

Bringing the Fallibility of Professionals Into the Classroom

by George Wilson

In his essay “The Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional,” William May presents an assertion that professionals in today’s society, because they face many restraints as they exercise their professional responsibilities, feel a diminishment of their sense of public responsibility which can convert their sense of professionalism into a self-perception of being a careerist. This essay explores one additional aspect of this beleaguerment, the expectation of our society that professionals must be perfect in the performance of their professional activities, and then explores ways to help students prepare for this kind of world.

May, using the medical profession as an example, presents several examples of how the professional becomes beleaguered. For example, physicians must ask their patients to pay for the professional services they receive. This transaction is similar to any market driven fee for service transaction, and given the complex nature of today’s economy, may push the physician to consider themselves in the same light as others who provide services for a fee. This may distance the physician from the feeling of being a professional, leading them to distance themselves from the issues that set them apart from other fee for service providers.

In this essay I do not intend to reiterate the various issues that can be used to define a profession. Among them are the idea that a professional works with a specialized body of knowledge and serves a good beyond their individual well being, that is the common good. It is by distancing from these and other professional ideals that the individual stops seeing themselves as a professional and begins to feel like a careerist.

Society places a tremendous amount of pressure on its professionals, and one aspect of this pressure that flows from May’s discussion is the expectation that professionals will not make mistakes, and in fact will perform in a near perfect, if not perfect, fashion. One need look no further than the medical profession for examples of this pressure. When a physician makes a mistake, they are at risk of being brought into litigation that can change their careers forever. This risk is so great that it even influences how physicians choose an area to practice. For example, many physicians avoid certain specialties, such as Obstetrics and Gynecology, because the risk of litigation is higher in such specialties. In fact, even when the physician is simply named in such a lawsuit, severe damage can be done to her or his career. Physicians are held to a standard of making no mistakes, that is of being perfect as they practice their profession, by our society.

This expectation can be found in other professions, and in fact may be one of the reasons that many professional bodies are so reluctant to pursue members who fail to meet

standards. If part of the mystique of being a professional is that professionals do not make mistakes, then a professional organization actually admitting that some of its members are failing to meet the profession's standards could be harmful to the profession's image in the eyes of the public. Perhaps some of this expectation stems from May's analogy of professionals as rulers. Before professionals became rulers, monarchs ruled with divine authority which carried an aura of infallibility.

The harm in this situation is that it forces the professional away from their humanness. As human beings we are certainly fallible, and do make mistakes. But, if the public expects perfection from professionals, then professionals must act as though they do not make mistakes, that is they must act as if they are infallible. This means that a professional must act in ways that may drive them to pretend that they cannot make mistakes. As a result they will feel that they are being held to a standard that is more than human. This unreasonable expectation can drive them further away from their sense of serving the public, since it is the public that places this expectation upon them, and thus this expectation can push them into thinking that they are careerists rather than professionals.

Bringing these issues into the college learning environment presents many challenges. While it may be possible to say that professionals such as doctors and lawyers acquire the sense of being a professional in their postgraduate education, some foundation must be built in undergraduate education. Two areas that can be dealt with in this regard are the idea of serving the common good and the issue I described above, being held to an extremely high performance standard.

May discusses the commitment of professions to serve the common good, quoting William Perkins, an English Puritan who defined calling as "a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good." May builds on this foundation, discussing how the professional uses his or her specialized body of knowledge to serve human need, turning away from self interest to focus on the needs of clients. In this frame of thought, professionals are willing to serve the need of the stranger because of the professional responsibility to serve the common good.

The concept of the common good presents many challenges in the undergraduate classroom. This is clearly not a concept that will be incorporated by students if presented in a traditional lecture and discussion based setting. One tool that may help present this idea in a meaningful fashion is the case method. Beginning with a story of someone who has been confronted with the choice of serving the common good, that is of serving others, and serving their own self interests, may be a way to confront students with the difficult reality of such choices. An example that comes to mind here at the University of St. Thomas is the case we use to begin the Business Ethics course, the "Parable of the Sadhu." In this story a business executive on a mountain climbing expedition in the Himalayas is confronted with the choice between helping a religious pilgrim who is in distress, (the Sadhu), or continuing his climb. The choice is essentially an either/or situation, the protagonist cannot both help the Sadhu and complete the climb. This case is used to introduce the concept of teleopathy, or "goal sickness." The case could be characterized to students as a way for them to see that being a professional means that

sometimes your own goals are lower priorities than those of the public the professional serves.

My own profession, accounting, provides many examples of such situations. In many cases accountants in public practice are confronted with situations where doing what they think is proper may have severe personal economic consequences. A case built on the experience of the auditors of Broadway Savings would be a good illustration of this responsibility. In this situation which occurred in the early 1980's, Broadway Savings, a publicly owned savings and loan association, wanted to account for certain transactions (called Acquisition, Development and Construction (ADC) transactions) in a way that would allow Broadway to recognize a substantial amount of revenue in the early parts of the transaction's life. However, Broadway's auditors, a Big Six public accounting firm, believed that the transactions would be more appropriately accounted for as investments in real estate, which meant that the income from the transactions would not be recognized until they were nearly complete. As a result of this disagreement, the auditors of Broadway had to grapple with the question of whether they should risk losing this large client because of a difference in interpretation of the accounting guidance for such transactions. In fact, these transactions were so new that no concrete guidance existed, and in the savings and loan industry different companies accounting for the transaction in different ways.

In this case the auditors told Broadway that they believed the second way of accounting for the transactions, with income recognized later in the transactions, was the only proper accounting in their professional judgment. Broadway then fired this firm, and hired another firm to audit their financial statements. The newly hired firm allowed Broadway to recognize income from the transactions immediately. The former auditors sustained a significant economic loss, one which meant that staff reductions would take place, by refusing to compromise their professional judgment.

This case is an example of the type of situation that students could be confronted with in case studies. I think it is only through such methods, which confront the student with a choice and give them a chance to see what they would do in an ambiguous situation, that these issues can be taught. Simply hearing about the situation, or watching it on a video, will not make the situation real. In addition, I think it would be helpful to present such cases from a variety of perspectives, and be sure to focus on the ambiguities such situations create. Another step that may help deepen the learning experience might be to find experiences that are more immediate to students, such as whether or not to cheat on an exam or plagiarize for a paper, may also help make these types of choices real for students. Of course, no one really knows what they will do in such a situation until they confront one in the pressures of real life. But by attempting to get students to think about the issues they may eventually confront, the classroom can arm them as much as possible to think through the issues and make a response that is consistent with their belief system.

With respect to the second issue I described above, the idea that professionals are held to an extremely high standard of performance, indeed sometimes a standard of perfection, I believe it will be difficult to convey to students how this will affect them. In some

settings students already encounter the impact such expectations can have. When we are confronted with our own imperfection in a setting that won't allow for such human frailties, our self image inevitably suffers. This can be a very defeating experience, and in its worst form probably causes some people to simply give up.

I suspect that role playing or similar types of experiential learning may be ways to help students learn to grapple with such situations. It is also possible to provide students with tools to use in such situations. For example, a common tool used to help students assess their writing is peer review. Feedback from a peer can help improve writing without creating a threatening situation. The accounting profession even has a built in process that acknowledges each individual's imperfection. This process is called the "review process," and it requires that any workpaper prepared by an accountant be reviewed by another accountant. The purpose of this review is two fold. First, it is a quality check to assure that the firm's standards are met and that undue risks are not taken. Second, it is an educational experience. The person whose work is being reviewed is not expected to be perfect. The review process expects some review points. However, the person whose work is being reviewed is expected to learn. This expectation, not of perfection but that learning will occur, is a far healthier expectation. This is the sort of experience, translated into the classroom environment, that could help students learn to set high expectations, but allow themselves to be human at the same time.

References

May, William F, "The Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional," Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal, Vol. 2 No 1, pp. 25-41, 1992.