From the Editor

What is a chemist?

This is quite a fundamental question. As is the case with fundamental questions like this, there is no simple—or right—answer and any attempt at answering it is fraught with controversy. Every time I have asked this very question to friends and colleagues I’ve seen passionate discussion that more often than not ends in disagreement. Is a student a chemist? Is someone like me—who has a chemistry education but works in a different field like publishing—a chemist?

Recently, at the American Chemical Society national meeting in Philadelphia, I had conversations with folks that brought this to the fore. The conversation started because one of us made a comment along the lines of the following: “There seem to be fewer chemists that identify themselves as such. What does it mean to be a chemist?” I will admit that this observation is completely unsupported by data of any kind but there seemed to be agreement between those who were part of the conversation that this is in fact true, a trend they have seen developing in recent years. We had all noticed that when people at scientific meetings introduced themselves it was more common to hear “I’m a material scientist” or “I’m a polymer scientist,” for example, rather than materials chemist or polymer chemist.

And I wonder: What is driving this? My guess is that this is partly driven by the fact that there is a lot more interdisciplinary work done these days, with more research happening in the fringes of what is traditionally chemistry. It seems natural for someone working in energy research, for example, in projects bridging chemistry, materials and biology to opt for “energy researcher” rather than “energy chemist” even when they may in fact be a chemist. In addition, or perhaps as a consequence of this shift, the traditional classifications have helped us organize our science for decades (inorganic, organic, analytical, etc.) are being abandoned in favor of more applied and descriptive titles such as food chemistry or geochemistry.

In addition, or perhaps as a consequence of this shift, the traditional classifications have helped us organize our science for decades (inorganic, organic, analytical, etc.) are being abandoned in favor of more applied and descriptive titles such as food chemistry or geochemistry. Coincidentally, around the time of the national meeting, others were trying to answer the same kind of existential questions. Blogger Chemjobber took to the Twittersphere to ask a somewhat related but broader question: “Is ‘scientist’ an identity or a profession or both?”

The poll he ran resulted in 10% of respondents saying it is an identity, 17% saying it is a profession, 55% saying it is both, and the remaining 18% stating that this is a ridiculous question. During the Twitter debate that ensued an editor of a scientific journal was described by some as “not a scientist,” along with data analysts or salespeople. It is totally possible that these individuals may have a Ph.D. in a scientific discipline and several publications to their name but no longer do their own research or work in a traditional scientific setting. Is a teacher a scientist?

Most people then asked this very question to friends and colleagues. Is “chemist” an identity, a profession, or both? Equating being a chemist with being an academic, as some on Twitter did, oversimplifies things and completely alienates the thousands of bench chemists and technicians around the world who are working in industrial labs. Conversely, being at the bench does not make one a chemist either because it eliminates all theoretical chemists with one big stroke. Isn’t an administrator who is running a research lab but no longer doing research himself/herself still a chemist?

Like the majority of the people who answered the poll, I agree that “chemist” is both an identity (first) and (then) a profession. Being a chemist has to do with the acquisition of a level of knowledge, expertise and skills that stay with you forever whether you work in a chemistry-related field or not. Science is about the process and the method to acquire facts and knowledge, not about the knowledge itself.

I am a (non-practicing) chemist now and forever regardless of where life may decide to take me professionally. Once a scientist, always a scientist.