



Defining Common Ground on Professional Integrity

Professional workers typically possess a large body of specialized knowledge and skills, engage in ongoing professional development and use independent judgment. In exchange for compensation, they provide services in both the public and private sectors.

Organizations representing professions establish standards and ethical guidelines for professionals in carrying out their duties and responsibilities. Integrity is a central and defining element of professionalism.

From that starting point, a coalition of organizations representing professional workers—professional associations and unions—sought to define professional integrity and identify key challenges confronting it.

The coalition first examined how individuals behave professionally and identified the top three elements defining personal professional integrity. Areas of concern include professional standards, the pursuit of knowledge and work contributing to the common good.

The three most important elements under professional standards are respect for professional and ethical conduct; accepting responsibility for continuing professional development; and respect for peers, employers, clients, research subjects and the public.

Under pursuit of knowledge, key areas include articulating responsibilities and openly exchanging ideas and information; reporting data and research honestly and transparently; and debating approaches based on the best available research and evidence.

Contributing to the common good entails a commitment to the broader context of one's work, including society at large; ethically responsible conduct in one's work; and accountability.

In addition to the personal-integrity challenges professionals confront, professions as a whole face challenges. One of the principal among these is pressure from external forces. Professional workers can find themselves being asked to compromise or ignore professional standards; to put personal or public safety at risk; and to alter, downplay or withhold research data or findings.

The misuse of science, research and evidence in policymaking is another major challenge to professional integrity. This can be manifested by misrepresenting research or scientific information when disseminating reports, communications or other public items; by suppressing, censoring or impeding access to information; and by excluding diverse evidence-based perspectives from research dialogues and discourse.

Limitations on professional autonomy and ability to meet and respect professional standards were also identified as key challenges. These limitations can appear in the form of inadequate staffing and resources; a lack of appropriate mechanisms to address misconduct, including ineffective whistleblower protections; and policies or procedures that prevent or restrict appropriate research and evidence-based practices.