon will vary across faculty members, of course, just like grading systems do – and just like the expectations of our students' future colleagues surely will.

Q8:   How can participating faculty members evaluate such professionalism attributes?

A: The thing is, almost all of us subjectively evaluate these things anyway – this program just allows for straightforward expression of those valuable insights. Our graduates will experience such subjectivity throughout their careers, so this may just prepare them better for those realities. Faculty members need not strive for the same kind of objectivity as in exams and grading – it wouldn't be possible, nor is it necessary in this program design. As to making evaluations, ratings are only categorical, so most students will clearly fall into either "high professionalism," "professionalism," or "participation" fairly straightforwardly. Some borderline cases may be difficult decisions, but these will be relatively few, and faculty members have complete discretion and final authority.

Q9:   But doesn't that subjectivity invalidate the whole exercise?

A: Subjectivity is inevitable in human relations, not just in college settings but throughout our graduates' business careers. This program may help to further facilitate the necessary transition in the entitlement mindsets of many of our students.

Q10:   What types of classes is the program meant for?

A: It could be beneficial in any/all classes. Certainly for upper division courses with fewer students, where it's easier for faculty to know the estimated 20-50% of their students who will participate, the more mature students and the discussion-heavy pedagogy might also benefit more from the increased attention to professional conduct. For lower division courses, the estimated 10-20% of participating students are likely to be the most well-known by the professor, and the attention directed to professionalism should be no less productive in these settings. Faculty members with some of each type of class can participate with any fraction of their classes.

Q11:   What does the program require of students?

A: Nothing is mandatory for them, either. For those who choose to participate, they only need to sign-up in an on-line database. Their names will then appear on the rating lists for their classes, so most will "raise their game" of professional behaviors for those faculty members who are also participating in the program – especially for those who choose to tie some course grading to their professionalism ratings. Also, participating students can earn recognition for extra-curricular activities, such as serving in leadership roles of relevant organizations, attending more Pathways sessions, and completing relevant activities like job shadows. They will be responsible for entering into the database the presumed value of each of their activities, through a system that requires little administrative oversight.

Q12:   How are students' overall professionalism categories determined?

A: The database will tally coursework professionalism points ("props") based on participating faculty members' ratings after each semester. Also, props for extra-curricular activities will be tallied every semester. The tentative formula (LINK) combines these two types of props in a weighted average –

with coursework worth double what activities are, in proportion to the likely hours of effort. Then, each student's overall props tally will be compared to the median level within his or her cohort (intended graduating class). These percentiles will then be split into thirds, with the top third earning a "high professionalism" distinction, the middle third earning "professionalism," and the bottom third of participants earning only "participation." Of course, those students who don't participate will get no rating, which is no change from the status quo.

Q13:   What do participating students get?
A: Upon graduation, participants receive letters (LINK) signed by the dean that certify the major accomplishment of those earning "high professionalism," the considerable effort of those earning "professionalism," and the usefulness of participation for those students finishing in the bottom third of participants. These letters are expected to have significant extrinsic value in job-hunting, as behavioral qualities are both the hardest to substantiate and among the most important to employers – in addition to the considerable intrinsic value gained from earning them.   Also, standing within the three categories will be visible to students throughout their years in the FCB, which may stir some friendly competition and also prove valuable for students' summer job applications.

Q14:   Would these Dean's letters somehow certify our graduates' levels of professionalism?
A: No more so than their GPAs certify their true knowledge. A strong correlation between professionalism level and business-ready behavior (or GPA and knowledge) is highly likely, but connotes no guarantee. Still, employers are likely to prefer this increased information about behavioral qualities over the present situation -- where this most important dimension of employability must be assessed with relatively little objective basis.

Q15:   How will transfer students be assured of participation on "a level playing field"?
A: They won't, any more than their community-college coursework assures them of being academically level with students who may have been at NAU, or even Harvard, for their first collegiate years. The fact is, the longer one is exposed to the professionalism concepts in the COB, the more likely that person will achieve the objectives of this program. However, in terms of props, transfer students who enter as juniors are not likely to be significantly disadvantaged, since the majority of participating professors will be in the upper-division courses anyway. Additionally, participants can cite their props standing, and the associated category of professionalism, on a semester and yearly basis, not just the overall graduating-cohort basis on which the final dean's letter is based.

Q16:   Why reward the kind of behavior that should be expected all along anyway?
A: It's true that some students will get a new reward for something they may have been doing all along. It's also true that some students won't do anything extra that they don't "have to." But the program is aimed at the large fraction of students in the middle who presently behave far below their capability largely because little guidance or incentive influences them otherwise. Like other incentives and recognition, this is expected to be leveraged through the compounding of second-order peer influences among students.

Q17:   Okay, but why THIS type of program?
A: No doubt we should be careful with the finite resource of faculty attention. But recognizing students for shifting their behavior from "fair to good" and "good to great" should be a reasonable investment with high ROI – especially if it's largely a reallocation of time otherwise spent on preventing a disproportionate fraction of students from moving from "fair to poor" behavior. Structure for the latter is already consuming resources. Structure for the former is expected to be complementary, creating more effectiveness toward the overarching objectives, and may well result in a net decrease in resource consumption.

Q18:   What if a student objects to their professionalism rating?
A: The program is clearly defined to students as a privilege, not an entitlement, since that's part of the implicit lesson about professionalism. On a class-by-class basis, there is no recourse whatsoever of each faculty member's determination (just like there seldom will be recourse on some evaluation by their future bosses). Across students' entire tally of props toward the end of their FCB careers, the dean's office may hear appeals from borderline students on a discretionary basis. Appropriately, the associate dean's discretionary decisions will be most influenced by the professionalism with which the student raises his or her concerns. Of course, since this program is contained entirely within the FCB and does not entail the official status of grades, no involvement of NAU administration is foreseen under any circumstance.

Q19:   What if a faculty member were to change their mind about participating in the program?
A: Outwardly, a faculty member's participation is only determined by whether they complete the ratings checklists for participating students in each of their classes. All faculty members will receive lists of their participating students periodically, and the final checklist link at the end of the semester, but any action on these for any or all classes in any given semester is entirely discretionary. Students only need to be told at the beginning of each semester if the faculty member will be participating, and if so how they'll implement the tool in that class. So inwardly, participation amounts to determining what factors of professionalism are of concern and how they are to be evaluated, then communicating that to participating students. After all, direct relationships with students are where the relevant concepts of this program really occur.

Q20:   I'm still unsure about the program. How can I get more info?
A: Several workshops will occur, typically near the beginnings and ends of each semester, to bring interested faculty together to discuss the pros and cons of participation, and to share best practices. These will be announced regularly. And to opt in, all you have to do is let your students know what factors you'll be considering, then just fill in the database form at the end of the semester. Also, refinements to the program will surely be necessary periodically, so updates will be shared regularly. Meanwhile, thanks for your interest and consideration!

Appendix 3: Frequently asked questions (and answers) for student outreach.

Q: What is the FCB Professionalism Recognition Program?
A: A unique opportunity for students to distinguish themselves by demonstrating professional qualities in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. Students participating in the program will be recognized by a letter from the dean documenting that they have earned a rating of High Professionalism, Professionalism, or Participation.

Q: Why should I participate?
A: • To become more aware of your personal professionalism both in the classroom and in your daily life.
       • To be recognized for the sum of your professional achievements. This includes your behavior in the classroom as well as involvement in extracurricular activities such as attending Pathways events, leadership roles in student organizations, and community service.
       • To enhance your résumé. Employers look for people with strong soft skills such as communication (verbal and written), strong work ethic, teamwork skills, initiative, and analytical skills. Participation in this program gives you a talking point with employers to help you demonstrate that you have learned soft skills.

Q: How do I sign up?
A: Go to the website and click "Sign up." You will need to use your ID number/user ID.

Q: How do I submit props for extracurricular activities?
A: Got to the website and click "Add Extra-curricular Activities." Logon to the system and fill out the form to submit your extracurricular activities.

Q: How is my level of professionalism determined?
A: • Ranking is based on two factors:
       1.   The rating your participating professors give you in each class.
       2.   Your participation in extracurricular activities.
       • Classroom props are weighted higher than extracurricular props.
       • Your props are compared to the props of other participating students in your expected graduation class.
       • Based on point values from your classes and extracurricular activities, one third of students will receive the designation of Highly Professional, one third will receive Professional, and one third will receive Participation.

Q: How do I know what my ranking is?
A: You may check your current level of professionalism at any time. Got to the website and click "Check Standing" then type in your ID number/user ID.

Q: How do I succeed in the program?
A: • Demonstrate professionalism in the classroom based on individual professors' expectations.
       • Participate in extracurricular activities both in and out of the FCB. These can include Pathways, organizational leadership, and community service.

Q: What is professionalism?
A: Although each professor will develop his/her own expectations and specify them on the course syllabus, the following are core values taken from the Code of Conduct: preparedness, punctuality, attentiveness, initiative, respectfulness, reliability, responsibility, and integrity. Please see Code of Conduct for more information (LINK).

Q: How would a PRP letter be any different than a recommendation letter from a particular professor?
 A: Both would be useful for employers. But the PRP letter could only be earned from consistently demonstrating professionalism throughout many classes across several semesters. This would reflect regular adaptation to many professors' styles, so for many recruiters the PRP letter would "say" more.