

Professional privileges are not civil rights

Some contributors to the discussion of standards on the APsaA listserve and elsewhere complain that our profession is excessively focused on standards, and that this has given rise to our reputation as "elitist" and "exclusionary." Such characterizations are misleading and confusing at a time when we need to be clear-headed about strengthening our profession.

Standards are intended to differentiate qualified aspirants and qualified practitioners from those who are not judged to be qualified. When such a differentiation is called exclusionary and elitist, this terminology is being utilized to incorrectly suggest social oppression and policies inimical to civil rights.

Standards for training and practice are fundamental to every profession. The need for standards derives from the social function of professions in society: to produce a cadre of professionals whose competence it can guarantee to the public. This guarantee is the basis of every profession's "social contract" with the public.

Education for the professions is bound to this social contract. Like democracy, professional education is a marriage of freedom and responsibility, creativity and constraint, electives as well as imperatives. Passionate espousals of freedom, inclusivity, and egalitarianism without concomitant commitments to educational standards are contrary to the nature of professions. Professions are elite, excluding by definition those who don't meet standards set by the professional community. There is nothing inherently bad or oppressive about standards, as long as they are sensible, meaningfully related to the assurance of educational excellence and professional competence, and fairly applied to all.

We should not conflate arguments about the content of specific standards with a rash and destructive argument against standards in general. We need to be responsible to the social contract if we are to be a profession.

Arguments against standards are basically arguments for de-professionalization. Is this what we want? It takes many years for an occupational group to become a profession. Do we want to return to the old days, when anyone who wanted to identify himself or herself as a psychoanalyst was free to do so?

This would not be in our interests. We need to work together to establish good standards that are related to good education, a rich creativity, and reliable basic competence. Our dialogue ought to address this challenge. We should not allow a regressive attack on standards to distract us from our social and moral obligations as a profession.