

Academics are Horribly Unprofessional... Here's Why

In a recent article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Rob Jenkins asks, [“Why Are Some Academics So Unprofessional?”](#).

One might well ask the same about any other profession, of course; doubtless many of you could give examples. But it does seem worse in academia, and that suggests a lesson both important and easily absorbed.

Jenkins is an associate professor of English at Georgia State University, but has enough experience with other sectors to have noticed a difference:

“Although I’ve spent most of my adult life in higher education, I’ve also had extensive dealings with people in the corporate and nonprofit sectors, and I have to tell you: Those of us in academe don’t always look so good by comparison.

*Case in Point: Back in November, after our new book *The 9 Virtues of Exceptional Leaders* came out, my co-author Karl Haden and I sent complimentary copies to select business and education leaders. Most of the corporate types responded within a few weeks with a nice note – in several cases, handwritten – thanking us for the book...*

The academics? Other than a few we know personally, we never heard a word from most of them.”

My own experience in academia was similar to Jenkins’: favors went unacknowledged, calls and emails unreturned, schedules were often not adhered to. Indeed, Jenkins supplies an anecdote relating how, when he was asked to speak at another

college and accepted, he never heard from them again despite his repeated follow-up inquiries about necessary logistical matters. That's not only ill-mannered but potentially quite harmful, if you actually need to make plans.

Perhaps the sort of behavior he laments is more common in academia than in business because the consequences for it are rarely severe. If you're often unprofessional in how you conduct business—not keeping in touch with clients or customers, failing even to acknowledge special consideration, let alone offer a *quid pro quo* for it, and so forth—you get a certain reputation which harms your business and your future prospects, if any. In academia, it seems, too many people are too busy trying to be creative geniuses to bother with such bourgeois virtues. So they don't punish each other for being like that.

That's a mistake. As Jenkins points out: “professionalism” is “just good manners extended to professional life.” Being ill-mannered is neither attractive nor useful.

On the positive side, Jenkins offers some simple advice for being professional that applies to everybody, not just academics. In the article, he explains each item on the following bullet list, which is well worth committing to memory if you haven't already made habits of them:

- Respond in kind
- Follow through
- Be there
- Speak temperately
- Follow the Golden Rule

That last item, of course, sums up the rest.