

The Essence of a Profession

[by Michael Lindsay, Deputy Director - ILEA](#) - 3/5/08

In my previous two articles for *The Law Enforcement Journal*, I have written about the recent advances we in Indiana made towards professionalism through the Refresher and the Revocation laws. The question naturally arises as to why these rules are necessary for law enforcement to be considered a profession. It could be argued that there was no monumental increase in police performance the day these laws were enacted; nor did police misconduct cease; nor did recruit qualifications skyrocket. So what makes these things necessary and are there others that we have not yet addressed?

Along a similar line, *U.S.A. Today* had a recent article (published 12/18/07) titled, "Police brutality cases up 25%". In this article, the newspaper cites Department of Justice statistics recorded between 2001 and 2007. Are we making progress? Are we slipping? Have we arrived as a recognized profession? If not, how close are we?

For many years, I have asked basic classes if they think law enforcement is a profession, a blue-collar occupation or just a job. The enthusiastic response is always and overwhelmingly, a profession. I then ask why this is? What distinguishes a profession from a craft, skill, art, vocation, avocation, occupation or simple employment?

With all of this uncertainty, how do we plot a course for attaining and then maintaining a professional status, both at a department level and within the occupation generally? Perhaps one of the first steps we need to take is to decide what it takes to be recognized as a profession.

I have some ideas along this line from years of contemplating the question. I must say, however, that there is not (to my knowledge) a list anywhere that says if an occupation or department satisfies 12 of the 15 elements listed here, that occupation or department has attained a professional status.

In my list, the elements for becoming a profession were mostly hijacked from a number of the recognized professions. You may disagree with my selections or interpretations.

1. One of the most important elements is something that departments cannot really control although good recruiting helps. This is the inner perspective of the officer. Most practitioners say they felt **a calling** to the profession. The profession is the way in which they wish to dedicate their lives for serving mankind. It is more than eight-to-five employment. It is a vocation. A life-long pursuit.

2. As such, this naturally leads to **a career**. A career differs from a job in that the practitioner becomes and "is" a doctor, for example, as compared to someone who "works" as a clerk. The doctor is viewed as being a doctor 24/7. The clerk punches out at 5 p.m. and has no off-duty responsibilities. A clerk may or may not still be a clerk in subsequent years.

3. The occupation itself must supply a **critical need or function** in society. As well intended as a street department worker may be, that group will probably never be viewed as a true profession no matter how well its members fill chuckholes. Doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, CPAs and policemen perform the sensitive, critical kinds of tasks that fulfill this requirement. They operate in arenas in which much harm can be inflicted if matters are not properly handled.
4. Because these functions are so important and crucial, a great deal of **discretion** must be placed with the practitioner. These are areas that do not respond well to a one-rule-fits-all approach.
5. In order to ensure that only qualified people are given these substantial discretionary powers, they must be screened and prepared in certain ways. Applicants must have a prescribed **minimum level of education** so that they have a basic knowledge of how their society operates as well as what is acceptable.
6. Thereafter, **specialized training** in the professional skills is one of the more obvious elements. Easily stated, this requirement is usually the most demanding.
7. Because these positions are life-long careers, a **continuing education** requirement must also be established to assure the public that those who graduated thirty years ago have kept pace.
8. In order to know and establish meaningful entrance standards as well as continuing education requirements, etc., there needs to be a **controlling organization** or **professional association** that is largely composed of peers who have worked in the profession. The highly technical nature of the specialized training does not lend itself to regulation by outsiders. These organizations typically become the hub of the profession. The ABA and AMA are examples of such organizations.
9. Along with education and training standards, all professions have established a **professional publication or journal** to keep members informed of new rules and the latest developments in the profession and association.
10. The professional association typically screens new applicants and constructs exams to document new members have sufficient training to enter the profession. This typically manifest itself through a **licensing or certification** process.
11. Realizing that the function of the profession is to aim for a high level of service to benefit society and to ensure discretion is not abused, most associations create a **code of ethics** to which all new members must affirm their support.
12. Beyond a general code of ethics, a professional association typically has **canons of conduct** for addressing specific problems or for handling new developments in society.
13. In order to maintain the standards established by the professional association, the profession needs a way to impose **sanctions** on those who violate the code of ethics, canons of conduct or continuing education requirements. These sanctions must also include the power of

de-certification, license revocation or **disbarment** when appropriate. This is typically done through a board of peer review.

These are benchmarks that I see other professions successfully using to maintain their professional status in the eyes of the public. There well may be additional elements that I have overlooked. A few of my future articles will likely focus on one or two of these elements in much more detail or examine an entirely new element.

If you would like to make comments on these elements or discuss whether you believe law enforcement has satisfied enough of these elements to qualify as a true profession, you are invited to email, write or call. You may just find your remarks appearing in a future edition of *The Law Enforcement Journal*.