

Interpreting Professionalism

By Associate Dean Paul Zelenski



Imagine standing in an elevator, your mind occupied by the issue at hand and you get asked the question, “how do I look?”

A friendly “hello,” or “how’s it going,” sure, but “how do I look?”

That has been my life since being appointed Associate Dean of Professionalism. An odd title, I know, but I will explain that later. In reference to their appearance I frankly sometimes would like to say, “great for a ball game,” or “that color is not good on you,” or “maybe you should do something with your hair.” Usually I say something polite or make a joke because some social boundary, some control mechanism says, “no, that’s not appropriate.” What I think people are doing is asking if they look professional or making an editorial comment on the emphasis the law school has been putting on professionalism lately.

Professionalism is a difficult term to define. Many people will say that they know it when they see it, and we are adept at identifying acts of un-professionalism. Yet when pushed for a definition, one gets as many different interpretations as people asked. Nationally, the legal profession has been addressing issues of professionalism. The American Bar Association Section on Legal Education and Admission to the Bar established a Professionalism Committee. The committee’s work resulted in the monograph, “Teaching and Learning Professionalism.” Law schools have conducted symposiums and dedicated Law Reviews to the topic. Yet there has been

no clear-cut definition. Problems are identified, solutions are suggested, yet what are we really talking about? Is it manners, ethics, or simply applying the golden rule? For some, it is simply about dress, a tidied up office, or being on time.

I think we strive for a definition of professionalism to try to simplify an issue that is complex. Is it really necessary to find the quintessential definition of professionalism? Isn’t professionalism really about dealing with ambiguity, in uncertain times, in situations we may or may not have any control over. How many times have we seen colleagues, supervisors, world leaders, and big-time lawyers act inappropriately under difficult situations. We can quickly say they were un-professional, acted inappropriately, or embarrassed themselves, others, and the profession.

As a legal education institution, we have an obligation to introduce and reinforce the concepts of professionalism and help students understand the complexity of the subject. As educators we have a responsibility to constantly challenge and support students to take personal responsibility for their actions, be an instigator of positive behavior, and treat each other with dignity and respect. As professionals, we must model appropriate professional behavior in everything we do and hold each other accountable when we stray.

At Cooley we have always prided ourselves as a professional school that prepares students to practice law like no other law school in the nation. Lately, we have brought the issue of professionalism to the forefront. The Dean even appointed an Associate Dean of Professionalism to emphasize the point. What we are trying to do is to bring into focus the need for attorneys to be civil, collegial, and lead with character. We have established a committee consisting of students, faculty, staff, alumni, State Bar representatives, lawyers, and judges to develop a blueprint to further support and nourish professionalism.

Alumni play a critical role in our efforts to emphasize professionalism. Many graduates supervise externs, develop mentoring relationships, hire our graduates, and bring publicity to the law school. We are grateful for your efforts in helping our current students become professionals and for your accomplishments that reflect positively on the institution. In the coming months we will be circulating Professionalism Principles that are being developed by the committee. These principles are not intended to be a definition of professionalism, rather a guide for behavior and decision-making in the future. If you would like to provide input into the development of these principles or would like to participate in the committee, please contact me at (517) 371-5140 ext. 2907 or Darryl Parsell at (517) 371-5140 ext. 2922 for further information. We invite your participation.

