

On Being Professional

Being professional involves not only knowing something,
it involves attitudes—a state of mind

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OBIGATION to write can create necessity to read and thus establishing the opportunity to learn. Such was this author's experience in checking library resources on the subject of professionalism. The rewarding find was a book entitled *Education for the Professions*.¹ Its first chapter spells out three earmarks of the professions as being (1) study and training, (2) measure of success, and (3) associations.

The first earmark indicates that an extended period of specialized study and training is required to learn the methods of service and to develop skill in their application. "The principal distinguishing characteristic of a profession," the editor writes, "is the possession of a body of knowledge, a set of attitudes, and a group of skills, collectively called a technique, which enables the members to perform a particular type of service." The status of Extension service work as a profession is established without question—the Census Bureau has tabulated us since 1930 among its population statistics as "farm and home management advisors."

But the second earmark (measure of success) caused me to ponder. The following paragraphs could, it seemed to me, have been written with a county agent or a specialist in mind, and may well be true in the coming decades as in Extension's past experience:

A second earmark of a profession is that, although the services rendered by its members are performed for a fee or a salary, their success

¹Clyde E. Blauch (ed.), *Education for the Professions* (Washington: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1955). Available from Superintendent of Documents, United States Government Printing Office, Washington 25, 302 pp. \$1.75 (paper), \$2.75 (buckram).

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is not measured by financial standards but rather by accomplishment in serving the needs of people. Their main driving force is professional spirit rather than the desire for gain; the true measure of their success is the quality of the service they render, not the financial gains they amass.

Professional men may become well-to-do, but the meaning and significance of their profession, both for themselves and for the public, is not primarily that they make money but that their service brings intellectual power to their pupils and students, protection to their country, health to their patients. The professional man is sustained by the satisfaction which he obtains from rendering a service well, from gaining the esteem of his fellow professionals, from living up to the solidly established tradition of the little society or professional group of which he is a member, from discharging faithfully the high professional obligation in which he has been indoctrinated. Here is one of the reasons why the professions are generally held in high social esteem. A truly professional man is a dedicated man; he espouses the high ideal of service to his fellow man; he is devoted to his art.²

The third earmark of a profession is said to be that its members organize associations through which they act collectively to maintain and improve its service. "From one another they draw inspiration and learn new ways of performing their services; to one another they freely contribute their ideas, their discoveries, their inventions."³

The implication of these three earmarks is that professionalism is more than what we know, it is also the set of attitudes that shape the way we do our work. Professionalism thus is a state of mind. For the individual it means an acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, a concern for the effect of one's actions upon the welfare of one's colleagues, and a recognition of the necessity for continually seeking self-improvement. For the association of professionals, the implication is that concern for improving the service rendered to the public should have precedence among objectives.

A corollary implication for associations of professionals is that the improving of service rendered to the public will inevitably require adapting the service to meet new needs as the problems of people change. It is not enough to refine past practice; it is also necessary to encourage innovation and to accept new ideas with an open mind. Today's Extension Service worker needs not only to be a professional in knowledge and attitude, but he or she must also to function effectively as a member of a team of professionals.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*