BOOK REVIEW

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Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America, 2nd ed. by William M. Sullivan. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005. 327 pp. ISBN 0-7879-7458-7

Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America, by William M. Sullivan, in association with the Carnegie Foundation, offers insight into the social and civic history of professionalism, including its rise and perceived fall, cultural influences that affect professional integrity, and suggestions for re-instituting integrity into the professional fields. Sullivan received his doctorate in philosophy from Fordham University and was professor of philosophy at La Salle University before joining the Carnegie Foundation as a senior scholar. He is co-author of Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life as well as The Good Society.

In Work and Integrity, Sullivan specifically addresses concerns relative to the professions of law, medicine, engineering, education, and theology but also gives general concepts applicable to any profession. As a fire service professional, a profession that has been in existence since the time of Ben Franklin, I am in agreement with many of Sullivan’s assertions on the roles of professions and their close association with social values and cultural acceptance; perception of civic duty; and the educational, institutional, and apprenticeship roles necessary to maintain professional integrity.

The determination of whether or not the application of a job or skill is a profession, or a trade, or a passion, or hobby may be difficult. Even according to Sullivan “professional is a loosely defined term” (p. 35). In order to understand the needs of maintaining the integrity of a profession, it is important to understand those characteristics that establish a profession. Sullivan asserts that professions have many common traits, which include clear standards, official licensing, professional education, formalized expertise, and most importantly, some type of jurisdiction over formalized public activity or service beyond the economic welfare of the practitioner (pp. 36, 37). There is some human capital, in the form of expertise or skill set, which is desired and valued by the culture.

Professionals in a given field are “historically emergent social groups who share common educational experiences and a resultant outlook on themselves and the rest of the world” (p. 54). There is emphasis throughout the book on the link between professions and their duty, obligation, and moral ethos to the public and community they serve in some needed capacity. Equally important is the perception, to the public, that professions that fail to meet those needs will lose integrity and therefore
will no longer be a profession that is valued in a community or culture. In the fire service, or emergency services, it is apparent that the failure to respond to the public needs would have dramatic consequences, on many levels, and would result in the loss of perceived value to the public and the resultant loss of professional integrity. The loss of this perception of professionalism may come from a large cultural or societal change that removed the need of the professional services or was replaced by a more valued or needed profession.

Sullivan interestingly relates some historical events or eras that changed the way that communities or the culture valued certain professions because the historical event altered the profession’s jurisdiction or influence over formalized public activity. He compares the rise of historical European professions from the established institutions of church and state with the colonial American “can-do” attitude. This established early American professions as more independent and diversified “and more focused upon the rewards of commercial success” (p. 70). Early American politics and the social drive for traditional values, influenced by Calvinism and Federalism and Jacksonian ideals, led to the desire for professionals, often society leaders, to have an education, institutional licensing, and a usefulness to the democracy that removed some of the “privilege” associated with the then European perception of professions. In the 1900s, the changes in professional attitude, acceptance, and formation continues with Sullivan’s astute explanations of free market economics, corporate capitalism, the evolution of science and technology, expertise, specialization, and importantly, organizations being perceived as professions.

Organizational professions had the benefit of expertise or expert influence but not necessarily the credentials of authority. Sullivan explained how this problem was solved by the advent of research universities around 1900, advocating and providing education in specialized skills and disciplines, which gave credibility to the individual along with personal capital movable between organizations. These movable capitals, and the evolution of giant corporate companies, led to a separation of local community ideals and values in favor of individual opportunity. This separation, along with the cultural advent of the metropolitan society created a loss of central civic values.

The post—World War II boon and the growth of business, science, and technology was described as having a positive influence on the status of the professional, even if in predominately technical as opposed to civic terms, as the civic needs and social problems were being addressed in various fashions. The biggest factor in this cultural era was the reliance on technical knowledge and skills, which was provided by universities and scientific institutes, thereby raising their social status. The universities, especially research universities, embraced the change in many aspects by providing more and more specializations and specific functions that promoted the profession’s credentialing and licensing. “The organizational society was institutionalizing the professions as ever more efficient extensions of the purified, specialized, technical rationality of the research institute into the messy world of daily life” (p. 147). However, this technical and specialized approach led to a loss of faith for the institution’s ability to produce civic professionals.

Sullivan discusses the Vietnam War and Robert McNamara’s technical approach to dealing with the military strategy of that war as having a significant
influence in dissolving some of the faith Americans had in institutional expertise and technical ways of dealing with social problems. “The upsurge of Sixties idealism . . . criticized virtually all institutions; like it’s Progressive predecessor it was generally critical of big business but its sharpest attacks were leveled at the very institutional sphere in which it came to self-consciousness; the university” (p. 152). This criticism and loss of trust and professional respect in some capacities, augmented with economic competition from other countries, the end of the Cold War, the yuppie phenomenon, and the “culture of contentment” left professions lacking in institutional or cultural integrity. In the fire service history, film footage taken of fire departments using water cannons and hoses on rioters, along with the fire bombing of fire stations in retribution, support some of Sullivan’s opinions. Sullivan sums up this era as, “the postwar institutional order was in tatters, and with it the good conscience and social esteem of professionalism” (p. 157). This social esteem, according to Sullivan, can be re-established and needs to be in order to provide for society in the manner of civic professionalism.

Sullivan discusses “conscious social values,” “active public,” and “common good,” and “moral character,” as components of a culture or society that citizens want or need from the perceived professionals, and in return, the professionals have a positive interdependence with the resultant internal personal, and economic, gratification from the receipt of social acceptance and respect. Economic and technological trends are examined in relation to society and professional or expert need, but the overwhelming theme is the co-dependency between society and the professional for establishing a social purpose within a moral meaning. Sullivan does not explain, quantify, or specifically describe the individual terms he uses for the connection between society and the professional, such as “moral,” and “ethical,” but it does not appear necessary and his intent is clear. The implication is that the professional will, or should, respond to the needs of society, in societies’ term and conditions, in order to contribute to, and be a part of, that society.

The burden appears to fall on the current professions for re-constructing the integrity that has been culturally lost in order to reach that level of acceptance necessary for professional acceptance and survival. The re-constructing of that integrity includes credentialing, development of skills and institutional knowledge, establishing standards of practice and technical competence, accountability for performance, and the acquisition of public legitimacy. Public legitimacy comes from the moral and ethical delivery of services that are “beyond the layperson’s ability to understand fully or judge” (p. 183). This legitimacy takes a combination of factors that should, according to Sullivan, be considered by professions for maintaining integrity, or achieving lost integrity. Primary among these factors is education. Not just any education, but an education designed to improve credibility and integrity.

“The challenge for professional education is how to teach the complex ensemble of analytical thinking, skillful practice, and wise judgment upon which each profession rests” (p. 195). Universities or institutions provide analytical thinking with instructors or professors well versed in the didactics of the profession. The profession certifies or qualifies those that can instruct, teach, and pass on that knowledge that is specific to the profession and maintains established standards. It is imperative that the education does not only include didactic training. Skillful
practice comes from being mentored in the fine skills by those that have experience, understand the responsibilities of performance within the profession, and are cognizant of the social and cultural expectations of their performance. However, analytical thinking and applicable skills are of little benefit to establishing credibility or integrity within the profession without the individual’s use of wise judgment. Wise judgment can be acquired, in part by the use of apprenticeships.

Sullivan uses the medical school approach to instruction as an example of a profession that uses all three components: analytical thinking, skillful practice, and apprenticeships, for maintaining the integrity bestowed upon them by the public. He adds to this by re-labeling each of these components as an individual apprenticeship and places them in order of attainment. First, the apprenticeship of cognitive or didactic training is institutionally completed. Second, skilled practitioners teach the apprenticeship of a tacit body of skills. Third, active participation as an apprentice under supervision, teaches values and attitudes shared by the professional community (p. 208). This method is not historically supported by many institutions and should be developed or driven by the professions wishing to re-construct their professional integrity.

Overall, the book was very readable and gave individuals, especially “professionals,” a historical perspective on how society and professions are linked to survivability and integrity through mutual purposes and civic responsibility. The fire service has enjoyed the societal perception of professional integrity for a long time based on the provision of those services deemed necessary by the culture. In addition, the fire service has employed the three levels of apprenticeship for many years. Similar to the medical profession, the fire service evolved into that method of instruction and apprenticeship by the necessity of delivering ongoing service to the community and adapting to the cultural changes that have occurred since the establishment of the fire service profession. Sullivan’s components of professional integrity—credentialing, development of skills and institutional knowledge, establishing standards of practice and technical competence, accountability for performance, and the acquisition of public legitimacy are an ongoing part of our profession. Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America displays excellent examples of why this evolution has occurred and may provide other professions the ways and means to achieve or maintain professional integrity.

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