



# Public Integrity

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## Ethics Resources

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moves from corruption to free markets and back. Those who control information flow must be guided by something other than monetary gain or threat of loss.

The model presented does not result in what would be considered an administrative transformation or a creation of a culture of ethical behavior. Once the support for systemic change emanating from a public official's leadership is gone, the official leaves office and corruption reappears. The authors are dealing with fundamental, instrumental behavior. Clearly, tangible results can be achieved through their approach—they provide examples of how it has actually occurred in practice. At this basic, instrumental level, their approach can be very effective, perhaps more effective than the more traditional approach to training and instilling a set of ethical principles for guiding behavior. However, by not incorporating the training and development dimension of ethical behavior into the model, sustained, administrative cultural change is not going to occur. We will remain at the individual "me" level of result rather than create a culture of a shared public community and purpose.

—Terrel L. Rhodes  
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***Disciplined Minds: A Critical  
Look at Salaried Professionals and  
the Soul-Battering System That  
Shapes Their Lives***

By Jeff Schmidt  
Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield,  
2000

*Disciplined Minds* is a witty, insightful, and blistering critique of the politics of professionalism. It is intended for a broad range of professionals, nonprofessionals, and students, but it is not for

everyone. Those who would benefit most from this book—those whose "professional training" involved an education in how to become oblivious to the politics of one's profession—are perhaps least likely to read it. Such individuals will likely find its insights unsettling, subversive, or, worse, irrelevant. Those who are willing to engage in an honest reassessment of what it means to be a professional, however, will find that this book is a gem.

The political nature of professional work is its unifying theme. On balance, it has more to do with sociology and current affairs than with administrative ethics per se. But in all fairness, its parallels are obvious and its case studies are illustrative of the costs individuals pay to maintain what the author, Jeff Schmidt (a physicist by training), calls strict "ideological discipline."

Although the roots of it seem always to have been in place, the author notes that in recent years, large organizations have developed an increased need for workers who offer more than technical proficiency—those who are willing and able to follow not only clear instructions but, in their employer's absence, whatever instructions they might have given. Such employees are expected to serve or anticipate their employer's interests and at the same time subordinate their own.

On these jobs, which exist in every field from journalism and architecture to education and commercial art, your view of the world threatens to affect not only the quantity and quality of what is produced but also *the very nature of the product or service itself*. Accordingly, these jobs require strict adherence to an assigned point of view. A prerequisite for employment has become a job candidate's willingness and ability to maintain strict ideological discipline, much like that demanded in military service.

To accomplish this, employers rely on institutions of higher learning to turn their most promising students into compliant, dispassionate workers who are both technically proficient and ideologically disciplined—in short, into “professionals” who are ready to accept whatever goals their organization assigns them. By “becoming oblivious” to the politics of their profession, the professionals they hire provide them with an avenue of escape from their consciences and moral concerns; this in turn allows them to leave the office feeling a (questionable) glow of self-approval.

In becoming oblivious, professionals neither contemplate nor respond to their own sense of ethics. Nor do they grapple with those assigned by professional associations. Instead, to the atrocities of organized corruption (secret meetings, illegal kickbacks, etc.), they respond dispassionately or neutrally, if at all. Moreover, in defense of their own social and economic advantage, they respond with strongly voiced indignation.

Professionals, as such, tend to overemphasize the virtues of technical rationality and underemphasize the dangers of unquestioned obedience. Unfortunately, when organizational goals are left unquestioned, the connection between what seems technically rational and what seems right, good, or more democratic tends to blur and one goal seems about as ethical as any other; at that point such questions are flatly dropped. However, between their organizations’ goals, the technical functions they perform, and the ethical values served by those functions, these professionals see no evil, hear no evil, and would not even think of speaking evil.

This insight into the politics of professional work (part 1 of the book) lays the groundwork for an equally compelling view of the way people are se-

lected to become professionals (part 2). Schmidt examines what most have probably suspected all along: that despite their alleged neutrality, standardized qualification examinations (e.g., the Graduate Record Examination, Law School Admission Test) tend to select students for their conspicuously subordinate attitudes. As students, these individuals do not simply refrain from acts of insubordination, such as challenging their graduate institution’s agenda or criticizing the ways that it reflects the needs of society, broadly defined. Rather, they enthusiastically embrace its system of professional qualifications and defend the efficacy of its qualifying examinations; after all, doing so serves to underscore their own fit within the system. They are “good students” in the eyes of their faculty and, for the same reason, will be “good professionals” in the eyes of their future employers.

This book is about the people who get these jobs and become members of the ideological workforce—professionals. Schmidt’s thesis is that the criteria by which individuals are deemed qualified to become professionals involve not just technical knowledge but also attitudes toward working within an assigned political and ideological framework. Apparent cultural biases in such examinations are actually political and ethical at root. The author argues that these tests serve the interests of employers by rewarding the ethically neutral. Furthermore, these tests help reproduce the current social structure by favoring those who appear most likely to “fit in well” in hierarchical organizations. This bias accounts for the low test scores of various social groups, whose individual members may have the aptitude for further learning but lack the attitude and values that would make them “good servants” of the current social structure. With this in mind, the po-

litical and intellectual timidity of today's most highly educated employees is far from accidental.

Critics of standardized examinations have traditionally argued that the tests favor middle-class white and male students over working-class, minority, and female students. Some have adopted the strategy of exposing as many specific imperfections in testing as possible. However, in the absence of a more comprehensive understanding of the problem—or of a clear, sharp analysis of *why* such selection examinations are biased and *where* the biases reside—the enterprise of selecting and rejecting people through standardized examinations continues to be seen as a legitimate (and reasonably neutral) social practice. For Schmidt, the key to the required analysis is seeing the tests not as flawed instruments in an otherwise nonpartisan system of college admissions but as a logical part of a larger system of college admissions, college/graduate education, and professional employment that itself requires criticism. Absent such test scores, an educational institution's ranking of applicants would appear less a ranking of attitudes and values, which would lend itself to a more politically diverse (and therefore less politically subordinate) student body.

Scholars and practitioners of public administration, perhaps more than other professionals, will certainly agree that this, or any, democracy thrives on public participation, which is to say, on a diversity of opinion. Getting from here to there, however, is a different story—one that, in Schmidt's hands, becomes a story of *political warfare*. As he sees it, the student in professional training faces a tough choice: organize or conform; confront or be obliterated. Neither alternative is easy but, for him, there appears to be no third choice (the author does

not address the difficulties of establishing and maintaining supportive communities outside the workplace, but his point is well taken). One way or another, he argues, everyone chooses. Those who do not face the issue directly allow the training system to decide for them; they end up conforming without missing a beat. Those who take what appear to be third choices, such as informed cynicism, dodge confrontation through disguised forms of self-adjustment to a life that, on balance, serves the establishment (p. 251).

Curiously, the author's analysis becomes adjuratory in later chapters as he takes on this topic. His previous detachment gives way to a didactic tone, political advocacy, and action campaigns. I use the term "curious" because some would question whether a community of salaried professionals is a proper subject for indignation, or at least whether it is one in which reform can be seriously expected. Indeed, by the author's own admission, professional roles are typically structured in ways that make the development of significant differences in the system highly unlikely.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on both public and private administrative ethics. It points to the central role of political and ethical values in understanding the relationship employers expect to have with the professionals who work for them, a role that is impossible to understand outside of its politico-ethical context. This is more, however, than a good reference book for preprofessionals and more than an analysis of the cooperative system of higher education and professional employment.

*Disciplined Minds* is a voyage of discovery that walks its readers through graduate school horror stories, indoctrination procedures within religious cults,

political biases within the testing community, and prisoner of war resistance techniques—in an effort to take a critical and passionate look at the world of professional work. In the process, it demonstrates how an honest reassessment of professionalism, or of what it means to be a professional, can be deeply liberating.

Minorities and other disenfranchised groups, in addition to those in search of ethical clarity, will find this book invaluable; it explicates a practical (some would say survivalist) approach to maintaining one's personal values and sense of self in academic or other professional environments that may range from the unsupportive to the openly antagonistic. Persons who belong to such groups have rarely found it advantageous to rely on others for a sense of self-esteem—least of all from those who use professionalism as a pretext for racist contempt. Looking to authority figures to validate your work, more often than not, confirms to them that you are an apprentice. Becoming an independent thinker requires taking what you know and developing your own style, but in return it provides a well-deserved sense of satisfaction.

This book will probably attract fewer readers than it should. Still, it deserves to be read by serious students of ethics in public administration and business, and especially by scholars of law and other disciplines. It is a wise investment for our colleagues in other disciplines, since it provides an empowering way of looking at the relationship between an organization's goals, the technical functions performed by its professionals, and the ethical values served by those functions.

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*Conflict of Interest in  
American Public Life*

By Andrew Stark

Cambridge: Harvard University Press,  
2000

Andrew Stark's book is an examination of the problem of conflict of interest that explores both sides of the coin—conflicts and interests—and how American law and public discourse perceive each. His research is informed by over fifty interviews with congressional ethics staff, Office of Government Ethics personnel, federal agency ethics officials, and former White House counsel; he also draws heavily from both federal conflict of interest law and well-known public debates regarding political ethics. His central claim is that since the mid-1960s, discourse and law have moved toward a distinctly "objective" view of conflict but a "deeply subjective" view of interest.

The objective view of conflict is embodied in a conflict of interest regime that prohibits public officials from a wide and constantly expanding range of objectively defined actions and situations that might lead to impaired judgment. This legal framework includes gift and honoraria bans and limits on representation of clients before government agencies. What makes it objective is that it focuses on external conduct and situations that might lead to impaired mental states, rather than on the regulation of internal states of mind. At the same time, Stark argues, the conception of "interest" in public discourse has moved away from an emphasis on pecuniary or objective (external) interests to encompass a concern for more subjective, internal impairments on judgment such as ideological biases, predispositions, and personal loyalties and experiences. The conception of potentially problematic