From the perspective of a professional regulatory body, professional designations exist to protect the public by signifying that an individual is registered, certified, or licensed in the practice of their profession. From the perspective of a professional regulatory body, the main beneficiaries of professional designations are the public, not the professional. Of course, professional designations are of benefit to the professionals. In many professions, individuals cannot practice without maintaining the professional designation, and in others having a professional designation has a real impact on career opportunities. But these are side-effects of the real purpose and intent of professional designations—which is to protect the public. We shouldn’t confuse the side-effect with the real purpose.

For professional regulatory bodies and for the professionals they regulate, obtaining a designation is just a first step. Many professional regulatory bodies would refer to this step as ‘entry-to-practice.’ The purpose of the entry-to-practice function is to ensure that only competent and ethical professionals are allowed to practice or are allowed to use a protected title. But that is just the beginning of it, not the end. As William Lahey, a law professor at Dalhousie University put it: “...the responsibility of SROs [self-regulating organizations] ... is to proactively do what they can [subject to the limits of their legal
authority) to ensure their profession is serving the public interest." Having admitted individuals to the profession, professional regulatory bodies must then do what they can to ensure that the professionals they authorize to use their designations continue to practice their profession in ways that are consistent with the public interest. This includes establishing continuing professional development requirements but also establishing and enforcing standards of practice, standards of ethics, and standards of knowledge, skill and proficiency. It is just not good enough to admit someone to a profession and to authorize them to use a protected title, but then to leave these individuals to practice without supervision or guidance.

From the professionals’ perspective, holding a designation means being subject to the authority of their professional regulatory body. This means being attentive to and complying with the professional guidance issued by their professional regulatory body. In exchange for the privilege of being authorized to use a professional designation, professionals agree to be accountable to their professional regulatory body in the practice of their profession.

Holding a designation granted by a professional regulatory body is more than just being able to put some letters after one’s name, and it is actually more than saying that one is ‘committed to professionalism,’ it means agreeing to be subject to the authority of a professional regulatory body which in turn has agreed to do all it can to ensure that the professionals it regulates practice their profession in an ethical and competent manner.

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