

Who was abraham  
flexner and why did  
he give his speech?  
essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In 1915, Abraham Flexner was the most influential individual seeking to reform medical education in the U. S. (Austin, p. 361). He had extensively studied medical education in the U. S., Canada, and Europe for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Austin, p. 361), and his suggestions for the reform of medical education that grew out of this study reflect his desire to establish medicine as a “ true profession: combining knowledge with clinical skill and with accountability for the quality of individual performance” (Austin, p. 362). For these reasons, he was invited by the program committee of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections to speak at the conference (Austin, p. 361).

According to Flexner, what are the criteria of a profession?

Flexner discusses six identifying characteristics of a profession. First, the activities involved in a profession are “ essentially intellectual in character,” and practitioners of a profession hold a large degree of personal responsibility (p. 154). Second, a profession has a “ learned character” (p. 155), by which he means that new information needs to be continuously sought out.

Third, professionals must put their knowledge and learning to use (p. 155). Fourth, the techniques of a profession can be taught, and training can be codified (p. 155). Fifth, a person’s qualifications are determined by that person’s ability to fulfill the requirements of the profession. As these requirements can be taught, a profession is a democratic (and not aristocratic) institution (p. 156). Because of this, there is a tendency for

professions to create professional organizations. And finally, professions are engaged in activities that contribute to the well-being of society (p. 156).

What are the recognized professions?

Flexner recognizes law, medicine, preaching, engineering (p. 154), architecture, teaching (p. 155), literature, painting, and music (p. 158) as professions.

Which criterion does social work meet? Why?

Social work is intellectual in character because social workers must use analysis in their work (p. 160). Social work is a learned activity (p. 162), and there are professional organizations of social workers (p. 162). Social workers are devoted to impersonal ends (p. 162).

Which criterion does social work not meet? Why not?

Social workers do not hold a large degree of personal responsibility because once they determine the cause of a problem, the solution for the problem must be found elsewhere (with a doctor, educator, charity) (p. 160). In this sense, social workers function as mediators. Education of social workers is also a difficulty because the boundaries of the field are blurry. Thus, it is difficult to establish a clear body of knowledge that a social worker must learn (p. 162).

Why was this speech so important?

This speech was important because so many of the leaders of social work in the years following Flexner's speech accepted his arguments without hesitation and strove to change social work to fit Flexner's definition of a profession (Austin, p. 364).

What did Flexner conclude?

Flexner concludes that social work, though not a profession, according to his definition of the word, could benefit from striving towards characteristics of the true professions, such as the publication of scholarly materials (p. 164). Furthermore, the fundamental characteristic of a profession is its professional spirit, and this is one element that social work fulfills because of its devotion to humanitarian causes (p. 165).

Do you agree or disagree with Flexner?

According to the requirements of a profession that Flexner sets out, I believe that his estimation is correct that social work does not meet these requirements. However, since 1915, our conception of a "profession" has changed remarkably, and given how social work as a field operates today, I would qualify it as a profession.

References

Austin, D. M. (1983). The Flexner Myth and the History of Social Work. *The Social Service*

*Review*, 57, 357-377.

Flexner, A. (1915). Is Social Work a Profession? In National Conference of Charities and

*Corrections, Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections at the Forty-second Annual Session Held in Baltimore, Maryland, May 12-19, 1915* . Chicago: Hildeman. Reprinted in *Research on Social Work Practice* , 11 (2001), 152-165.