Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

Preparing Professionals as Moral Agents

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Abstract: In today's environment of unrelenting economic and social pressures, Sullivan makes the case that the professions need their educational centers more than ever as resources and as rallying points for renewal.

Essay:

Breakdowns in institutional reliability and professional self-policing, as revealed in waves of scandals in business, accounting, journalism, and the law, have spawned a cancerous cynicism on the part of the public that threatens the predictable social environment needed for a healthy society. For professionals to overcome this public distrust, they must embrace a new way of looking at their role to include civic responsibility for themselves and their profession, and a personal commitment to a deeper engagement with society.

The highly publicized unethical behavior that we see today by professionals is still often thought by many—physicians, lawyers, educators, scientists, engineers—as "marginal" matters in their fields, to be overcome in due course by the application of the value-neutral, learned techniques of their profession. But this conventional view fails to recognize that professionals' "problems" arise outside the sterile, neutral and technical and instead lie within human social contexts. These are not simply physical environments or information systems. They are networks of social engagement structured by shared meanings, purposes, and loyalties. Such networks form the distinctive ecology of human life.

For example, a doctor faced with today's lifestyle diseases—obesity, addictions, cancer, strokes—rather than with infectious biological agents, soon realizes that he or she must take into account how individuals, groups, or whole societies lead their lives. Or in

education, it is often assumed that schools can improve student achievement by setting clear standards and then devising teaching techniques to reach them. But this approach has been confounded when it encounters students who do not see a relationship between academic performance and their own goals, or when the experience of students and parents has made trusting school authorities appear a dubious bargain.

In order to "solve" the apparently intractable problems of health care, education, public distrust, or developing a humane and sustainable technological order, the strategies of intervention employed by professionals must engage with, and if possible, strengthen, the social networks of meaning and connection in people's lives—or their efforts will continue to misfire or fail. And not only will they be less effective in meeting the needs of society and the individuals who entrust their lives to their care, but they will also find in their midst colleagues who do not uphold the moral tenets of the profession.

The idea of the professional as neutral problem solver, above the fray, which was launched with great expectations a century ago, is now obsolete. A new ideal of a more engaged, civic professionalism must take its place. Such an ideal understands, as a purely technical professionalism does not, that professionals are inescapably moral agents whose work depends upon public trust for its success.

Since professional schools are the portals to professional life, they bear much of the responsibility for the reliable formation in their students of integrity of professional purpose and identity. In addition to enabling students to become competent practitioners, professional schools always must provide ways to induct students into the distinctive habits of mind that define the domain of a lawyer, a physician, nurse, engineer, or teacher. However, the basic knowledge of a professional domain must be revised and recast as conditions change. Today, that means that the definition of basic knowledge must be expanded to include an understanding of the moral and social ecology within which students will practice.

Today's professional schools will not serve their students well unless they foster forms of practice that open possibilities of trust and partnership with those the professions serve. Such a reorientation of professional education means nothing less than a broadening and rebalancing of professional identity. It means an intentional abandonment of the image of the professional as superior and detached problem-solver. It also requires a positive engagement. Professional education must promote the opening of professional life to meet clients and patients as also fellow citizens, persons with whom teachers, physicians, lawyers, nurses, accountants, engineers, and indeed all professionals share a larger, common "practice"—that of citizen, working to contribute particular knowledge and specialized skills toward improving the quality of life, perhaps especially for those most in need.

Professional schools have too often held out to their students a notion of expert knowledge that remains abstracted from context. Since the displacement of apprenticeship on the job by academic training in a university setting, professional schools have tilted the definition of professional competence heavily toward cognitive

capacity, while downplaying other crucial aspects of professional maturity. This elective affinity between the academy's penchant for theoretical abstraction and the distanced stance of problem solving has often obscured the key role played by the face-to-face transmission of professional understanding and judgment from teacher to student. This is the core of apprenticeship that must not be allowed to wither from lack of understanding and attention.

A new civic awareness within professional preparation could go a long way toward awakening awareness that the authentic spirit of each professional domain represents more than a body of knowledge or skills. It is a living culture, painfully developed over time, which represents at once the individual practitioner's most prized possession and an asset of great social value. Its future worth, however, will depend in large measure on how well professional culture gets reshaped to answer these new needs of our time.

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