

# are extension workers professionals?

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Harold Swanson

What is a professional? Do Extension faculty, whether county, state, or federal based, really qualify as professionals? Do they meet the professional requirements of educators? Or are they merely good craftsmen and public relations practitioners, little concerned with standards, ethical obligations, understanding, and other common attributes of the professional?

“Professionalism” and “professional” are difficult concepts to establish and define. We live in an era when nearly everyone claims to be a professional. Beauticians, morticians, athletes, and countless others aspire to and claim professional status.

The purpose of this article isn't to dispute the right of these groups to the title of professional. Rather it's to establish a concept of professionalism and list attributes that may be a guide to Extension workers as educators.

## Definition of Profession

E. T. York, Jr., former administrator for the Federal Extension Service, and now provost for the Florida Higher Education System, gave his definition of profession to an annual conference of FES:

A profession is a remunerative occupation of high status. It is based on a body of specialized knowledge. In it are self-directing practitioners, with long, formal training, performing a socially accepted service under a code of ethics which places the interest of the client above that of the practitioner. <sup>1</sup>

He then distilled this to four basic elements—specialized knowledge, training, integrity, and service. Also important are standards, self-satisfaction in work, and dedication.

## Professional Standards

The criteria of professional standards I'm suggesting are based on my modifications of these and other ideas.<sup>2</sup>

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To meet professional standards, the Extension worker as an educator in the county, the land-grant college, and USDA should:

***Skill,  
Proficiency***

1. Be particularly skillful and proficient in his work. Specialized subject-matter fields and Extension education are recognized and distinguished disciplines of learning, skill, research, and practice. It's my feeling that in the next decade most younger county agents will have to have a master's degree, and state and federal staff mostly Ph.D.'s with a sprinkling of master's degrees in some of the communications and supervisory positions.

To gain this proficiency, the Extension worker needs two kinds of knowledge and skills:

- a. Those directly concerned with his own specialty or area of competence ranging from general agriculture or general home economics to sociology or psychology or ruminology.
- b. Those connected with the skills, understanding, philosophies, background, and processes of Extension as an educational process. We must be familiar with the processes and theories needed to understand what happens in education and communications. Here continued exposure to the disciplines of social-psychology, psychology, sociology, communications, and education are important.

***Public  
Responsibility***

2. Have a strong sense of public responsibility. To maintain this sense, an agent must engage in continual self-examination, research, and self-criticism.

***Service***

3. Place service to others higher in importance than personal gains.

***Dedication***

4. Be especially dedicated to one's job and what it stands for. One needs to reflect both to his colleagues and to those outside the pride he has in his profession, in Extension, and the satisfaction his work gives him. A professional doesn't downgrade his profession. He may criticize and try to reform it, but constant derogation really means he should say "goodbye" to any profession.

***Self-Direction,  
Self-Motivation***

5. Be essentially self-directing and self-motivated. Be given the chance to work in settings where he can be autonomous and make decisions. At the same time one must be willing to take full responsibility for the results of one's efforts and actions and accept professional criticism. With today's stress on accountability,

the professional Extension worker must account to his superiors and the public for his work. Many academicians will disagree with me on this point, but they may either be too self-protective or too deeply mired in "ivory tower" professionalism.

A professional seeks counsel and advice but doesn't try to transfer responsibility for his mistakes to others.

*Continued Learning*

6. Try to continually improve oneself. A professional is a "continuing learner" in a never-ending quest for knowledge.

It's inconceivable to me that any Extension worker who believes in Extension as continuing learning can fail to put full effort into improving his own professional competence. A "nonlearner" in Extension, whether a state or federal level worker or a county Extension staffer, doesn't deserve the label of professional.

Nothing irritates me more than the chronic "know-it-all" or "so-whatter" who sneers at new professional development efforts as impractical, "we-know-all-that-stuff," etc. Fortunately, there are few of these people in Extension.

*Concern for Colleagues*

7. Be concerned about, and work toward, the improvement of his colleagues' welfare.

*Ethical Standards*

8. Work within acceptable ethical standards. No such standards have been adopted for professional Extension workers, but some of the points that might well be considered are these:

- a. Loyalty to fellow workers.
- b. Avoiding rumor and hearsay. A professional gets information important to him directly from those authorized to release it.
- c. Membership and support of professional organizations that represent the person and the profession to which he belongs.
- d. Adjusting grievances through proper channels.
- e. Meeting professional obligations to and agreements with his colleagues.
- f. Receiving advancement only through worthy professional performance and superior preparations and not at the expense of others.

*Professional Literature*

9. Know and be familiar with professional literature of the field.

Here, I include in professional literature not only specific subject matter, but also Extension philosophy and methods. A specialist or agent unable to communicate effectively or impervious to local Extension needs or situations, or unable to relate to specialized audiences, has little professional value to the organization. Willing to learn and relate, such specialists and agents become valuable professionals.

*New Methods*

10. Be willing to change methods of job procedure when new information based on research is received.

*Information Exchange*

11. Believe in the exchange of information. A professional contributes, when possible, to the skill and knowledge of the profession by sharing new ideas, plans, and materials with colleagues. Belonging to professional groups and contributing to them is one, and an essential, way of doing this. In the case of state and federal staff, this should be in both their speciality and their Extension adult or youth professional organizations.

*Profession's Language*

12. Use and understand the specific language employed in the profession.

Many times we hear the term "Extensionese," usually uttered in derogation. Yet, it's perfectly acceptable and useful for agronomists, journalists, animal scientists, to use the technical language of their profession when communicating with their colleagues. When they use the same language, however, with less technically oriented audiences, they're guilty of poor Extension teaching.

My point is . . . when we communicate with each other in Extension, we can and should use "Extensionese" terms such as program development, educational objectives, program thrust (somewhat overworked), and many more. But let's not overdo it.

For the first six years of the *Journal*, I was privileged to serve either as a member or vice-president of the corporation. We were often criticized for using too technical language, which "us common agents or specialists" didn't like. And it was sometimes a valid criticism. But let's never say we are common agents or specialists or administrators. Let's not glory in our "reverse snobbery." Let's be proud professionals. Yes, and let's be able to use the *Journal* and other similar publications, couched in the language of our profession.

## Moral Responsibility

This set of criteria, which allows for a great deal of individual initiative and independence, imposes real responsibilities on the professional. Paul E. Miller, past president of West Virginia State University and a creative Extension director, called this the “moral responsibility” of the professional to “recognize that the truths he applies are not at all completely certain.” This should, Miller says, induce humility in the professional who, like the scientist, sees room for doubt, sees that not everything can be reconciled, and sees that the power he might wield could be destructive if not constrained by his own dedication.

Certainly the criteria and thoughts suggested here are neither complete nor universally accepted. They might, however, be the basis for considering more desirable and acceptable criteria and standards for the Extension worker.

Oh, yes, I didn’t answer my original question, “Are Extension Workers Professionals?” Frankly, I’m not sure. Some are; others aren’t. And I’m talking about all Extension workers, whether they work on the county, state, or federal level. We’ve come a long way, but we still have a ways to go. But, “I’m damn proud to be an Extension worker, and I’ll try to be a better one.” In so saying, I’m part way there.

## Footnotes

1. Federal Extension Service, “Professionalism for Extension Workers” (Annual Conference, Federal Extension Service, Washington D.C., January 9-11, 1963).
2. G. B. Leighbody, “What Makes a Professional, Professional?” *Phi Delta Kappan*, XXXIV (April, 1953), 295; Myron Lieberman, *Education As a Profession* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1956); Raymond R. Ranta, “The Professional Status of the Michigan Cooperative Extension Service” (Ph.D. dissertation, dissertation, National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1960); Harold B. Swanson, “What Is a Professional?” *ACE*, XLVIII (November-December, 1965), 3-4; and Dale Yoder, *Personnel Management and Industrial Relations*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962).