

# Professionals—To Be or Not to Be

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In 1956, Lieberman, in *Education as a Profession*, listed eight characteristics that determine occupational professionalism.

1. The performance of a unique, definite, and essential social service.
2. Emphasis on intellectual techniques in performing the service.
3. A long period of specialized training to acquire a systematic body of knowledge.
4. A broad range of autonomy for both the practitioner and the occupational group.
5. Acceptance of broad personal responsibility for judgments made and acts performed within the scope of the occupation.
6. Emphasis on the service rendered, rather than economic gain to the practitioner.
7. A comprehensive, self-governing organization of practitioners.
8. A code of ethics clarified by actual cases.

Since Lieberman listed these characteristics, many re-

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*Editors' note—This article is the result of the author's work with the ACE Public Relations Committee. He has compiled pertinent research on the topic and gives his views in hope of initiating a dialogue. The editors of ACE Quarterly welcome response to this article as well as other dialogues on communication.*

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searchers have used them as the basis for "professionalism scales," including several in the field of communication. Hawley created such a scale for research on professionalism among newsmen that has subsequently been used with both American Agricultural Editors Association and ACE members.

Evans surveyed AAEA members in 1976. His results were strikingly similar to those of a survey of ACE members conducted the same year by Bostian and Reed.

Swanson in 1961, and Read in 1969 addressed the question of professionalism among agricultural communicators in articles for this journal. Reed's master's thesis from the University of Wisconsin treats the topic in detail.

The consensus among these researchers seems to be that there are a few highly professional agricultural communicators; a few that rate quite low; but the majority are "medium." That is not to say those people do not do their jobs in a good, perhaps even an exemplary fashion; they just do not qualify as professionals. When they ask to be treated as such, however, I wonder if they realize that being professional accrues not only benefits but great responsibilities as well.

Professionalism is not something that can be given to people. In fact, they cannot even "earn" it by getting more degrees, more salary, or a higher position; or by subscribing to more journals; taking sabbatic leave; or attaining faculty status. Some of those things happen to professionals, but none of them have ever created a professional. A person becomes a professional accidentally; by believing so strongly in what he or she is doing, and by caring so much about it that they are elevated naturally above the "workers" around them.

When someone in our field expresses the desire to be treated "like a professional," in most cases I think they have in mind the respect and authority they see accorded most professors. I wonder, however, if they would like to earn a Ph.D.—not for the sake of having a degree, but for the intense research and learning that accompany it. Would they be interested in conducting research, publishing their findings in journals, and keeping abreast of the research being done by others in their field? They would need to be versed in the incredibly dynamic field of communication—all of it—not their myopic field of, say, print media in agricultural journalism, or even their limited field of agricultural communication.

For, as Reed says, "carpet cleaners, football players, and pipe fitters may perform high-quality work, and so may communicators, but a quality job does not denote a professional."

Helen Hurd, in the *Journal of Cooperative Extension* puts it another way:

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... 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.

How many of those requesting "professional status," I wonder, take the time to read the research of others, let alone conduct original research of their own. Personnel at a land-grant institution are arbitrarily split into teaching, research, and extension components. That doesn't stop many professors and researchers from finding time to do extension work; nor should it stop us from finding time for teaching and research—even if it means doing it on "our own time."

If the professors with whom we work knew we spent the same effort on communication research (both doing and reading) as they spend in their fields, they would be far more willing to accept our word on questions that arise in our dealings with them.

Another caution for those who would be professionals is put forth by Whitehead:

...professionalized knowledge, supported by a restricted acquaintance with useful subjects subservient to it...has its dangers. It produces minds in a groove. Each professional makes progress, but it is progress in its own groove...

So, add to the time spent on keeping abreast of the field of communication the time necessary to stay current on at least the most important developments in agriculture, psychology, sociology, education, and human ecology.

I contend that many ACE members have fallen into the trap

that Whitehead describes. Support for this contention is reflected in the conferences and contests of our professional organization. They tend to ignore anything outside the bounds of our field as immediately applicable to our jobs. They also fragment our field further into particular segments—graphics, publications, mass media, etc.

Miller and Schwartz in their February 1980 abstract reported on research on communication in research teams. This study showed the people most sought for advice "...read more, especially sophisticated journals;...authored more papers in refereed journals; gave more conference papers; had more Ph.D.s."

Miller and Schwartz describe the situation as "...a small set of highly competent and productive people who monitored outside information, shared it among themselves, and were sought by others...for their knowledge."

Those of you who have been asking to be granted "professional status"—who want the benefits that accrue from such status—are you willing also to make the sacrifices and accept the responsibilities?

Because when you start making those sacrifices; when you start taking those responsibilities; the rest will eventually follow—accidentally.

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