

# Helping Students Learn to be Professional

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By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

“My students act so unprofessional,” a faculty member complained. “Two of them were all but making out before class started and they never stopped touching each other during class.” Heads nodded and more examples followed.

Being professional isn’t something easily defined and any proposed definition can be debated when it comes to examples of what is or isn’t professional. But in many fields, teaching students professional behavior is part of the instructional agenda. I have always admired those who teach in professional programs where there is the usual large amount of content, but also skills students need to develop and professional behaviors that must be learned. Nursing is a good example—lots and lots of content, plus all of the sophisticated skills and behaviors expected of health care professionals. All this is taught within the time constraints of a degree program that ends with a rigorous certification exam. Hats off to colleagues who teach in programs like these.

As for those with the complaints I shared in the opening paragraph, I wanted to ask, which students are being unprofessional? Are they first-year students or seniors? Do we have unrealistic expectations for students in those first college courses? No one is born knowing what it means to be professional. These are skill sets that must be learned.

One of the big problems that we face with students is convincing them that what happens in college classrooms is very similar to what happens in the world of work. For example, they assume that once they get into the workplace, they won’t have to work with people who fail to carry their weight on a team project. Perhaps we should invite them to observe faculty committees. A lot of students also think it doesn’t matter if they miss deadlines, come late to class, regularly request a bending of the rules, or text while someone else is talking. In some cases they might know these things are unprofessional, but the actions become justified in the student’s mind because they’re doing them in class, not at work.

In the article referenced below, two teachers propose an interesting way to get students to begin thinking about college as preparation for professional life. Each one taught a course that they framed as a job experience. The teacher functioned as the supervisor, students were employees, the syllabus was the employment contract, and the assignments were authentic—tasks employees could be asked to do on the job. These weren’t specially created courses; one was an industrial organizational psychology course and the other a course that introduced students to the psychology major. However, some course details were changed in interesting ways. For example, in the industrial psychology courses, points weren’t given for attending class—that was expected—but students lost points for multiple unexcused absences.

The authors make this observation in their conclusion: “Framing these two courses as a job made us think more carefully about all of our classroom policies and procedures ... and whether we were effectively preparing our students for their futures in which they will need to be responsible and accountable for their actions.” (p. 66) That’s a key point and it got me thinking again about how college experiences need to occur on a developmental trajectory. We should be treating beginning students differently than seniors. Recently I’ve been looking at some syllabi from capstone courses and have been surprised with how many are peppered with the same policies and prohibitions found in syllabi for lower-level courses. If we’re working on developing professional behaviors across a sequence of courses and years in college, shouldn’t seniors know that work needs to be turned in on time and that not being in class has consequences? Maybe we need to examine the approaches we’re using to develop professionalism if our seniors can’t set their own rules for responsible behavior.

We operationally define professional behavior with various rules and regulations, but do students know that's what we're doing or do they think all those policy requirements are just teachers telling students what to do because that's one of those things teachers do? The reasons for deadlines, attentive listening, careful editing, respectful disagreement, and being punctual may not be obvious to those who think college classrooms operate on a different plane than "the real world."

**Reference:** Campana, K. L. and Peterson, J. J. (2013). Do bosses give extra credit? Using the classroom to model real-world work experiences. *College Teaching*, 61 (2), 60-66.