

Professional Leadership and Change

When it emphasizes things, the Extension Service is vocational; when it re-orientes its thinking to people, it is approaching professionalism

HELEN G. HURD

WHAT DO WE mean when we call ourselves professional educators? What does the modifying word *professional* signify? Recall the activities that are deemed professional—teaching, nursing, medicine, law, social work, the ministry. People in these professions deal with people. They teach them, nurse them, heal them, protect their rights, and minister to them. All human activities could be charted on a continuum, showing their direct relation to people at one end and to things at the other.

In contrast to the professions are activities such as carpenter, builder, miner, manufacturer, garbage collector, farmer—these activities deal with things. None of them are considered professions. Somewhere in the middle of this chart would be such activities as architecture (which is concerned with people's use of material) and management (which is people's use of people). Accounting and banking are becoming professionalized as their orientation is more to people's use of money than it is to money itself. Management is looking more to the professional aspects of its responsibility in dealing with people than with things, now that we no longer think of labor as a commodity.

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A second characteristic of professionalism is its concern with the long-range and public aspect of its work. The professional considers

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his role one of public responsibility; the vocationalist—if there is such a word—fulfills a needed job today. The ethical code of the American Medical Association says that the prime object of the medical profession is the service it can render humanity, and that it exists primarily for the good of the public. The codes of other organized professions make clear that the profession implies a concept of public responsibility.

In a society which emphasizes material gain as much as ours does, the temptation for the professional man or woman to do only those things which make money is great. Almost every professional person has at some time had to reconcile his economic interest and his public responsibility. Economic interest, prestige, and status are pressures in our society which becloud the sense of professional obligation and responsibility.

Vested interests threaten the professional when they try to influence him toward an uncritical but lucrative acceptance of some idea or technique or product. A profession itself may constitute a vested interest when it tries to exclude others from membership. The refusal to admit women to certain professions, though no longer so prevalent, is an illustration. The demand for certain educational prerequisites, designed to limit the number of persons entering a field, is sometimes more a result of in-group vested interest than a desire to raise educational standards.

Perhaps another way to look at professionalism is the extent to which something other than technique is emphasized. A teacher who is a good technician knows all the pedagogical rules and can handle the materials properly. But a true professional is interested also in the ultimate results—in the growth and development of the student and the influence of his teaching, not only upon the student, but also on society at large.

Perhaps another criterion by which to distinguish professionalism is the extent to which excellence is emphasized. A glass-blower may be a good technician, producing technically perfect glassware, but when the quality of his workmanship achieves the truth of beauty he becomes an artist, not a craftsman. A teacher may be a good technician, producing technically perfect lesson plans, but when the quality of his workmanship produces people who cherish knowledge, he becomes a professional.

Professionals are obliged to search for and lead others toward the good. This may sound too metaphysical; nevertheless, the temptation toward shoddiness and mediocrity is great in our mass-produced society. We should be stressing the values of excellence.

MORE THAN SPECIALIZATION

Professionalism is more than specialization. Of course the worker must be proficient in his field of operation. It is to be expected that he keep himself up-to-date with the new knowledge and new developments in his field. It goes without saying that he belongs to a professional association, or several of them, and reads the journals. Today, no one can be narrow and provincial in his outlook, least of all a professional person. He has to know what is going on in the world beyond his community, his state, and his country. Professionalism and ethnocentric prejudices simply do not go together. Nor do professionalism and temporocentric attitudes go together—we cannot view all events from the perspective of our own time any more than we can judge all societies from the perspective of our own culture.

We have been very busy in the past quarter of a century teaching about things and how to use them. This is understandable: there have been so many things—new things—spawned by our inventiveness that it seemed important to educate in their use and thus facilitate their diffusion throughout society. New principles of personnel management; of farm management; new accounting procedures and devices; new educational ideas and methods; new techniques in the arts of music, painting, and writing; new developments in rehabilitation, parole, penal practices; new understandings in physical and mental health; new foods, equipment, and fabrics—all of these and many more have cascaded upon us as new knowledge. And it seemed important that this new knowledge be passed on in the educational process.

A further impetus to this emphasis on things has been the high degree of specialization, not only of bodies of knowledge, but also of individuals who, in our modern urban society, have become educated as processors of specialized techniques—the “technicians.” In the compartmentalization of roles which has accompanied the highly-organized society, we must become specialists if we expect to succeed. Our job roles as teachers, accountants, lawyers, scientists, biologists, nutritionists, nurses, etc., have become the individual’s major source of status and identification. We develop specialized vocabularies and professionally-oriented points of view. This has had the effect of placing all knowledge in a context, with a particular tendency to define principles in terms of how they might be applied, and to substitute things for ideas.

What I am trying to emphasize is that the professional approach seems to involve the notion of people doing things for people. What

personal advantages accrue, like pecuniary gain, are secondary. In our affluent society, however, some professions—notably medicine and the law—have been most remunerative; others like the ministry, teaching, social work, and nursing have rewarded their practitioners with a relative meager living. And yet, one should not go into a profession because he “wants to help people.” This approach is likely to stand in the way of objective practice: the social worker who is too generous, the nurse too sympathetic, the doctor too tender-hearted—all must become hardened to the necessity of objective handling of their relations with people. The professional approach is not one of charity; rather it is one of objective concern, not only for the individual, but for the total situation in which the individual finds himself.

THE PROFESSIONAL APPROACH

The professional approach is one that looks not only at the individual problem, but also at surrounding causes and effects. The professional must learn to identify and objectify the several situations which surround every individual and every event. It has been thought that a mother is the best judge of her own child. In fact, a mother is perhaps the least competent to judge her own child. An outsider, not even a professional, can probably make a better assessment of the child than the mother; a trained professional can make the best assessment. Why? Because the professional has been taught to look beyond the immediate situation. We all live and move and have our being in several social systems—our family, our community, our country, and the numerous associations we enter into constituting other groups of specialized influence.

If professionalism is to mean anything in the future, it has to emphasize qualities not found in all work contributions. It may be that professionalism will disappear with the new “technocracy,” but I am inclined to believe that a new version of professionalism is developing, and as you can see, I am groping to describe the outline of it. If we can't establish criteria for professionalism, we may as well concede that anybody who does anything well is a professional.

Thus far I have indicated several characteristics of professionalism: the professional deals with people more than with things; professionalism is more concerned with the public interest than with the self-limited private interest; something more than technique is emphasized. We have to be as expert as we can be in our fields; professionalism is more than specialization. Professionalism seems to involve doing things for people, but not in an ego-centric way.

Professionalism involves commitment. The question is commitment to what?

WAYS OF VIEWING PROFESSIONALISM

It might be interesting to examine what some of the sociologists are saying about the professions. Some tend to see in the professions a sign of the emergence of a new type of occupational structure, exempt from the capitalistic relationships of production and competition for profit. Unlike other occupational classes, the professions are concerned with "social efficiency" rather than individual interests, and might therefore be the class, according to T. H. Marshall, to "find for the sick and suffering democracies a peaceful solution to their problems."¹

Other writers, particularly Talcott Parsons, oppose this interpretation, and emphasize the fact that professional people, like businessmen, are concerned with the achievement of individual success in their chosen field. Sympathy and understanding toward a client are only the requirements for the efficient performance of a service, just as good personal relations are the requirements for efficient work in a factory. Parsons sees no need to generalize these professional/client relationships into broader social attitudes.

Another view makes a distinction between the creative professionals (like the artists) and other members of the learned professions who apply the products of the innovators and introduce them into the culture, requiring educated people to be the final consumers. Other authors are inclined to think that professional people are being absorbed and assimilated into the bureaucratic structure of white collar work.

Still another view comes from the economists and political scientists who interpret professional organization as a monopoly. Rather than contributing to social efficiency, according to them, professional organizations are monopolies, i.e., instruments for raising the price of professional services and restricting the membership through increasingly higher educational requirements. On the other hand, the long and costly training of the professional engenders a professional attitude that distinguishes the professional from other occupational groups.

The sociologist is interested in the role analysis of the professional. The professional self-image is developed through a series of

¹The views expressed here and in the following paragraphs are taken from a monograph recently published in England for the International Sociological Association with the support of UNESCO entitled "Professions in the Class System of Present-Day Societies — A Trend Report and Bibliography."

recognized stages of professional development. Many studies of the process are being made. The professional trainee, as he comes into contact with the various segments of his role, learns the correct responses and behavior. Have you ever seen a professional person behave unprofessionally or a non-professional put on the trappings of professional behavior? It is obvious that there is such a thing as professional behavior and professional attitudes. Yet, how many of us forget our professional training when we get into the world of action and practice and behave just like anyone else. If we are trained in scientific precision, do we make unscientific or emotional judgments based on insufficient fact? If we are trained in certain principles of leadership, do we fail to put those principles into practice in bringing up our own children?

There is no agreed-upon definition of professionalism. There is a set of characteristics which are, in differing degrees, present in an increasing number of occupations. Social reasons behind the increase in "professions" could be found in the rise of the middle classes and the changing nature of the universities playing a major role in training for the professions. Land-Grant Colleges and Universities have played no little part in the expansion of higher education leading to an increase in the professional approach to the development of human resources—dealing with people as well as things and ideas. If the role of the professional is to be maintained, he must stand for something more than specialized training and efficiency. Our society is creating many "experts" and "technicians." They answer the question: "What is the job to be done? Give it to us and we'll do it." But it is the professional who will answer the question: "Why is the job to be done, and of what value is it to the individual and the society?"

THE TOUCHSTONE of a true profession is ministry to the people, exercised with pride, insistent upon the authority which true scholarship should command.
—VANNEVAR BUSH

A GREAT DIFFERENCE between men arises according to whether they do or do not pay attention to their daily experiences, and this in turn depends upon whether or not they are determined to learn.
—VANNEVAR BUSH

KNOWLEDGE is not enough. Technique is not enough. Mere experience is not enough. This is the mystery at the heart of the teaching process; and the same mystery is at the heart of the healing process. Each is an art, more than a science or a skill—and the art is at bottom the ability to "tune in to the other's wavelength."
—SYDNEY J. HARRIS