

Commentary

Thoughts On Our Profession

Melanie Ghio

Having just returned from the 1987 National Conference on Volunteerism, thoughts of professionalism and related issues are uppermost in my mind. We are being urged by the leaders in our field and by the very forces of change in our society to develop into a certifiable, legitimate, recognizable profession, and there is a great deal of value in that. As we in AVA struggle with increasing professionalism, the value of certification, development of career paths and similar issues, it is incumbent on us to thoughtfully consider the questions that continually crop up in these discussions, not pushing them aside as of less immediate concern. Because I feel this way, I attended the crackerbarrel sessions on certification and ethics. The exchange between participants in these sessions spurred the writing of this article.

In an article published in *Voluntary Action Leadership* in 1984, Laura Lee Geraghty examined the "Changing Profession of Volunteer Administration." Laura Lee points out that we have many of the accoutrements of professionalism already. Researchers and scholars are actively examining this enterprize called volunteerism; colleges and universities are creating programs to teach the theory and skills necessary for effective performance; organizations that support the profession in its many contexts are providing the collegiality and collaboration required for fruitful professional growth; national, state and local governments are involved programatically and legislatively in the endeavors which our profession seeks to administer.

And yet, while recognition as a profession in the traditional sense may be very near, we will not be doing our field a favor until we re-write the definition of "professionalism." Of major concern to me is finding a role model for our profession as a *profession*. I do not know if one exists. Social work and many other professions that began as caring responses to human need have followed paths leading to detachment, stringent guidelines, strict definitions of appropriateness and limitations on inclusion. In striving for objectivity, practitioners sometimes lose warmth and humaneness. What it means to be a professional is often confused with certain types of behavior. Guidelines and definitions sometimes replace knowledge, understanding, ethics and experience. Limitations on inclusion often result in insensitivity and condescension towards clients and "non-professionals" alike. This may work in other fields, but I do not believe it will be tolerated in volunteerism.

The movement toward professionalism is not at fault here, but the individual interpretation of "professional" made by each of us must be continually examined. Few fields bring to their early development the rich tradition of enthusiasm, warmth and caring that ours has. It is this aspect of our profession that we must jealously guard despite our rush to prove legitimacy. It is imperative that we develop as cohorts, colleagues and collaborators—a model which must be the guiding spirit of volunteer administration. While other professions jealously guard educational preparedness, legal sanc-

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tions, professional guidelines and admittance into the ranks of the profession, we must maintain the warmth, inclusiveness and creativity that mark our field.

We must never lose the ability to improvise, nor should we be ashamed of our ability to be resourceful outside of the normal way of doing things. While we may indeed need to learn to say "no" sometimes, and allow volunteers to say the same, we must not build a wall of "no's" justified by our professional guidelines. At the Chicago conference, we were told that Chicago is the home of improvisation in the entertainment world. Our profession acknowledges the importance of improvisation, creativity and resourcefulness in solving problems, attaining goals, and completing tasks. If we become too serious about our professionalism, we may lose one of the things that makes us unique.

So our definition of "professional" must recognize a much broader educational/experiential preparation; it must allow for ingenuity and resourcefulness rather than standard operating procedure; it must view expressive warmth and caring as valued hallmarks of the true professional. But if this is indeed our definition of the word, we must also take the opportunity to model the new professionalism to the rest of society. We certainly have examples enough of this definition. Marlene Wilson, Sue Vineyard, Ivan Scheier and others model this type of professionalism daily; the memory of Hat Naylor sets the highest standards for them and, in turn, for us.

Thus far, I have written in general about rewriting the meaning of "professional." I would now like to focus on the issue of professional exclusivity versus volunteer inclusiveness. One of the hallmarks of any profession is the limitation of admittance to that profession. Many such limitations have very good reasons for existence, and some not so good. Many professions are limited to those who have successfully completed certain courses of study or apprenticeship; doctors and plumbers are among these. Here in Louisiana, a particularly lucrative profession is that of Mississippi river boat pilot. For generations, only the sons of river pilots have been

eligible to learn the specialized skills of that profession. While we are far from creating a dynasty of volunteer administration (only our daughters would be accepted!), we must look at the "exclusiveness" of our profession, for better or worse. Let me share a couple of vignettes from the Chicago conference that served to make this examination necessary for me.

Because of a last minute change in plans, my original traveling companion could not go with me to Chicago. The non-refundable ticket was given to one of the agency secretaries, a young black woman who has no connection with professional volunteer management. Her observations upon strolling through the conference areas with me were telling. She viewed us as representative of the profession of volunteer administration and were revealed to be "exceptionally well-dressed, prosperous looking, middle-to-upper-middle class, white women." Please do not think that my companion was displeased by what she saw. Her comments reflected admiration for the attractiveness and "professionalism" of the participants. But we were, in her eyes, and are in reality, a rather exclusive group—exclusive of cultural diversity, exclusive of gender diversity, and exclusive of economic diversity. We were, in fact, pretty good stand-ins for the volunteers that all of us know are an endangered species.

Another revealing comment was made by a gentleman I met after the session on certification. Reflecting on a comment that we would begin to be paid like professionals when we are acknowledged by others as professionals, this gentleman laughingly said that we would effectively raise the salaries in this profession in direct proportion to the number of men who join! As a former educator, he had witnessed the increase in compensation and professional respect accorded teachers when education was no longer seen as a woman's job. After years in social services, I can attest to a similar phenomenon in social work.

Each of these little stories reveals some very painful truths, some statements about society and professionalism that likely go against all our fondest hopes

and beliefs. If nothing else, they certainly represent a challenge to us in our professional development, the challenge of exclusiveness versus inclusiveness. If it were a question only of equality, our apparent exclusiveness might be less troublesome. After all, there are many professional volunteer managers who cannot attend a conference who would, were they in attendance, help balance the picture. The fact that those in the profession who participate in AVA are predominantly white, middle class and female is well-documented in the survey published earlier this year, but the true demographics of all people in this field may be less weighted in that direction. The only way we can assure ourselves that we are not perpetrating the inequality (and therefore excluding the richness of variety) is to consciously attempt, as individuals and as a profession to attract non-white, non-affluent, non-female members. This is nothing revolutionary; every profession in our country (with the exception of a few river boat pilots) is making strides in this type of affirmative action. We have the opportunity to make those strides at such an early stage in the development of this profession as to be truly revolutionary.

In summary, as we mature as a profession and in our individual careers, we must go thoughtfully into that future. Making for ourselves a profession which maintains its unique identifying characteristics is a challenge. We do not have a well-marked path to professionalism except one that may strip us of our traditions. We are challenged, too, to become reflective of our society by removing the many subtle and unseen barriers as well as the obvious ones. We are challenged by our growth and recognition; we are challenged by our dreams and aspirations. We will best meet the challenge by maintaining our rich tradition proudly and by building a new model of an inclusive profession.