

## Who Is a Professional?

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*There is a tendency to label all white-collar workers "professionals." But if everyone is a professional, the term loses its meaning. Maintaining that extension work per se is not a profession, the author discusses what a profession is and lists characteristics of the real professional—the attributes that distinguish him from the technician. Suggestions are presented as to how extension workers can become more effective as professional adult educators.*

WHAT IS a profession and who are the professionals are questions which seem to require clarification in the new context of an industrial society with its complex division of labor. If everyone is a professional, the term loses its meaning. Even now the professionals find themselves surrounded by semi- or quasi-professionals, with each group denying the validity of the professional status of the other.

Some writers indicate that professional people are being so assimilated into the bureaucratic context of white-collar work that they may lose—indeed have lost—their identity, along with a sense of responsibility and moral integrity that has characterized professions in the past. Another part of the problem is the rise of personnel engaged in the same or similar work who do not have the training that the professionals have had. When this occurs in the same organization, morale tends to be low and loyalty diffused.

In modern society, an increasing number of professionals are going into government and industry, as well as into traditional institutions. A professional scientist, for example, coming into an industrial laboratory tends to be less loyal to the bureaucracy (the corporation) that employs him than does the person trained in and by the corporation. The professional looks to his peers, colleagues, fellow scientists, for approval, not to his bosses. Unless he has tenure, he seeks to improve himself by moving on to superior work lo-

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cations where opportunities for research and professional advancement are better. On the other hand, a person trained by the organization which employs him may express a high degree of loyalty to the organization and show a high degree of conformity and all the "proper" attitudes toward his employers. Thus his loyalties, attitudes, and willingness to cooperate—to be a "company man"—become criteria for advancement, and he may become a highly-paid administrator while the professionals are still seeking promotions. This is just one area of conflict of professionals in bureaucracies. Members of a profession may also encounter conflict when working with personnel from other professions, in a shared work situation.

At this point I will throw the bombshell by maintaining that extension work *per se* is not a profession. The Extension Service is—or has been—more like a collegium. It is a group of professionals, each with his own training, professional societies, codes of ethics.

#### WHAT IS A PROFESSION?

There are many ways of defining a profession. The simplest and most comprehensive was enumerated by Goode:

We should think of occupations as falling somewhere along a continuum of professionalism. . . . The . . . core characteristics are a prolonged specialized training in a body of abstract knowledge, and a collectivity or service orientation. . . . As an occupation becomes more professionalized, it acquires several features which may be viewed as sociologically derivative from the two just noted. These include the following traits: (1) The profession determines its own standards of education and training. (2) The student professional goes through a more far-reaching adult socialization experience than the learner in other occupations. (3) Professional practice is often legally recognized by some form of licensure. (4) Licensing and admission boards are manned by members of the profession. (5) Most legislation concerned with the profession is shaped by that profession. (6) The occupation gains in income, power, and prestige ranking, and can demand higher caliber students. (7) The practitioner is relatively free of lay evaluation and control. (8) The norms of practice enforced by the profession are more stringent than legal controls. (9) Members are more strongly identified and affiliated with the profession than are members of other occupations with theirs. (10) The profession is more likely to be a terminal occupation. Members do not care to leave it, and a higher proportion assert that if they had it to do over again, they would again choose that . . . work.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William J. Goode, "Encroachment, Charlatanism, and the Emerging Profession: Psychology, Sociology, and Medicine," *American Sociological Review*, XXV (December, 1960), 903. © 1960, reprinted by permission of the American Sociological Association and the author.

If extension work *per se* were a profession (and it ought to be one of the rising new professions), there would be training centers for extension workers, similar to other graduate professional schools. People would go into extension work from many backgrounds, as they do now, but they would be further trained in a body of theory and knowledge to supplement their technical background. Extension would have some control over who is admitted and, through its professional association, regulate the procedures to discipline members. There would be a code of professional ethics and a means of licensure.

The object of the graduate program would be to develop knowledge in the understanding of people, their motivation, needs, and desires. Knowledge in the field of communications, media, and techniques would be explored and increased. Techniques of community organization, social planning, and uses of the environment would be developed in a scientific way. The professional extension worker would be a person trained in the new science of man and in ways of bringing this vast amount of usable knowledge into everyday use.

We can no longer depend on liberally-oriented ministers, businessmen, college professors, and club women to be instruments of social change. This is a job for professionals. Lest anyone think that this is a prescription for a planned society in the hands of a few, let us remember that in every profession there are resistances. No profession is monolithic. Professionals would be less likely to agree among themselves than would most groups and would be least likely to be influenced by an organizing demagogue. It is my hope that there may be developed through the Cooperative Extension Service and other similarly oriented service organizations, a profession of public service socially-oriented and politically-wise. Most of our present public servants are politically-oriented and only occasionally socially-wise. This entire new professional field could come about through an increasing professionalism of the occupation of extension worker.

In a book about professionalism, sociologist Herbert Blumer says that:

Professionalization represents an indigenous effort to introduce order into areas of vocational life which are prey to the free-playing and disorganizing tendencies of a vast, mobile, and differentiated society undergoing continuous change. Professionalism seeks to clothe a given area with standards of excellence, to establish rules of conduct, to develop a sense of responsibility, to set criteria for recruitment and training, to ensure a measure of protection for members, to establish collective control over

the area, and to elevate it to a position of dignity and social standing in the society.<sup>2</sup>

Among the interesting problems in the concept of the professionalism of the extension worker is the question of his relationship to those he serves. A farmer is not a *customer* of the agent. A customer determines what his own needs are and shops around for satisfaction of those needs. Neither is he a *client*, for a client is an individual who should or must accede to professional judgment or advice. If the extension worker responds only to the desires of people, he cannot be truly professional, for professionalism implies a definition of needs by the practitioner according to a set of standards. Of course we must give people what they want some of the time, but we must also raise standards so people will want an increasingly higher quality of service, information, and technical assistance.

Extension has always been concerned with people. It has been concerned with the individual farmer and his crop, the individual homemaker and her preserves, the individual youth and his pig. But as Extension changes its milieu from an agrarian to an urban society, it must become more involved in social control and social change. As this new involvement occurs, we find ourselves dealing with people in a somewhat different way. We must extend the quality of our relationships beyond the purveyance of technical knowledge.

A profession exists in the cause of the common good, although there is nothing to guarantee that all members of the profession will devote themselves to the common good. Marjorie Brown stated it this way: "Each [profession] exists because it attempts to answer certain related questions which are significant problems in the society—problems concerned with achieving the good life. Thus a profession is concerned with knowledge which is for the good of society."<sup>3</sup>

It is the function of the professional to transmit the truth as far as he knows it into social action. The professional extension worker is neither a pitch man nor a propagandist. He is a conveyor of tested knowledge, having a personal capacity to bring the very highest quality of thinking to any practical situation.

Professionalism is more than specialization. Of course the worker

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Blumer, in preface to Howard M. Vollmer and Donald L. Mills (eds.), *Professionalism* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966). © 1966, reprinted by permission of Prentice-Hall, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Brown, "Professional Values," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, III (Summer, 1965), 73.

must be proficient in his field. He must keep up-to-date with knowledge and new developments, belong to a professional association, and read the journals. But he must also know what is going on in the world beyond his community, his state, and his country.

Thus far, several characteristics of the professional extension worker have been listed. He deals with people more than with things. He is more concerned with the public interest than with self-limited private interest. Something more than technique is emphasized. He must be an expert in his field, but professionalism is more than specialization. Professionalism seems to involve doing things for people, but not in an egocentric or self-gratifying way. Professionalism involves commitment—not only a personal commitment, but a commitment to the constructive use of knowledge for the creation of a better life.

The person who translates scientific knowledge into social action—this “professional middleman”—should be a very special kind of person. Dr. Brown says that the “quality of our workmanship as professional persons in any practical situation is determined by the quality of thinking which is used in meeting that particular situation.”<sup>4</sup> What kind of person must we be in order to be regarded as a worthy member of this new profession of extension worker?

#### THE REAL PROFESSIONAL

1. *The real professional has a sense of history.* He does not live in the past, nor entirely in the present. He sees the future as part of the past and of the present. He does not live in blinders. For example, he takes a nonhysterical view of today's youth. He probably finds them about like he was in the 20's, only more so. Youth crimes today are committed publicly, while ours were in the protected confines of a small-town family or the speakeasy.

The *real* professional has probably defined for himself, in line with the known objectives of his profession, a set of basic values he should seek to achieve in his work. The home economist wants healthier children, happier families, more liveable homes; the agricultural agent wants better yields, better methods of accounting, a certified seed program. When he works with *things*, he is on solid ground. But what values does he hold relevant to the times and the people?

We, who are older: let us not be guilty of those attitudes which look back to the past as a golden age. You, who are younger: remember that there were and are many good things from the past—

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

and these should be taken into account. Let us remember that a sense of history is important for our perspective as professionals.

2. *The real professional recognizes the relevance of the emerging patterns of relationships* which stress interdependence rather than independence, cooperation rather than isolation, and an increasing centralization of the source of action rather than the old pattern of a maze of autonomous units, each operating by itself.

We need new devices and techniques for getting information to the layman and the public. In our urban society there is less and less time for more and more meetings. We are not going to get people out to meetings. Information will have to be disseminated by a more general means of communication than face-to-face contact. This communication, written or via TV or radio, has to be understood by the most mechanically illiterate. With the rapid upward mobility and changes in status accompanying higher incomes, we assume too much when we expect clients to understand material that is full of unexplained technical terms, simple as these terms may appear to us. Would instructions about pressure cookers be understood by those who until recently had neither gas nor electricity? How should we present instructions on care of hardwood floors to people just moving into public housing from dirt-floor rooms?

Are people too busy to read 16-page brochures? Maybe they need pictures. Do we print too much and demonstrate on TV too little? In our country 89 per cent of all households have TV.

We will have to deal with people in large groups, through other groups. Today's farmer belongs to specific associations formed for specific purposes, i.e., a poultrymen's association. Through these associations, he gets specialized knowledge based on latest research. People are not divided into neat little groups. Programs must be flexible, adaptable, movable. Program content must be more inclusive. We cannot deal with our problems separately, because they are not separate; they are all interdependent. New groups must be involved, new both as to experience in community work and as to age categories. The great number of persons displaced or moved about by automation must be caught up into the community.

This professional concept of inter-relationships—not only of knowledge, but of people—can be understood only in terms of a new operational program involving all of our institutions, each doing its part, but reinforced by the others. Cooperative Extension would be one of these, working cooperatively to help establish and coordinate new organizational relationships in order to lead people into the obligations and responsibilities of modern urban industrial life.

3. *The professional has an understanding of the complexity of the world and of knowledge, and consequently of the work he does. He does not hesitate to bring in experts from other fields. He does not hesitate to say "I do not know."* The person who has a ready answer for every question is a faker.

We must also consider the total relationship of Extension to teaching and research. A professional will grasp the significance of this point. We are making a start at meeting the needs of the citizens of the urbanizing society if, for example, the county agent knows that he has to go beyond the confines of the traditional College of Agriculture if he is to meet the needs of the agri-businessmen with whom he deals; if the home agent knows that she can no longer depend on programs based solely on cooking and sewing; if administrators make it possible to break through the boundaries of colleges, disciplines, and agencies to solve problems in their total implications. Today's problems are not isolated, and the professional must work with other professionals in solving these problems.

4. *A professional is continuously at work on his own growth and development.* He never stops studying. He seeks to develop within himself not only new knowledge, but new wisdom that comes from continuous study and reflection. Of course there is the problem of time. But the *real* professional will find time to do these things, even time for reflective leisure. He *must*, if he is to be anything more than a trained technician! Personal effectiveness is one of the essentials of professional leadership. The professional must plan and execute a continuous program of self-education. Through constant study, he escapes from the strait-jacket of his own discipline.

5. *The professional must, through training and competence, be able to assist in guiding the layman in social planning.* If we are at all worthy of the name professional, we should be capable of taking part in the social planning process. We have seen too often the havoc wrought by senseless growth, or senseless destruction, or senseless action where no planning was involved, when we had no idea of where we were going or why. We can be busy enough just keeping up with the changes necessitated by normal social changes, growth and development in society. But we must also spend much of our time repairing the social structure or fabric of social relationships unnecessarily torn apart by our previous lack of vision or planning.

We are just now beginning to apply planning principles to social life—community, family, and national life. For a long time, it was felt that these areas should not or could not be planned. We are now beginning to know that science can solve social problems, as

well as mechanical and physical problems. The professional extension worker must be committed to this belief.

Lundberg suggests several criteria for the professional, acting as a planning agent in social affairs.<sup>5</sup> First, he should be able to develop reliable knowledge of what *alternatives of action* exist under given conditions, and the probable consequences of each. A soil scientist knows what to try if a seed does not germinate in a certain situation. A social scientist should know what alternatives are possible if a community decides not to support new school taxes. Second, the professional should be able to gauge reliably what the majority of people will support under given circumstances. Many a good community project may have failed because it was proposed before its time. Timing is a valuable adjunct to social planning and community action. Third, according to Lundberg, the professional must be able to develop administrative techniques for performing most efficiently and economically.

Let us not be misguided into believing that the way to insure the democratic process is to hold plenty of meetings. The democratic process will be best served by professional advisers making known the possibilities and alternatives in any course of action—by making this information known and by acting on the basis of mutually-arrived-at decisions.

#### CONCLUSION

As professional adult educators we need to incorporate in our work a sense of history. We need to realize the importance of relationships and interdependence in the highly-organized, heavily-populated urban world in which we work. We need to fully understand the complexity of the world and the vast proliferation of knowledge. We cannot possibly know all there is to know, even in our own fields. We must never stop studying. Planning and executing a continuous program of education is part of our development as professionals. We must get out of the grooves of our own disciplines. And, finally, we must take active roles in the planning process, providing guidance in making known to lay authority the possibilities and alternatives of any given course of action. These behaviors are the marks of a professional.

We have a new urban culture, a modern family, a great new society, and millions of new clients. The job ahead will challenge our best professional leadership and our total resources.

<sup>5</sup> George Lundberg, *Can Science Save Us?* (New York: Longmans Green, 1947), p. 50.