

PROFESSIONALISM AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES: SOME THOUGHTS FROM AN OLD PROFESSIONAL

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What makes a profession and what is professionalism?

A **profession** is a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often training, and intensive academic preparation. It is also the whole body of persons engaged in a calling.

A **professional** is a person engaged in one of the learned professions, or one that engages in a pursuit or activity professionally.

Professionalism is the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize a profession or a professional person.

A Professional Society is an organization of professionals –The RINA founding statement in 1860 stated that its purpose was “to promote and facilitate the exchange of technical and scientific information, views and discussion, and through this to influence and contribute towards furthering knowledge, understanding and standards” The purpose of SNAME is summarized in its Directory as “to advance the state of the art; to afford facilities for the exchange of information and ideas; to disseminate the results of research, experience and information among the members; to encourage and sponsor such research; to cooperate with educational institutions; and to promote the professional integrity and status of the members.” (SNAME 1893)

What distinguishes a healthy and successful profession?

A profession has to have a continual supply of new persons or it will die out. Fortunately we have more students entering the department than ever in the past 10 years. Our department is recognized as the leader in the USA and one of the best in the world. Our graduates are able to find the positions they want with many of them getting more than one job offer. Recently the small craft and yacht design and building business has been active in recruiting our graduates. Also the offshore industry is currently in one of its boom cycles and has been hiring our graduates. The high price of oil will make it even more of a growth business. **That is the good news.**

So what is the bad news? First, that our shipbuilding industry is almost non-existent in the commercial shipbuilding business. Second the number of ships our Navy needs is getting less and with current budget problems, the country cannot even afford the number they want. As NAVSEA and the large shipbuilders employ most of our graduates this certainly suggests that we are NOT in a growth industry.

This situation is mirrored in the situation of the professional society to which NA&ME students and graduates can belong. It may also be the reason that the society is undergoing reduction in numbers and reduced interest and willingness of the younger professionals to stay a member and actively participate. Less than half of our graduates maintain their membership in our professional society. Less than a quarter of the student members’ in our department are involved in anyway with the Student Section.

So I would suggest that we all could do more and work smarter to maintain our profession in a healthy state

Why do we need professional societies?

Trevor Blakeley, in his paper THE ROLE OF MODERN PROFESSIONAL INSTITUTION, which he presented at the Pacific 2004 International Maritime conference, stated “in examining the role of a professional institution, it is appropriate to start by considering some of the factors which distinguish a profession as an activity or a body. Key among the factors is the requirement for a profession to have a governing body, which sets standards of professional competence as a condition of entry or the achievement of professional status.

This governing body must also set and enforce standards of ethical and professional conduct. It is a function of a professional institution to be such a governing body for its members.

It is implicit therefore that to be counted as a member of a profession, the individual must accept and subscribe to those conditions and criteria which define a profession, including the authority of its governing body.”

Mr. Blakeley further states [1] that “today modern professional institutions play a much more proactive role in providing a link between the individual engineer, academia, industry, and society, and ensuring that its members achieve and maintain those standards of professional competence and conduct which industry expects and society demands.”

Mr. Blakeley’s statements say it all, and I offer them as I cannot do better.

Why should NA&ME graduates be members of their professional society?

If Mr. Blakeley’s arguments are not enough how about the old adage that if you do not plan where and how you want to go you may end up where you do not want to be! What does this mean for professionalism? Simply if you do not get involved then the profession may end up in a state you do not like or agree with.

There are many benefits from membership in a professional society including:

To all members

1. It indicates that the member has met a professional level or status that is recognized and valued by other professional societies, society in general and industry.
2. Opportunity to participate, contribute to, and maintain their knowledge of the profession up to date.
3. Opportunity to meet other professionals and to work with them in maintaining and growing the status of the profession.
4. Peer recognition of achievements in developing the profession and its knowledge.
5. Opportunity for continuing learning and education.
6. In SNAME, membership on Technical & Research Committees and Panels.
7. Participation in local Section activities.
8. Discount prices for annual meeting, conferences and publications.

Additional for Students

1. Recognition by potential employers of their involvement in the activities of the profession.
2. Ability to meet and learn from experienced members – mentors.
3. Opportunity to show interest and initiative in expanding breadth of experience and knowledge during their basic learning period
4. Opportunity to organize and develop the role of students in the society. This can be done by becoming a committee member in the SNAME Student Steering Committee
5. Opportunity to shape the future of the society and the profession.

These are all strong reasons for membership and participation, and you would think that we would all be actively involved. I am sorry to advise that this is not the case. Membership in SNAME is probably less than a third of what it could be and the number of those that get involved in its organization and working is probably less than 10%.

Why are we in this situation today?

Today students, the future professionals, and workers in general do not see their career and/or employment the same way as my generation. Now I am not saying that is bad. In fact their separation of work and all the other things they can do is perhaps more balanced than in my case. I admire that they can make decisions to forgo positions and promotions that require they work ridiculously long hours, in preference to having more time for their other interests. Also they have many more opportunities to spend their time than we did.

However, I fear that this balancing of work and increasing leisure time opportunities has adversely impacted how they see and value professionalism (where is it on their totem pole?). This may also be because of the world trend toward more and more generic engineering education. Dare we fear that NA&ME will one day be an elective in mechanical engineering?

Why am I concerned? After all, next June I am out of it! I am concerned because it is my industry and I have a number of concerns about its future. First we have shipyards hiring non-naval architects in positions that in my opinion should be filled by naval architects. Obviously the employers do not appreciate and value the special knowledge and skills of naval architects. How has this happened? I believe it is because we ourselves do not value and thus promote our professionalism. **We must do it – no one is going to do it for us.**

Recent student feedback of concern is:

1. No time to participate in SNAME student activities – too busy with studies and working to pay their way through college.
2. Students do not see the value and long term effect of networking and being a member in SNAME.
3. Faculty at their schools are not members or if they are they do not participate in professional society activities, so why should they?
4. Do not see the benefits of membership themselves, do not see that the people already in industry are members, and their employers will not support them (time off and financial), so why should they maintain their membership after graduating.
5. SNAME is an “old boys” club. Same people have been in control of it for years and it is difficult to remove them – no opportunities for younger members.
6. It costs too much.

Now these are students' perceptions and many of them are wrong. However, we all know that perceptions are often what we base our decisions on, not reality, especially if the reality is unknown to us. SNAME and the Student Steering Committee have taken steps in the past four years to make it easier for students to participate in the national governance, and recently commenced a student section in both the SNAME News and Marie Technology publication. Regarding perceptions 4 and 5, I would suggest to the students that they focus on the fact that the future is theirs and that they can make it what they want it to be ONLY if they have a strong sense of professionalism and a strong and effective professional society.

There was no doubt in my mind when I started to study at the university that I was entering the profession of naval architecture. Next I realized to be an active and effective member of a profession one should be not only a member, but active in the professional society.

I could hardly wait for it to happen. As soon as I became a student in RINA and North East Coast Institute of Shipbuilders and Engineers, I was desperate to join the Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders in Scotland and then the greatest success was to become a student member of SNAME. I did not do it to get textbooks cheaper. I did it because they were my professional institutions and I wanted to get all the benefits I could out of them, the major one being knowledge and play a part in their functioning. I also wanted the prestige that was assigned to being a member. It always interested me that to this day in UK naval architects put their membership behind their name in all formal business documents. For me it would be FRINA, FSNAME, FIMarEst, and MASNE. Now it would be ridiculous to use them all but I have friends that use two. Most professional engineers in the U.S. put P.E. behind their name in business letters and on their business card. In Europe it is Eur. Ing.

I have never regretted the money I have spent on membership fees, nor the extensive time I have spent in society activities. I can honestly say that I have received from membership much more than I have put into it. I sincerely believe that active membership assists a person in their career.

There are many examples that prove this point, including members of our faculty, and many of our alumni – **which is that active membership in SNAME is good for your career.**

So why is our professional society struggling to maintain its membership and to be an effective part and leader of our profession? Obviously some of the contraction in membership just follows the reduction in the total number of professionals in the industry in the U.S. We are a third today of what we were when I came to this country 39 years ago. But more worrisome is the dwindling interest and support of both existing professionals in the industry, and students.

I believe that some of our students are really trying to be effective members of their profession. This past semester the UM Student Section has had two technical evening meetings. The second, which was very well attended by students (but still only a third of the number that could be there), only had two faculty plus one staff member in attendance

The student section still has a long way to go and I hope incoming Student Section officers continue the good work accomplished in the last year. However, they cannot do it on their own. They need the faculty's help.

So I challenge the faculty to give more support to the student section activities. I also challenge all the students that are not involved to become so. After all, it is only a couple of evenings each semester and you will learn and your career will benefit from it. **Try it you will like it.**

In the good old days most marine businesses paid the professional society fees for their employees. They also paid the expenses for their employees to attend not only local section meetings but annual meetings and conferences. Today this is not the situation. This change has obviously had an adverse impact on the level of participation by members. I remember SNAME annual meetings with 2000 attendees. Today it has dropped to less than 500 and recent attendance has only been maintained at that level by combining the Ship Production Symposium with the Annual Meeting.

I believe that members should be more than willing to pay the membership fees (you should note that, just like gas prices, SNAME fees are half of what Europeans pay), but it is unreasonable to expect members to attend annual meetings and conferences on their own money. Attending meetings and learning from the presentations and developing networks is an essential part of the membership benefits to a person's career, and if their employers will not support them in this matter, the members understandably will begin to question what is in it for them.

I must state that I have been most fortunate that all the companies I worked for recognized the benefits to them as well as myself in my active involvement in professional societies, and therefore, financially supported me. I believe that they got as much out of it as I did.

In closing I want to thank you all for listening to me. I hope I did not offend anyone: that was not my intent. Rather I wanted to point out the serious situation I believe we are in, where we may lose all sense of professionalism and more specifically pride in our profession, and to encourage everyone to support this important early part in our students' professional lives.