How Should Professionalism Be Expressed?

The principal discussion at the open meeting of the Washington Society of Professional Soil Scientists (WSPSS) in October 1978 addressed the issue of certifying professionals in soils in the American Registry of Certified Professionals in Agronomy, Crops and Soils (ARCPACS). In particular, the Society discussed the expression of professionalism by ARCPACS. On the scroll presented by ARCPACS are the professional’s name and his degree. Does this degree imply a particular level of professionalism? Is it a means of stratifying professionals?

Any professional, especially one with a Ph.D., is frequently specialized in one area of soils. He has expertise in that subject, for example, soil chemistry, but may be deficient in another, such as soil physics or soil taxonomy. How does the naming of one’s highest degree promote his professionalism? Each professional must stand on his own merits, credibility, education, and experience. If ARCPACS didn’t think he was qualified, he should not have been certified.

Each professional has his own proficiencies and deficiencies, and his own particular credentials. One may have a prolific academic background while another may have abundant experience. Education can be expressed by naming the highest degree one has attained. But how is experience rated? Professionals with either the appropriate education or the appropriate experience should be labelled as professionals, not as B.S., M.S., or Ph.D. Unless there is a way to rate experience, ARCPACS should rate professionals, not degrees. Neither a Ph.D. nor 30 years of experience in itself implies professionalism. Professionalism should be rated according to one’s entire background. A professional becomes competent through his entire background, not solely with his academic qualifications. According to ARCPACS, “certification is based on scholarly preparation, knowledge, and [my emphasis] experience.” So why emphasize scholarly preparation? The Society felt that the practice of naming one’s highest degree on the scroll should be eliminated.

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1 The certified professional is provided a scroll or certificate which carries his or her name. As an option, the professional can choose to have the highest degree attained placed after the name. Since this is not mandatory (nor has it ever been), some choose not to have the educational degree placed after the name. It is simply a choice of the professional and is not obligatory. It is provided as service for those who choose to use it. — Martin D. Openshaw, Director of ARCPACS.