

## *Professional Standards*

**A profession rests on a proved body of knowledge;  
the professional uses this knowledge  
in service to others**

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PROFESSION is defined in the *Oxford Universal Dictionary* as "a vocation in which a professed knowledge of some department of learning is used in its application to the affairs of others, or in the practice of an art founded upon it."<sup>1</sup> A professional is defined in the same dictionary as "one who belongs to one of the learned or skilled professions" or "pertaining to, proper to, or connected with a or one's profession or calling."

These definitions are interesting not only for their precision, but also for their age. The first one dates back to the sixteenth century; those for professional to the eighteenth. It is thus safe to say that man has been concerned for a long, long time with differentiating the professions from other occupations, and with ascribing particular characteristics to the professional both in his person and in his behavior.

This concern has not abated. The literature in virtually all academic disciplines is rich in discussions of the *profession*, the *professional*, and *professionalism*. The consensus of opinion may fairly be said to be that a profession rests on the basis of a proved body of knowledge, and the professional uses this knowledge in the service of others, with financial return to himself not considered the major measure of success. Each person engaged in the practice of a profession has a real and an individual responsibility to it. These individual responsibilities of the professional, when added together, become the collective or corporate responsibility of the profession itself.

<sup>1</sup> C. T. Onions (ed.), *The Oxford Universal Dictionary*, Third Edition (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1955).

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What is this responsibility? Or if it is too large to be encompassed in a single statement, what are its component parts? Probably the most important and useful single word to keep in mind when examining the essential elements of corporate professional responsibility is standards. It is on a sound and mutually held concept of standards that the responsibility depends for its fulfillment.

Mary Parker Follett, in an address given in 1925,<sup>2</sup> discussed the types of standards involved in the corporate professional responsibility as they might apply in the world of business. Many scholars feel that no more definitive classification has yet been made. The types of standards she outlined will be considered as they might apply in Extension work.

**ESTABLISH STANDARDS.** Obviously, the first step in delineating a profession is to set its perimeters. The body of knowledge upon which it rests must be clearly defined. If one considers the medical profession, it is readily apparent that the core of the relevant body of knowledge is the medical sciences—but the total body of knowledge includes all sciences and arts related to that central core.

Further consideration of the medical profession leads us to the next step in establishing standards: What are they for the individual practitioner? How much of the total body of knowledge must he, as an individual, possess? In what depth must he have it? The minimum standard has been established as the M.D. degree and a stated internship, but the profession encourages—and rewards—further study and specialization.

It is necessary for the professional in Cooperative Extension to consider thoughtfully the proved body of knowledge which applies in his case. Unless he claims relationship with such a body of knowledge, he cannot consider himself professional. Is it agronomy, horticulture, animal husbandry, or any other of the specialized fields in agriculture or home economics? Is it a standard level of understanding of total knowledge of agriculture or home economics as represented by the Bachelor's degree from such a college? Or is it broader? Is it possible that the professional in Cooperative Extension may be trained and competent in a discipline other than the traditional ones of agriculture and home economics?

**MAINTAIN STANDARDS.** It is essential that the professional maintain standards. This arises from his loyalty to the work itself rather than to a specific organization. The worker may move from county to county, state to state, county to university because he is able to do his work in any of these situations. His loyalty is to a body of

<sup>2</sup>H. C. Metcalf and L. Urwick (eds.), *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1940), pp. 132-45.

principles—to ideals—which stem primarily from two sources: (1) the standards inherent in the body of knowledge; and (2) love of the work and deep satisfaction derived from work well done.

**IMPROVE STANDARDS.** Standards which are not constantly being evaluated and improved soon become hopelessly outdated and worthless. The professional has the responsibility not only to practice his profession, to apply his learning, but also to extend the limits of knowledge on which it is based. He has an obligation, not only to keep himself aware of developments in his field, but to contribute findings of his own for the enrichment of other practitioners.

**EDUCATE THE PUBLIC TO APPRECIATE STANDARDS.** The true professional never confuses “giving the public what it wants” with “working with people where they are.” The first of these he cannot do if the doing violates professional standards; he has an obligation to influence and change what the public wants if such development is indicated. The second of these he must do if his teaching is to be effective. Cooperative Extension has done a particularly outstanding job in this area, but as clientele changes, “where people are” changes not only emotionally and intellectually but physically as well. The professional in Extension must now reach this clientele in this new place if he is to educate it to appreciate standards.

There is one other facet of educating the public to appreciate standards which should be considered. The public has no better criterion to use in judging professional standards than the behavior of the professional himself. In his work with lay people or groups of lay people, the conduct of the professional must be impeccable if he is to teach by that best of methods—example. He cannot expect to be considered truly professional in his behavior if he uses lay people as a means to reach selfish goals or to arbitrate his differences of opinion with professional colleagues. To the public, the professional provides a single front. This is essential to building and maintaining respect.

**TO KEEP MEMBERS OF THE PROFESSION UP TO STANDARDS.** Each practitioner has an obligation to share his knowledge and experience with his colleagues, and to accept help from them in turn, in order that the total level of practice may be raised. In addition to this responsibility carried by each individual, supervisors and administrators have a particularly heavy duty in this area. They have no alternative, professionally, to insisting that staff keep up to standards. There is no choice open to them. They cannot excuse it, overlook it, accept it, and thus condone it. They must constantly remember that the total work of the profession suffers unless each worker is performing at an acceptable level.

TO PROTECT THE PUBLIC FROM THOSE INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE NOT ATTAINED STANDARDS OR WILLFULLY DO NOT FOLLOW THEM. As in the standard discussed above, the burden of this one falls heavily on the supervisor and administrator—and it is an obligation which must be met if the profession is to survive. Many of the professions—law and medicine, for example—have associations which insure this. The lawyer may be disbarred through regular procedures set up by the members of the profession; the doctor may lose his license to practice or may be removed from the staff of a hospital as a move of censure. In many cases, however, professionals have not empowered a central association to perform the censure function. It is, therefore, automatically delegated to the supervisor and administrator.

All of the standards seem simple when set forth as they have been here; but they are, in fact, extremely complex and offer opportunity for reward for those who use them as starting points for the development of their own thoughts.

In addition to standards there is one important, distinguishing mark of the true professional. It represents the *art* as well as the science of the profession, and is embodied in the manner in which the work is done. It can be given many names: flair, style, studied restraint, economy of time, effort and energy. These are but a few. It occurs only when the techniques are so well mastered that the practitioner need no longer concern himself primarily with them. The pianist who is a true master of his art uses his technique as the means whereby he puts himself into his performance. His thought, his emotion, his artistry is paramount—but only because he has mastered technique. He has style, flair, fun, while he is working and derives deep enjoyment and satisfaction from his effort.

All professionals have a like opportunity for self-expression and fulfillment. The professional in Extension has a particularly important area of work in which to perform his service, and thereby earns this reward when the work is well done. It is he who provides his clientele with the climate in which individual growth and development can take place; he presents his knowledge by means of that most skilled of all arts—the better organization of human relationships. And when he is a true and seasoned professional, he does it with the seeming ease and economy of motion that inspires confidence and respect in all with whom he works.

TRIFLES make perfection and perfection is no trifle.

—MICHELANGELO.