

# qualities of a professional!

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George B. Strother

## From the Simple to the Complex

In times gone by, Extension educators lived in a comparatively simple society serving a comparatively simple and clearly defined set of needs. Whether serving the small farmer or the small businessman, outcomes were measured in relatively few dimensions in the tradition of "making two blades of grass grow where one grew before." In such a setting, the Extension educator could dispense proven remedies to relatively few, relatively homogeneous sets of clientele groups.

Today, however, a balanced outreach program must be based on the realization that Extension education must serve a great variety of complex needs. The constructive use of leisure time, the preservation of our environment, and a richer retirement experience for the growing number of older people in our population are a few examples of this broader mission.

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Due to this change in the nature and complexity of the job, there's a growing recognition that the helpful, all-things-to-all-people kind of generalist is being replaced by a group of knowledgeable professionals with a full-time commitment to the application of specialized knowledge and skills to a wide range of society's problems. In an increasingly complex society, the demand for professional quality of work and for high professional standards of performance becomes the reason for our being in business. This delivery of a high level of competence is the principal public justification. The old-time generalist no longer appears to legislatures and Departments of Administration as justification for additional funds.

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## Professional Definitions

But, there are professionals and there are professionals. Dictionaries distinguish two kinds of professionals, one in terms of respect and the other of disparagement. In the first sense, a profession is spoken of as a calling and in the second sense as a pose, as "a professional doer of good." Clearly, it's in the sense of a profession as a calling that we look in setting our standards, keeping in mind the danger that a pose sometimes masquerades as a calling or that what begins as a calling may degenerate into a pose.

A profession in the best sense of the word implies a set of standards or qualities against which the professional must be measured. To maintain these standards, we're seeing a significant national movement to require that professionals demonstrate periodically that they can still meet the standards—a move in many professions to require continuing education as a condition for recertification or relicensure.<sup>2</sup> How strange it would be if professional adult educators would refuse their own medicine!

## Six Qualities

What then are some of the qualities or standards against which professional adult educators can be measured? For a start, I'd suggest six of them.

### *Art*

First, the educator as an artist. Someone long ago described great acting as an art that conceals art. Behind every great artist is the mastery of a medium that's so complete and effective that the spectator's attention is riveted to the message, oblivious to the disciplined effort that's able to convey the message so effectively.

So the professional adult educator must be able to master the tools of his trade and yet at the same time submerge these underlying skills in conveying meaning in the most effective possible manner. The art of using the right combination of methods and media to accomplish the specific educational goal we have in mind is at least as difficult as the art of the actor or the painter or the musician.

In particular, in this era, when the Carnegie report<sup>3</sup> speaks of the fourth revolution—the media revolution—and in a time when commerce and politics exercise increasing skill in their demand for people's attention, no professional educator can hope to succeed optimally without mastery of the basic tools and skills of the trade: the ability to capture and hold the attention of the audience, and to get the message over in the most effective possible way in view of content, educational setting, and the constraints of time, space, and cost.

*Clarity and  
Simplicity*

Second, clarity and simplicity. Like the legendary *nouveau riche* who are noted for their extravagant use of money, there are academicians noted for their extravagant use of the English language, mistaking obscurity for profundity. I'm reminded of a cocktail hour conversation that I had once. A casual acquaintance, commenting on a colleague of mine, said, "He must be terribly intelligent. He's so difficult to talk to."

While it's true that precise language and technical language often are difficult to understand, the true professional is one who's secure enough in his own grasp of his subject to make every effort to be understood, to use, insofar as polite society permits, the Anglo-Saxon monosyllable instead of the Latin polysyllable, and of whom it might be said, as Chaucer said of the clerk of Oxford, "not a word spoke he more than was needed."

*Depth of  
Subject*

Third, a continuing interest in his subject matter. The Greeks saw mind and matter as inseparable, form and substance. In the same way, the educator who's skilled in conveying information but has little to convey is an incomplete person, just as the one who has much to convey and little skill in conveying it is incomplete. There's a danger that people who have been through 15 or 20 years of being a student may say, "Thank God my education is over, and now I can start doing something." The danger is probably even more insidious among people who hold advanced degrees and who are thus certified to be learned.

There's nothing wrong with enjoying Marcus Welby or the evening bridge club, but when these things emerge invariably victorious in competing for one's attention with the subject one professes, the ranks of the professional have been replaced by one more hired hand, posing as a professional.

*Breadth  
of Vision*

Fourth, breadth of vision. At the other extreme from a dying interest in one's subject matter is a too-consuming interest in some small part of the world of knowledge. Cynics have defined the Ph.D. as a process of learning more and more about less and less. We use the term "Renaissance Man" to describe a person who has a firm grasp of a wide range of knowledge.

The "Renaissance Man," to the benefit of all of us today, replaced the "Medieval Man," who counted the number of angels who could dance on the head of a pin. We need more professionals who, while they can't master a great variety of disciplines, can at least fit them into their

scheme of things. Dean Rusk, formerly the head of the Rockefeller Foundation and later Secretary of State, said it well in a 1974 speech to a group of university administrators.

We are learning that everything is related to everything else. It was not the ecologists who first discovered this simple proposition, because human experience is driving us in that direction. A very wise man, General Omar Bradley, said some years ago that "the time has come to chart our course by the distant stars and not by the lights of each passing ship." What I am concerned about is compass bearings, the ability to see things as a whole, the knowledge and understanding which just might generate wisdom at a time when wisdom is needed most of all. My guess is that since state universities and land-grant colleges are committed to the service of the people, perhaps this—helping our citizens see things as a whole—is our next big job. We have wrought miracles through specialization, but have we wrought miracles in synthesis? What about the compass bearings which will help us and our young people find our way through the turbulent storms of change and the confusion of complexity? Of that I am not sure.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Goal-Orientation*

Fifth, goal-orientation. Sociologists have frequently described the means-end transformation, the process whereby, particularly in large, complex organizations, the means for accomplishing goals become ends in themselves. For one thing, means are often more easily measured than ends or results. For another, rewards are often based on simple measures of output such as head counts.

To some extent, management information systems and specifically Extension management information systems, in this instance, foster this means-end transformation. Concern with clientele and program tend to be replaced by head counts and student contact hours. Just as hospitals are sometimes measured by the number of beds filled instead of the number of beds emptied, as librarians are measured by the number of books catalogued instead of the number of books circulated, or policemen by the number of people arrested instead of the number of crimes prevented, so sometimes in dispensing our particular form of salvation, we tend to count the number of people that come into the revival tent instead of what happens to them after they leave.

One of the most serious side effects of an obsession with head counts as opposed to program impact is the effect on one's attitude toward risk and uncertainty. Any true professional is a creative person, and creativity involves a positive attitude toward risk taking. Undue emphasis on sheer output and numbers inevitably causes people to shy

away from risky, innovative programming because of the ever-present threat of failure and because of the fact that creative programming is far more time-consuming than routinized programming. The professional is interested in turning frogs into handsome princes—the hack is a worker on the academic assembly line, with piece rates as the incentive.

*Rapport*

Sixth, rapport. Rapport is a term most commonly used in the psychological clinic. It has been borrowed into the English language from the French, because there apparently was no English word that would really do the job. Rapport, translated literally, simply means relationship, but it carries with it overtones of understanding, empathy, and sympathy. It implies that the effective Extension educator—indeed all educators—are in love with knowledge not for its own sake, but because knowledge is power in the best sense of that word. St. Francis of Assisi once said, “No one really knows anything unless he can put it to some use.”

Rapport implies the ability to relate to people, to understand their needs and the ways in which knowledge can be passed on to them in helping them to better meet those needs. This applies not only to clientele, but also to effectiveness in relating to colleagues, to policy makers, and to the wider community.

Failure to relate effectively to these significant others also diminishes one’s effectiveness with respect to clientele.

In short, rapport—the ability to relate effectively to others—is a coin with two sides. Relating to others implies the ability not only to serve clientele, but also to function as part of some significant larger whole—an organization and, beyond that, a total society.

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**Summary**

Professionalism can be either a pose or a calling. There’s a considerable body of literature to help the posers in what has come to be called gamesmanship—the art of succeeding in seeming to be what one is not. The tangible rewards can be substantial—at least in the short run. If, on the other hand, one’s profession is a calling, there are at least six qualities or standards requiring continual cultivation: art, clarity, depth, breadth, goal-orientation, and rapport.

In the final analysis, the extent to which Extension professionals possess these qualities comes back to the central question of accountability. The true professional

will be measured by the results achieved—changes in the behavior of people and their environments. Improvement in the quality of life will be demonstrated by changes in specific social indicators: voter participation, reduction in the school dropout rate, a decline in infant mortality—not in the number of meetings held or the number of pamphlets mailed.

It's a large order to measure up in all these qualities, but I can only agree with Dean Rusk's assessment that it's most likely to happen in our land-grant institutions. That's what we're all about.

### Footnotes

1. This article is based on a paper given at the Annual In-Service Training Conference of University Extension, University of Missouri, Columbia, October 17, 1975.
2. George B. Strother and David N. Swinford, "Recertification and Relicensure: Implications for the University," *The Spectator*, XXXVIII (March, 1975), 5-9.
3. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, *The Fourth Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).
4. Dean Rusk, "Tomorrow's Need: The Universal Man," in *Public Service and Extension in Institutions of Higher Education* (Athens: University of Georgia and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, Center for Continuing Education, 1974), pp. 3-8.