

## Professionalization Of Staff

Certain occupations or careers such as law and medicine are thought to hold a “**professional**” status in our society. Generally an occupation is considered to have gained **professional** status when the following elements are present: a specialized body of knowledge is developed and maintained; practitioners undertake a training period during which that body of knowledge is studied, learned, and tested; members are recognized by the community and their clients as having authority in their field; the profession operates autonomously and develops a culture maintained through associations; and it develops, maintains, and enforces a code of practice and/or a code of ethics and behavior.

Since the late 1970s and following significant changes in staff recruitment and training in the 1980s, corrections officials have increasingly sought to be perceived as **professionals**. However a number of barriers remain in place before the professionalization of corrections may be complete. **Correctional** employment is often poorly paid and has minimal educational requirements. It is also potentially a dangerous occupation, usually with monotonous routines. It may also be thought to involve questionable ethical practices. Until such factors change, the status of correctional employees as **professionals** will continue to be questioned.

### HISTORY

The history of the professionalization of correctional staff is linked to changing views regarding punishment and prisons. During the 1960s and 1970s, for example, increased oversight by external agencies regarding the conditions of imprisonment drew attention to the conditions and treatment of prisoners and staff behavior. An awareness of how staff were treating prisoners increased the demand for staff accountability. Many correctional centers modified their organizational structures and began to monitor staff-prisoner interaction. Staff composition also changed at this time, as more teachers, counselors, and psychologists were employed. Female correctional staff began to be employed in male prisons, where their presence was thought to “soften” the all-male environment and assist in more humane ways of managing prisoners.

As the conditions of imprisonment and the administration of punishment shifted, the working culture and expectations of correctional staff began to change as well. Moving beyond their previous task of merely locking and unlocking prisoners, correctional staff began to perceive themselves as having a wider and more “**professional**” role in the management of prisoners. In an effort to achieve the professionalization of the workforce, correctional agencies sought to change recruitment practices, revise orientation programs for new officers, and provide inservice training for those staff already present in institutions. Training began to emphasize the humane treatment of prisoners and introduced new techniques of prisoner management that stressed the need for staff to exercise their authority in ways consistent with the new reforms in the administration of punishment.

### BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Despite some considerable gains, there were a number of barriers to achieving the professionalization of correctional staff. The reforms often were imposed from outside the institution, frequently mandated by court orders. Consequently, many of the new approaches often were not supported by the employees. Instead they were seen as a threat to the security of the institutions and to the safety of both prisoners and staff.

Many of the barriers also existed at an organizational level. While there were changes in the recruitment practices of correctional departments to attract more highly educated staff, the actual job of front-line correctional worker was not substantially modified. Officers were not granted more autonomy nor given voice in the management of prisoners. Instead, they found that emphasizing the human services aspects of their occupational roles might lead to sanctions. **Correctional** departments and organizations themselves tended to remain rigidly hierarchical, with paramilitary rank structures. Such organizational structures were not supportive of any self-controlling, autonomous decision making on the part of staff, as the rhetoric of professionalization had emphasized. Nor were these organizational structures conducive to changes to the organizational culture of the workforce that would support the modified staff recruitment.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

There remains some work to be done within corrections in order to develop a professionalized correctional workforce. While there is no doubt that the administration of punishment requires specialized expertise and knowledge, correctional administrators must examine some of the continuing organizational structures that hinder professionalization.

The realities of work in correctional institutions must be fully examined in order to determine the degree to which they meet the demands for formal systems of training and accreditation. They must also be analyzed to see how they have developed and maintained standard codes of ethics and practice. **Professional** autonomy for correctional staff operating in secure environments requires an examination of the ways it differs from the operation of **professional** autonomy in other occupations. Adequate strategies for the implementation of organizational reforms must focus on the structures of the organization as well as the nature of the staff operating within those structures.

Public stigmatization of the work of correctional staff continues to make the achievement of full **professional** status very difficult. Without the widespread acknowledgment of the specialized knowledge and expertise of correctional staff as well as respect for the contributions of that work within the wider community, the internal organizational recognition of professionalism among correctional staff remains problematic. Finally, current trends in criminal justice, particularly those related to the rapid expansion of penal populations that tend to result in the mere warehousing of inmates, also mitigate against the professionalism of staff. Overworked staff in overcrowded institutions are often unable to undertake the individualized management of prisoners in their care. Instead, they effectively revert to their historical role as those who merely lock and unlock prison cells.

## **CONCLUSION**

The professionalization of correctional staff requires that their work be recognized as demanding specialized expertise and skills, occupational training, acknowledged authority, and ethical standards of practice. Currently, correctional officers often work in an uncertain, sometimes dangerous environment that is characterized by set organizational structures, a capricious political climate, increasing workloads, and diminishing resources. Even though there has been substantial progress made toward the professionalization of the correctional workforce over the past three or four decades, there remain a number of serious issues that need to be addressed before corrections can be considered professionalized.

—Anna Alice Grant

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## **Further Reading**

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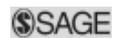
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