

Are Today's Grads Unprofessional?

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Today's college graduates do not exhibit as much professionalism as their employers expect of them, according to a new study from York College of Pennsylvania.

As part of the small liberal arts college's effort to rebrand itself as a place where "professionalism" is cultivated, its newly created Center for Professional Excellence commissioned a survey of more than 500 human resources professionals and business leaders to gauge not only what they think "professionalism" means but also how well the recent college graduates they have hired exhibit it.

The results of the survey, released Friday, suggest that colleges need to change how they prepare their students for the working world, particularly by reinforcing soft skills like honoring workplace etiquette and having a positive demeanor.

The survey indicates that "there is a widely held sentiment that not all college graduates are displaying professionalism upon entering the work force." More than 37 percent of the respondents reported that "less than half of [the recent graduates they have hired] exhibit professionalism in their first year." The average employer indicated that slightly more than 51 percent of his or her recent hires exhibit "professionalism."

In clarifying what exactly this means, about 88 percent of the respondents "think of professionalism as being related to a person rather than the position." To that end, the traits or behaviors mentioned most by the respondents as being characteristic of professional employees were "personal interaction skills, including courtesy and respect"; "the ability to communicate, which includes listening skills"; "a work ethic which includes being motivated and working on a task until it is complete"; and "appearance."

Similarly, the traits or behaviors most associated by the respondents with "unprofessionalism" included "appearance, which includes attire, tattoos, and piercings"; "poor communication skills including poor grammar"; "poor work ethic"; and "poor attitude."

To further define the gap between employer expectations and student realities, the study asked respondents "to rate traits according to both their importance when considering a person for a position requiring professionalism and the extent to which they are present in first year college educated employees." Upon analysis of these on a matrix, the study notes that the quality most prevalent in new college graduates — "concern about opportunities for advancement" — matters the least to employers.

Among the traits or behaviors employers value most, and that they believe are most deficient in the recent graduates they have hired, include "accepts personal responsibility for decision and actions," "is able to act independently," and "has a clear sense of direction and purpose." The study notes that colleges need to put a particular focus on imparting these traits to their students.

Still, there is some indication that not everyone surveyed believes the "professionalism" of their recent graduate hires has significantly declined in recent years. More than 53 percent of the respondents reported the percentage of those exhibiting "professionalism" has remained the same over the past five years. Nearly a third, however, indicate that it has taken a nosedive in recent years. The most popular reasons for this grim outlook include "an increased sense of entitlement," "new cultural values," and "a changed work ethic."

David Polk, the professor of behavioral science at York whose research group conducted this survey, said he was unsure how much the responses indicated some sort of "generational phenomenon," acknowledging the age-old disappointment adults throughout history have often expressed in the younger generation. He noted with disappointment that the survey failed to ask the ages of those responding. Still, he noted that, generally, those responding were significantly older than the recent graduates they were asked to assess.

“One of the things you’ve got to ask yourself is, are we just a bunch of dinosaurs looking at young people saying, ‘What I’m seeing here is inappropriate,’ ” mused Polk, who made sure to note he was 61. “Are the changes in attitude here generational or are they lifestyle changes? Will you people eventually take on conservative professionalism or have things just changed? We’ll have to do more studies to find out. For instance, the freewheeling baby boomers of the 1960s are the ones who filled out our survey today. We can be sure which it is with just this one study.”

Polk’s students, who have been discussing his research findings in class, are of two minds about what employers are saying about their generation. On one hand, Polk said he has students balk at the notion that certain tattoos or piercings might make them seem “unprofessional.” Conversely, he said nearly all of them admit to having a greater sense of “entitlement.” While Polk said that most students did not think of this as being problematic, he expressed some concern in this attitude.

“We tell our children, ‘You’re all worth something,’ and ‘None of you are losers,’ ” Polk said. “I’ve asked my class, ‘Do you really think you’re all winners in everything?’ I mean, you’ve got to be mediocre in something. This attitude that everyone’s going to play on the team and that everyone is going to be recognized for something is out there. It’s great that people have positive self-esteem, but I can’t help but think that we live in Lake Wobegon [the fictional town of *A Prairie Home Companion* fame], where every student is ‘above average.’ ”

Despite this, Polk offered a number of suggestions about what colleges can do in the classroom to improve the “professionalism” of their graduates.

“I think if you can get professors to buy into the concept, which is critical, then professors can serve as role models,” Polk said. “For instance, the last thing I would do is wear blue jeans to class. I think that’s unprofessional and not something I’d wear in a position of presumed authority. . . . Also, some professors will say, ‘Just call me by my first name.’ There’s no way I think that’s proper behavior in my classroom. It creates this wonderfully false impression that professors are less authority figures than they are friends.”

Professors can lead by example in other ways, too, Polk continued.

“Let’s just ignore parents for a second, and let’s call students out on improper behavior in the classroom,” Polk said. “You’ll probably notice from the study, a lot of what people are talking about here is soft skills like attitude, demeanor and respect. As a professor, most of us see our jobs as conveying knowledge and making sure our students comprehend it. I’m not sure how many would respond that it is also their job to help a student develop good behavior. There’s this moral authority that some professors get uncomfortable with. For this to work successfully, when a professor calls out a student’s behavior, the administration should be there to back them up immediately and say, ‘Your behavior is wrong.’ ”

In the meantime, York’s Center for Professional Excellence has gotten in on the act. It will host a number of seminars throughout the academic year with employers talking about expectations of their employees and other workplace issues. Polk said he would like students to be required to attend a certain number of these seminars throughout their college careers. Additionally, he noted he could see the potential for York to create something akin to a general education course focusing on “professionalism.”

“If we can truly embrace this thing, it’ll be a major challenge,” said Polk of York’s effort to rebrand itself. “I can just see me going to faculty and saying to them, ‘Your blue jeans are inappropriate,’ and them telling me where I can go.”