



Saskatchewan Institute of Agrologists

Professionalism

This publication has been prepared to provide background information on professionalism to facilitate discussion of objectives and alternative approaches and systems by agrologists and possible agrologists. The purpose of this publication is to stimulate thoughts of professionalism. It is hoped it will assist in the development of a better understanding of professionalism and focus on this important issue.

Personal Professionalism

Background

The issue of personal professionalism is distinct from that of professional organization structure. A number of agrologists have stated their point of view on professionalism. These views have, as their common denominator, the exhortation of agrologists to act in a professional manner for the best interests of society, to maintain standards and to increase educational activities by members.

Definition

A professional is one of a group of persons who jointly and individually assume responsibility for: defining the nature of their services; defining the minimum base of knowledge and skills needed to provide that service; defining the limits of their individual ability to apply that knowledge and those skills; defining the codes of conduct and ethics to be used to guide and evaluate their service to others and policing themselves regarding their provision of services to others.

Characteristics

The concept of personal professionalism involves carrying out one's work in a professional manner. The unique measure of professionalism is service to the community. The major professions in North America state the requirements for professionalism.

1. They must have a service motive, sharing their advances in knowledge, guarding their professional integrity and ideals, and rendering gratuitous public service in addition to that engaged by clients.

2. They must recognize their obligations to society and to other practitioners by living up to established and accepted codes of conduct.
3. They must assume relations of confidence and accept individual responsibility.
4. They should be members of professional groups and they should carry their part of the responsibility of advancing professional knowledge, ideals and practice.

Personal Criteria

At the individual level, the criteria for professionalism involve technical competence and personal behaviour.

As a professional, you must know what you claim to know and have the expertise professed. Agrologists, like other professionals, have difficulty coping with the knowledge explosion. It is very difficult to keep up with the latest research even in one's area of speciality let alone acquire an adequate grasp of general trends in agriculture.

Professional agrologists have a tendency to find themselves working outside their area of expertise. This occurs because some people switch fields by choice and others are promoted into positions which increasingly require them to perform management rather than technical functions. Often agrologists become policy makers in areas where they have limited expertise or experience.

There are no simple solutions to these types of problems associated with maintaining technical competence. Recent moves toward professional development requirements by provincial institutes are a recognition of this need.

Professionals have a responsibility to act in an honest and ethical manner. They are expected to give a client or employer sound and independent advice whether or not the receiver will be offended and whether or not the advice is followed. The professional has a responsibility for formulation of the problem as well as the answer and should not hesitate to restate the questions when the real issue is being obscured or ignored.

A professional has obligations to the profession as well as to his or her clients, employers and the public. These include obligations of assisting those entering the profession, supporting education and research in the field and promoting the good name of agrology. Professionals have an obligation to behave in an ethical manner to fellow professionals. The major prohibitions in codes of ethics are an unfair means of competition, taking advantage of one's employment, etc.

The final professional behaviour to be considered is the obligation to dissent. A professional is obligated to dissent when he or she believes their public agency employer is not acting in the best interest of the public.

Most agrologists behave in an ethical manner.

Characteristics of a Profession

Definition

A profession is an ideal type or an abstract model of superior behaviour toward which individuals in an occupation, or a particular occupations group, strive in their work and their service to the public. A profession has several important characteristics including: a common body of knowledge; a system for controlling admission;

rules of conduct; procedures for discipline; and, public and legal authority.

Common Body of Knowledge

The hallmark of a profession is that there must exist a body of knowledge which distinguishes that profession from other professions. One may distinguish between professional and nonprofessional occupations on the basis that the skills exercised by the professional person are derived from and based on a body of theory underlying the profession.

The common body of knowledge and skills are not shared by the general public. It is mastery of this unique body of knowledge and skills which gives the professional the right to distinguish himself or herself from all others and to assert primacy in this occupational area.

Powers of Admission

Each profession aspires to and seeks the power to establish rules for membership in the profession. Three types of powers exist, namely: control or accreditation of training programs; establishing entry standards; and, establishing continuing knowledge and skills levels or training requirements.

Many professionals accredit colleges and in doing so, regulate the curriculum content, research and other related activities of the colleges which train their professionals.

The establishment of entry standards is common to all professions. Entry usually is a two-stage process based upon academic achievement and a period of articling or apprenticeship. The academic criteria are usually based upon graduation from an accredited or designated college program. The second state of entry involves a period during which the aspiring professional must practise under the guidance and supervision of a practising professional or complete an articling period.



Most, but not all, professions establish continuing education and/or skill standards. Specific courses, numbers of hours in elective professional activities may be prescribed in order to ensure professional members maintain their level of expertise.

Code of Practice

Professions, realizing that not all members will maintain the highest ethical standards on all occasions, provide a code of ethics to assist their members.

Codes of ethics or codes of practice vary in length and emphasis from profession to profession. They outline the broad general principles by which all members should be guided and indicate how these principles apply in specific circumstances.

Codes of practice involve ethics, not criminal behaviours. It is implicitly assumed that a professional will practise within the legal constraints of society and provide service of a high ethical standard.

Discipline

Professions have the power to discipline members and, in many cases, nonmember. Professions are enabled by acts of provincial legislatures to discipline members in a number of ways. Members may be warned, reprimanded or expelled. In the case of professions with mandatory powers such as law, agriculture, medicine, and engineering,

expulsion from the profession means prohibition of practice. Most professions also have the power to prevent nonmembers from providing services for remuneration.

Legal Authority

Professions have a unique place in our society. They are given exclusive legal powers to be self-governing, to decide who may enter, the conditions of continued

membership, the right to establish rules of behaviour, and in many cases, to prohibit nonmembers from being employed or paid for specific activities. In order to acquire these unique powers, the members of the professions must convince the public, or at least their elected officials, that they have unique skills of value to the public. The public must be convinced they can be trusted to discipline themselves in a responsible, safe, and equitable manner and to represent the best interests of society.

Challenges

The two major challenges facing the development of personal and organizational professionalism among agrologists are the lack of public recognition and the organizational structure of the provincial institutes.

Public Recognition

Public awareness of professional agrologists is often low. Recognition of agrologists as professionals can never be greater than awareness of our existence. Basically, we have an awareness problem, not an image problem, because we have no image. Hardly anyone knows what an agrologist is and the idea that members are professionals is beyond many people's comprehension. We have an identity problem for several reasons:

1. The term agrologist is unique to Canada and totally meaningless unless someone has defined it for you. Until we engage in greater public awareness activities, we will be the "invisible profession."
2. Public perceptions of professionals are based on medical doctors, lawyers, accountants, and engineers. In each case, the professional is an individual who provides a service to a client on a fee for service basis. The degree to which a group is considered professional is proportional to the percentage of members who are paid on a fee for service basis. Agrologists employed by governments and universities, are often regarded as faculty or staff and the public doesn't think of them as professionals and are unlikely to be considered professional agrologists.
3. Unlike most other professionals, agrologists often do not supervise the work of the practitioners within their area of expertise.

Farmers have and probably always will, operate independently from the agricultural professional. Historically, agriculture has been an occupation quite different from building or construction which is directed by architects and engineers, health care which is controlled by medical doctors or the legal system which is dominated by barristers and solicitors. The powers, responsibilities and visibility of agrologists are very limited compared to those of farmers. In fact, many farmers have limited knowledge of agrologists and do not think of agrology as a profession.

4. Only a minority of agricultural graduates and potential professional agrologists consider themselves to be professionals. This is indicated by the fact that many, if not a majority of graduates in agriculture, do not belong to a provincial institute of agrologists in most, if not all provinces. This situation is partly due to the failure of the agricultural faculties to indoctrinate students in the importance of the profession. A student entering one of the traditional professional schools, such as engineering, veterinary medicine, or dentistry, knows what he or she will be doing upon graduating. Do students go to an agricultural college to become professionals or to get a science degree which they hope will lead to a job? How many first year agricultural students are aware they will qualify to be a professional agrologist upon graduation? How many bother to join when they graduate?

The vast majority of agrologists want their

profession to have greater visibility. While not all agrologists may feel the need for a professional identity, there is a growing number who do.

Organizational Structure

All provincial institutes of agrology attempt to be both regulatory and advocacy agencies simultaneously. These roles are in basic conflict regardless of the degree of regulatory powers delegated by the provincial government. Under the various professional acts, agrologists are, in the public interest, given the authority and responsibility to regulate their members. In some provinces such as Manitoba and Saskatchewan, they have authority to insist that all persons practicing agrology have institute membership. In some other provinces, membership is not mandatory, so the institutes are given regulatory powers in the name of the public with the intent that they act in the public interest.

Professionalism among agrologists is limited by lack of public recognition and appropriate organizational structure. To become recognized as professionals, there is a need to think and act like professionals, to make society more aware of our capabilities and to restructure our institutes of professional agrology. To do so will require effort and involve risks. Failure to do so will result in a lack of public awareness and acceptance of the profession.

How many agrologists insist that PAg be included after their name?

The Saskatchewan Institute of Agrologists is an organization of university trained professionals that protects the public by ensuring its members are qualified and competent to provide knowledge and advice on agriculture and related areas.



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