#72 What is the difference between a designation and a profession?
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There are now designations for just about anything and everything. The drivers of this proliferation of designations are many. The reality is that anybody or any organization can develop and grant a designation. There are no standards to which all designations or the organizations that issue them must adhere to\(^1\). Except for regulated professions, the issuance of designations is an unregulated activity. It is somewhat of a ‘wild west’ out there when it comes to designations. There is also a great diversity in designations in terms of what they mean and the context in which they are granted. The only aspect in common to designations is that individuals are authorized to use a certain title and letters after their name.

Designations and professional titles have always been part of the professions. One argument that has been made is that the proliferation of designations is linked to pseudo-professionalization. Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) coined the term “mimic professions” to refer to occupations which have “\textit{taken on the coloration but not the substance of profession}.”\(^2\) The idea here is that occupations that aspire to become professions imitate established professions by adopting some of the “trappings” of professions

\(^1\) However, there are voluntary accreditation processes that certifying bodies can chose to participate in such as the ISO 17024 accreditation process and the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).

such as designations but do not have the deeper aspects such as mindset and values which are characteristic of the professions.

For instance, many associations have begun to offer designations to their members. These designations are positioned as benefits or career enhancement products and are marketed to members of the association as products that will help their members ‘accelerate their career,’ ‘get recognition for their skills and experience’ or ‘demonstrate their professionalism to their employers.’ For the association, these designations are also intended as member retention initiatives. Established professions think of designations in terms of protection of the public rather than a member benefit. For the professions, the purpose of designations is to signal to the public not only that the professional has met certain standards of competence and ethics but that the professional is subject to the oversight and authority of the professional regulatory body. For professions, designations are just part of a much broader professional regulation framework, all of which is aimed at protecting the public interest. Designations designed as member benefits and designations designed to protect the public are necessarily different, they are geared towards different objectives.

An interesting development relevant to the difference between designations and professions is some proposed legislation in the Louisiana State Legislature. The importance of this proposed legislation is that it captures a sentiment that goes beyond just the state of Louisiana. The proposed legislation would prohibit the use of the terms ‘certification’ and “registration” for nongovernmental professional credentialing unless state law requires certification or registration to work in the profession. The proponents of the Bill in the Louisiana State Legislature have argued that the multiplication of designations has created confusion among consumers. This proposed legislation creates a fault line between government-sanctioned designations and other designations. Although occupational regulation is structured differently in the US and Canada, this line applies here as well.

The idea that government sanction is what distinguishes true professions from mimic professions is not new. Even Roger Martin in an HBR Blog dated July 2010 entitled Management is not a profession commented on this:

“So my basic calculus is as follows: If quality can’t be determined in advance and cost of failure is high, the market in question will attract regulation. And if the product/service is delivered by a single identifiable individual, it will become a regulated profession. If it doesn’t attract regulation, it doesn’t matter a whit whether an activity is deemed by its participants to be a ‘profession.’”

Martin’s point is that any occupation can think of itself as a profession, and bolster this claim by offering designations, but that ‘it doesn’t matter a whit’ if it isn’t government sanctioned.
With government sanction comes a full regulatory context and a public interest mandate, this is not the case for non-government sanctioned designations. This is a difference that makes a big difference. When there is government sanction, the right to use a professional title or related initials is part of a bigger regulatory framework. It is also the case that standards of qualification must be established in the public interest. The purpose is not to provide a benefit to members but to protect the public. Most models of professions include government sanction and professional regulation among the core characteristics of professions. Not all regulated occupations are professions\(^3\), but it is difficult to be considered a true profession without professional regulation. The whole context and meaning of designations are different for professions which are governed by a professional regulatory body that has a public interest mandate.

For regulated professions, the focus is less on designations and more on being a professional. Professional regulatory bodies don’t ‘sell’ designations like ‘mimic professions’ do (which doesn’t mean that professional regulatory bodies are not interested in attracting talent to the profession). To focus on designations is to focus on the “coloration but not the substance” of profession. It’s a different mindset. Designations are part of being a profession, but professions are so much more than just designations.

\(^3\) Compulsory trades are regulated occupations but they are usually referred to as trades and not professions.