

DAWIA AND THE PRICE OF PROFESSIONALISM

Keith F. Snider

This article examines the intent and outcomes of the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) in light of research literature on the sociology of the professions. It indicates that professionalization is leading to an acquisition workforce that is expert and specialized, yet insular and careerist. Professionalism thus comes at a price, and a major question for those dealing with acquisition workforce reform issues is how to keep this price as low as possible.

Five years after passage of the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA), it is appropriate to examine the act—its intent, provisions, and outcomes—in some perspective. Scholars (e.g., Fox, 1974, 1988), presidential commissions (e.g., President’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Defense Management, 1986), and Congressional committees (e.g., U.S. Congress, House, 1990b) alike have devoted considerable study to the topic of workforce reform. Yet the need for additional study remains as new legislation is aimed at the acquisition workforce (U.S. Congress, Senate, 1995), and as current trends toward “downsizing,” “rightsizing,” reengineering, and reinventing continue into the future.

The subject of this paper may be introduced with an anecdote from the author’s experience in teaching portions of Defense

Acquisition University (DAU) courses. At the beginning of one recent course, students introduced themselves and explained their reasons for attending. One might have expected that these relatively senior civil servants and military officers would cite reasons relating to professional education and personal development. Without fail, however, most students gave a reason that smacks of the self-serving careerism known as “ticket punching:” to obtain the certification for training required as a result of DAWIA.

This apparently careerist frame of mind in our acquisition workforce should not surprise us. A significant body of research concerning the sociology of the professions indicates that this is an entirely predictable, albeit unintended, consequence of DAWIA. Some of this research explores the prestige and competency aspects of

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professions and may be useful in understanding the intent of DAWIA. Another more critical area of the research focuses on what happens to occupations as they become professionalized; that is, as they gain professional status. Professionalization is generally seen as a positive movement in the direction of improving the quality and status of an occupation, but research also reveals unintended consequences of professionalization that oppose the outcomes intended by those seeking such status. Probably the most obvious example of the unintended consequences of professionalization is provided by the legal profession, once highly respected in American society, but now often criticized for being insular and self-serving.

Professionalism thus comes at a price. This paper will review the research literature to expose and explore that price: the “dark side,” so to speak, of acquisition workforce professionalization. It will reveal the essentially problematical nature of professionalization, thereby questioning DAWIA’s assumptions about workforce improvement leading to reform of the overall acquisition environment.

ATTRIBUTE MODELS: CAPTURING THE INTENT OF DAWIA

Occupations and professions became important subjects of sociological research during the first part of this century as sci-

entific and technological advances led to an ever-increasing level of diversification and specialization in the workforce. Emerging occupations sought the same level of prestige accorded the four traditionally recognized professions: law, medicine, the ministry, and university teaching (Etzioni, 1969). The aspect of prestige is evident in this classical definition of the word *profession*:

Profession: a calling requiring specialized skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organization or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service. (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, 1961)

From this classical perspective, certain qualities are attributed to professions (Pavalko, 1988):

- (1) A unique knowledge base justifying the claim to special expertise.
- (2) A long training period requiring specialized knowledge and indoctrination into the occupational subculture.
- (3) Relevance of work to social values.

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- (4) A service versus a profit motivation.
- (5) Occupational autonomy. The profession is self-regulating and self-controlling. Only members of the profession judge and certify who is competent to practice.
- (6) A strong sense of commitment and loyalty to the profession.
- (7) A strong sense of a common identity resulting in a significant subculture.
- (8) A code of ethics and system of norms that are parts of the subculture, reinforcing motivation, autonomy, and commitment.

Because of these attributes, professions are perceived to exhibit that high quality of work in terms of requisite expertise, experience, and dedication to service which justifies public trust and respect. Early research in the sociology of the professions documented these attributes and the associated quest among emerging occupations to gain the status of professions by taking on their attributes. For example, caseworkers led the move during the 1920s to establish formal training programs leading to certification in the budding field of social work (Larson, 1977).

The attribute models of the professions are useful in understanding the putative intent of DAWIA, as reflected in the title of a National Contract Management Journal article, "Creating a Professional Acquisition Workforce," by former Congressman Nicholas Mavroules (1991), one of the architects of DAWIA. Nothing in his article, in the text of the legislation, or in the record of relevant Congressional

hearings (U.S. Congress, House, 1990a) indicates an explicit intent to establish the field of acquisition as a profession per se. Nevertheless, the goals of making the acquisition workforce professional and of increasing the professionalism of the workforce are clear.

One need not belong to a profession in order to be professional or to exhibit professionalism. Yet these words refer to and take the power of their meaning from the high classical concept of profession as reflected in the attribute model. To be professional or to have professionalism means therefore to act as though one belonged to an occupation with at least some of the attributes of the traditional professions.

The intent of DAWIA is to make members of the acquisition workforce professional by treating them as though acquisition has some of the attributes of a profession. Specifically, acquisition is seen as possessing the attributes of a unique knowledge base requiring extended training and experience. The workforce then becomes professional by meeting the requirements for acquisition education, training, experience, and tenure provided for under DAWIA.

A brief discussion of how this relates to some military members of the acquisition workforce will illustrate this point further. Some sociologists (e.g., Jackson, 1970) include the military as one of the traditional professions. Indeed, the "profession of arms" fits the attribute model well. It's also true that the warrior's unique knowledge and skills in the art and science of war are valued in the field of acquisition, particularly in understanding the operational use of equipment under development (U.S. Congress, House, 1990a, p. 184). But, as Kronenberg (1990, p. 286)

points out, the warrior orientation does not easily accommodate itself to the complexities of management in the Department of Defense (DoD). Professional warriors are often seen as amateurs in acquisition:

... the Army, the Navy, and, to a lesser extent, the Air Force provide only limited industrial management training for military officers whom they assign to key managerial positions in major acquisition programs. Army and Navy officers assigned to acquisition programs often have extensive combat arms experience (e.g., as pilots, ship captains, armor commanders) but little or no advanced training and experience in the planning and control of industrial development and production programs. (Fox, 1988, pp. 40–41)

The implicit views expressed here are: first, that acquisition has the attributes of a unique knowledge base requiring extensive training and experience; and second, that the skills and training of the professional warrior—the pilot, the ship captain, and the armor commander—are inadequate for tasks in acquisition.

Further supporting this view that military members are not professionals in acquisition has been the practice of the military services to rotate officers frequently in and out of key positions (Kronenberg, 1990, p. 286). This environment in which military amateurs hold key acquisition positions is, according to Mavroules (1991, p. 15), one of the root causes of the nation's continuing acquisition problems.

DAWIA aims to correct this situation. It recasts warriors as acquisition professionals by requiring them to undergo education and training in acquisition, to de-

vote perhaps most of their careers to jobs in acquisition, and to forego more frequent career-broadening rotations in favor of longer tenure and stability in key acquisition positions. These requirements will inevitably force young officers to choose early in their careers whether to proceed as warriors or as acquisition professionals, because the training and experience necessary to do both successfully is simply too extensive. DAWIA encourages such an early decision toward a career in acquisition by requiring that paths be identified for officers to progress from entry level all the way to the most senior acquisition positions.

Similarly, the acquisition workforce as a whole, through compliance with education, training, experience, and tenure requirements, is made professional and improved, reflecting the quality associated with the classical view of the professions. The intent of DAWIA is thus consistent with the Total Quality Management (TQM) view that investments in employees are investments in agency capacity (Lane and Wolf, 1990, pp. 83–84; White and Wolf, 1995, p. 213). The expectation is that the return on these investments in the workforce will be improvements in the processes of acquisition. According to Mavroules (1991, p. 16), “more qualified people should make for a more efficient acquisition system that will give us more bang for the buck.”

Of course, not everyone agrees that such an investment is appropriate. Some believe that the nature of defense acquisition is such that no professional skills are required. Former Office of Personnel Management associate director Terry Culler (1986, p. 32) argues that a civil servant with any more than an acceptable

level of competence is overskilled and overqualified for government service. The government cannot afford to hire the best and the brightest. The proper place for these professionals is in the private sector “where they can contribute to the process of wealth creation necessary to maintain a healthy society.” Others argue that the present acquisition system and processes are so seriously flawed that no amount of professionalism in the workforce can bring about improvement (Library of Congress, 1985, p. 5). From this perspective, radical reform of the overall system is more urgently needed than workforce reform.

Apart from these critiques, there remains the question of whether we can, at some future time, ever know whether or not DAWIA has produced its desired consequence of an improved acquisition system. If, for example, we experience fewer programs with cost overruns, can we say with any certainty that the professionalism of the workforce was a causal factor? Suppose on the other hand that we experience greater numbers of programs with overruns. Can we say that DAWIA led to this state of affairs? Or would the situation have been even worse without the legislation?

The uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding the analysis and evaluation of complex policies are well documented (e.g., Nakamura and Smallwood, 1980). Clearly, we have no models or techniques that can either portray all relevant acquisition variables or predict the effects of different acquisition policies without bias. We are therefore left with fundamental uncertainties about whether or not DAWIA will have its intended consequences.

Unintended consequences, however, are another matter entirely. We have sub-

stantial research evidence, again from the sociology of the professions, that points to some troubling potential outcomes of DAWIA. Since it is not evident that these were considered in the debate leading to passage of DAWIA (or for that matter in any prior attempts to reform the acquisition workforce), their explicit consideration is, at this time, appropriate.

PROCESS MODELS: REVEALING THE DARK SIDE OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

Process models of the professions arose as a response to critiques of attribute models. Some sociologists argued that the assumptions of attribute models, particularly the assumption that clients are better served as workgroups become more professional, lead to an emphasis on the positive side of professions, thereby overlooking implications of power. From this perspective, the power of a professional group, derived from its claims of expertise and special status, is used primarily to benefit the group’s membership in ways frequently at odds with the public interest (Friedson, 1986).

These models describe the steps in the process of *professionalization*, defined as “giving a professional character to, treating as, or converting into a profession” (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, 1961). The specific steps in the process and the order in which they occur vary from researcher to researcher, but in general follow the same basic pattern (Wilensky, 1964):

- (1) A “critical mass” of workers is involved in the work activity.

- (2) The work becomes a full-time activity.
- (3) Training schools are established to transmit the skills of the work.
- (4) University programs are established.
- (5) Professional associations are formed.
- (6) Competition occurs with neighboring occupations over the boundaries of the work.
- (7) A code of ethics is developed.
- (8) Political action (e.g., lobbying) is taken for legal protection and restrictions.

The path of this process is one of increasing specialization and differentiation of the occupation. The occupation gains status by portraying itself as possessing unique knowledge and skills; indeed, the more unique the skills, the stronger the claim to professional status (Foote, 1953). Occupations are motivated to emphasize their uniqueness and are under tacit pressure to develop their own separate bodies of knowledge (Larson, 1977, p. 201). Levels of understanding, perspective, and communication across occupational boundaries decrease as the level of isolation increases (Mosher, 1968, pp. 122–123). The focus of the occupation turns increasingly inward toward its own survival and maintenance at the expense of service to the public. Claims to separateness are legitimated and a facade of public service is maintained through symbols such as university programs, certification procedures, and codes of ethics.

The work group becomes more concerned with taking on and maintaining the outward manifestations of professionalism than with its substance. In particular, completion of required training programs and other certification requirements become ends in themselves rather than means to improved quality of service, and the accompanying certificate becomes proof of professionalism. Thus, the salesman of burial plots is no longer a salesman, but a “professional memorial consultant” with a diploma issued after a one-week training course to prove it (Lieberman, 1970, p. 52).

Process models lead to a critical interpretation of what attribute models mean. The creation of a specialized knowledge base, claims of service motivation, commitment, codes of ethics, and other attributes are revealed as no more than myths created by work groups in competition for the rewards and privileges to be gained by the recognition as “professional” (Pavalko, 1988).

Lieberman’s (1970) analysis is especially critical. Pointing to the medical and legal professions, he argues that, since professionalism springs from the exercise of specialist skills, judgments relating to competence or proper professional conduct may be exercised only by the professionals themselves; that is, only professionals are qualified to judge themselves. Decisions regarding the profession may be rightly made only by the professionals, and the maintenance of the profession is their principal function. Lawyers, for example, *are* the legal system. Professionals exercise a tight self-serving control over their fields, hence the title of Lieberman’s book, “Tyranny of the Experts.”

It must be noted that this literature provides no evidence that these troubling outcomes stem from any conscious malevolent intentions of work group members. Rather, the movement toward specialization and insularity occurs in a subconscious or unconscious way that is consistent with Niebuhr's (1960) description of the way injustice tends to arise in any large organization. During professionalization, members continue to believe that they are "doing the right thing;" that is, elevating the quality of both their work and themselves in the best interests of the public. Actions such as political lobbying for legislation favorable to the profession, for example, would be justified by its members as in the public interest.

DAWIA AND PROFESSIONALIZATION: CURRENT TRENDS

How does this research relate to DAWIA? It's clear that defense acquisition is proceeding along the path of professionalization as described by the process models. (We may debate the precise point in the process at which acquisition stands [some might argue that some acquisition career fields, contracting for example, have completed all the steps.] But to what purpose?) These models tell us that DAWIA is a point on that path, and well-intentioned as it may be, the legislation will have consequences: a price of professionalism. We may begin to gauge this price by looking at the implementation of some of DAWIA's provisions, which indicates a trend of continuing specialization and insularity of the acquisition workforce, with a concomitant focus on the trappings of professionalism.

Most obvious of course is DAWIA's institution of an Acquisition Corps for the various components of DoD. DAWIA's provisions for selection criteria for corps members and for the designation of critical acquisition positions that may be filled only by members meeting special education, training, and experience requirements, mean that this Corps will be a highly specialized group, separate and differentiated from others within DoD.

Second, DAWIA's provision for a university (DAU) to conduct educational development, training, and research and analysis for acquisition means that these functions will be executed in an increasingly separate environment. While the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC) has historically been the leading institution in acquisition training and research for DoD, each of the services has to some degree maintained its own acquisition training capabilities (e.g., the Army Logistics Management College). Under DAWIA, the centralization of acquisition training management means that these institutions now to a significant degree operate under and respond to DAU and are thereby distanced from their respective services.

Third, within the Acquisition Corps, separate and distinct career fields (e.g., program management, acquisition logistics) are institutionalized by DAWIA. Each career field has been determined to have its own set of competencies: a unique body of knowledge. This means that there will be movement toward specialization and differentiation *within* the acquisition workforce. For example, each career field will have its own training and certification requirements and its own professional society (e.g., National Contract Manage-

ment Association, Society of Logistics Engineers). Each career field will become increasingly expert and specialized, but also increasingly differentiated and isolated from other career fields. (The specialization of the program management career field, which is associating with the civilian-oriented Project Management Institute [U.S. Department of Defense, 1994, pp. 2–3], is ironic, given the DoD program manager's traditional role and responsibility of integrating the efforts of the various acquisition functional areas.)

The separation of the career fields will be exacerbated by the current arrangement in which most DAU consortium schools offer courses in only a few career fields. Budgetary pressures, "turf" issues, and steady-state enrollments will keep schools from expanding their offerings into other career fields. The tendency will be for schools to "play to their strengths" when faced with these pressures, which may lead to a consortium of DAU specialist schools, each specializing in only one or two career fields.

As discussed earlier, the institution of certification requirements leads to a view of certification as an end rather than a means. The same budgetary pressures will force DAU student enrollments and the duration of required training to minimal levels. Acquisition workforce members will be pressured to get training certification (to "punch their tickets") in their career fields, with little regard for the content or substance of the training.

Other points may be noted, but the trend is evident. While the acquisition workforce may indeed be growing more professional, the price of this professionalism is its growing insularity from the rest of DoD. As the process continues, levels

of understanding and communication between the acquisition workforce and other DoD professionals (the warriors, the personnel specialists, and others) will decrease. More troubling, the perspective of each acquisition career field will narrow as it becomes: first, increasingly preoccupied with its own discipline; second, more firmly convinced that it has all the right answers; and third, less able or willing to see and hear what is going on in other career fields. The acquisition logisticians, for example, may be superb professional logisticians who are completely incapable of communicating outside their discipline. Granted, such a workforce may be more professional according to our definitions, but is it really *improved*?

This illustrates the essentially problematic nature of professionalization. As we respond with increasing specialization to what we see as the increasingly technical challenges of acquisition management, we create new problems for ourselves. And still we do not know if we are curing the nation's acquisition ills.

KEEPING THE PRICE LOW

Given that there is a price to be paid for professionalism, our objective should be to keep that price as low as possible. What can we do to keep the acquisition workforce from becoming too insular and to maintain a balance between specialization and perspective across disciplines and career fields? We may begin by looking for examples of professional education and training that aim to broaden perspectives among members of the profession. Such examples can impart insights and stimulate debate on the best way to proceed from where we are now.

One possible exemplar is the professional education and training of Army officers. (Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force officers have similar professional education and training programs.) In this model, specialized professional training occurs early, essentially at the entry level. Generalized training takes over very soon thereafter and continues throughout the remainder of the officer's career. Specifically, between commissioning and about the fifth year of service, the officer receives several months of specialized training in the skills and equipment peculiar to his or her basic branch at an Army school that specializes in that branch (e.g., infantry training occurs at the Infantry School and Center at Fort Benning; signal training at the Signal School and Center at Fort Gordon). After this point, institutional education and training is almost exclusively generalist. It focuses on combat command and staff operations, leadership, and management not only across the Army's basic branches, but across service and national boundaries as well. Officers of all branches receive this integrative and interdisciplinary training together at institutions chartered to conduct this type of generalist training (e.g., the Command and General Staff College [CGSC] at Fort Leavenworth).

The sheer volume of this type of training is also instructive. Top officers spend about a year in mid-career resident training at CGSC and later spend another year in residence at a Senior Service College.

Does this model of training preclude the presence of ticket punching careerists, the "price of professionalism," among Army officers? No, it simply keeps this price low.

We may envision such a model applied to the acquisition workforce. Entry-level

members might receive specialized career field training at specialist acquisition schools around the country. Mid-level and senior members from all career fields, on the other hand, would meet together in residence at one or two selected acquisition research and teaching institutions, and devote extensive study to a broad range of issues cutting across the various career fields. (Such long-term residential programs have been suggested in the past [U.S. Congress, House, 1990ab, p. 219; Stupak, 1993, p. 22], and the Senior Acquisition Course at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces appears to be a move in this direction.) The current practice of awarding intermediate and senior level training certification on the basis of completion of one- or two-week courses would be abandoned in favor of long-term resident study programs.

Clearly, there would be many challenges to be met and substantial investments to be made to make such programs a reality.

CONCLUSION: TWO VISIONS OF THE FUTURE WORKFORCE

In conclusion, I offer two possible visions of the state of the acquisition workforce in 25 years. One vision is of disconnected groups of specialists, each narrowly focused on their own particular piece of the acquisition puzzle. The other vision is of a workforce that takes the broad view, bringing together diverse skills and perspectives to determine how best to fit together all the pieces of the puzzle. The dialogue on which vision we choose to make reality should begin now.

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