

Do You Really Qualify As a Professional College Teacher?

Harold B. Swanson

Abstract

In a clear, concise manner the concept of professionalism in collegiate teaching is defined. Necessary criteria and attributes are listed as a guide toward professionalism.

Are we college teachers of agriculture really professionals? Perhaps it is heresy even to imply that college instructors do not always meet the professional requirements of educators. Or are we merely well-qualified experts, little concerned about standards, ethical obligations, understanding, and other common attributes of a profession?

"Professionalism" and "professional" are difficult concepts to define. Nearly everyone claims to be a professional. Beauticians, morticians, athletes, and countless others claim professional status.

This article does not dispute these groups' right to the title. Rather, it establishes a concept of professionalism in collegiate teaching and lists attributes to guide college teachers toward professionalism.

E. T. York, Jr., former administrator for the Federal Extension Service and now provost for the Florida Higher Education System, once quoted this definition of a profession [1]:

"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."

He distilled this down to four elements — specialized knowledge, training, integrity, and service. Others have pointed to the importance of standards, self-satisfaction in the work, and dedication.

Criteria

The criteria I'm suggesting are based on my modifications of these ideas and those of extension educator Raymond Ranta, educators G. B. Leighbody and Myron Leiberman, labor professor Dale Yoder, and others [2].

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To meet professional educator standards, the college teacher of agriculture should:

1. Be particularly skilled and proficient in his or her work. Agriculture has a wide variety of recognized and distinguishable disciplines. To gain this proficiency, the college teacher needs two kinds of knowledge and skills:

● Those directly concerned with his area of competence. Some colleges may require a broad knowledge of agriculture and the ability to teach general agriculture. Others, especially larger Universities, require very specialized competency in fields such as agronomy, soils, dairy science, economics, farm management etc.

● Those connected with the skills, understanding, philosophies, background, and processes of collegiate teaching. To understand education and communications, we must be familiar with the processes and theories in these areas. Here, exposure to social-psychology, sociology, communications, and education — to mention a few disciplines — are important. It is here, I feel, too many teachers of agriculture fall short.

I'm constantly amazed that we rightly insist on the highest degree of sophistication and knowledge in research, but pay little heed, or perhaps give "lip service," to proficiency in or understanding of learning and teaching processes.

2. Have a strong sense of both public and student responsibility. To maintain this sense, we must engage in continuous self-examination, research, and self-criticism. I believe "humanism" and ability to relate to the student are essential in teaching, although I might be hard-put to defend the position with research findings.

3. Place service to others in higher importance than personal gains. Physicians' code of ethics includes this. The same code should apply to us in college teaching.

4. Be especially dedicated to his job and what it stands for. Each of us needs to reflect — both to colleagues and to those outside this institution — the pride he has in his profession, in collegiate teaching, and in job satisfaction. A professional doesn't downgrade his profession. He may criticize and try to reform it, but constant derogation indicates he should say "goodbye" to his profession.

5. Be essentially self-directed and self-motivated and be able to work in positions of considerable autonomy and decisionmaking. At the same time, he must take responsibility for the results of his efforts and actions and accept professional criticism.

In these days of accountability, the professional college teacher is responsible to account for his work to the university and to the public. Many academicians will disagree with this. They may be right. On the other hand, they may be too self-protective or mired in "ivory tower"

professionalism, or they may be hiding behind the cloak of "academic freedom."

A professional seeks counsel and advice, but does not transfer responsibility for his own mistakes to others.

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

It is inconceivable that any college teacher who believes in learning can fail to put full effort into improving his own professional competence. A poor teacher can become a good teacher. However, a "nonlearner" — a person who fails to keep up in his field or in his teaching skills — doesn't deserve the label "professional." It may be more difficult to maintain subject matter competence today, but this doesn't excuse us from being continuing learners.

No one is more harmful than the chronic "know-it-all" or "so whatter" who sneers at new professional development efforts as impractical, "we know all that stuff," etc.

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

8. Work within acceptable ethical standards. Various standards have been adopted for university teachers, but some points to emphasize are these:

- Loyalty to fellow workers.
- Avoidance of rumor and hearsay. A professional secures important information directly from those authorized to release it.
- Membership and support of professional organizations that represent the person and the profession to which he belongs.
- Adjustment of grievances through proper channels.
- Meeting professional obligations to and agreements with his colleagues.
- Procuring advancement only through worthy professional performance and superior preparations and not at the expense of others.

9. Have knowledge of and familiarity with professional literature of the field. Here, professional literature includes not only specific subject matter, but also that of educational philosophy and methods. This Journal is an example of professional literature on educational philosophy and methods. A college teacher unable to communicate effectively, who is impervious to student needs or situations, or who is unable to relate to student audiences has little professional value. Willing to learn and relate, such instructors and professors become valuable professionals.

10. Be willing to change methods when research indicates the need to do so.

11. Believe in 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 and related groups and contributing to them is an essential way of doing this.

I feel that more sharing of methods, materials, and research results contribute greatly to improving the welfare and learning of students and the general public. After all, we're public servants, albeit scrupulously independent academicians.

12. Utilize and understand the specific language employed in the profession. Many times we hear criticism of instructors' use of terms that are unintelligible to those in related fields. It is perfectly acceptable and useful for agronomists, journalists, animal scientists, and nutritionists to use the technical language of their profession when communicating with their colleagues. However, when they use the same language with less technically oriented audiences, especially outside of classroom situations, they are guilty of poor teaching. When we communicate together as professionals, we can and should use the language of our profession. But let's not over-do it!

Professional Responsibilities

The opportunities to improve teaching are many. Many seminars are presented, but usually only the already proficient instructors feel these are worthwhile. And the range of available literature is great. Help is available from many departments at every university and college.

The criteria I've outlined allow a great deal of individual initiative and independence and impose real responsibilities upon the professional. Paul A. Miller, president of Rochester Institute of Technology and long-time land-grant college administrator, referred to the professional's "moral responsibility" to "recognize that the truths he applies are not all completely certain." Miller said this should 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, criteria and thoughts suggested here are neither complete nor universally accepted. They may, however, be the basis for considering more desirable and acceptable criteria and standards for the college teacher.

Oh, yes, I didn't answer my original question, "Are we college teachers professionals?" Some are; others are not. But I do believe our agricultural teachers have combined "humanism," "enthusiasm," good teaching, and thorough knowledge of their fields to the extent that they need not take a back seat to their colleagues at any educational departments or institutions in the nation. We've come a long way, but we still have a way to go. As long as we recognize we're still "becoming" teachers, that we're not all the way there, I think we qualify as professionals.

References

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" (unpublished Ph.D. 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, *Personal Management and Industrial Relations, 5th ed.* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1962).

CARE OF INDOOR PLANTS FOR THE HOME IS TITLE OF NEW COURSE AT FRESNO

The agriculture field, along with other disciplines has a stereotyped image among college students. It is thought of as a conservative, banal major with the same material being presented today as it was 20 years ago. A way to combat this problem is to move agriculture into the minds of urban people where the overwhelming majority of our citizens live. How do you make them aware of agriculture? By offering a class in the plant science department that affects most every young person attending college today.

After transferring to my present college (CSUF), I was very surprised to find that in the ornamental horticulture department there was not one class that dealt with indoor plant production. Fortunately, on our campus we have what is called the "Experimental College", a part of the regular college with the exception that they deal with new and innovative classes. If these classes are a success, they will enter their respective disciplines as regular courses.

New Class Results

Encouraged, we planned our new course, "Care of Indoor Plants for the Home" within this experimental college framework. The results produced an enrollment of nearly 300 students the first semester and nearly 200 the second semester. Approximately 80% had never taken a plant science course or for that matter, had never thought of indoor plants as part of agriculture. As a result, student inquiries pertaining to ornamental horticulture section of the plant science department increased. Students who were having problems finding employment in their respective fields were now considering a career in ornamental horticulture.

Paul Sommers is a lecturer in the Plant Science Department at California State University, Fresno. Along with his colleague, Dr. Gary Kock, he has tried to experiment with a new type of class. He and Dr. Koch will be working at the NACTA Convention this June and will be glad to discuss their ideas with others.

The purpose of the class is to give 50 of the most common foliage plants found in the home, their botanical and common name and their individual cultural practices. I have concluded that the success of this class is attributed to two main factors:

- 1) The use of instructional aids and practical demonstrations.
- 2) The student's intense interest in the subject. (I can sincerely say that not one student ever left the class early from our three-hour weekly lecture.)

As far as the need for laboratory space and time are concerned, the students may use their own home as a lab to experiment with plants after the demonstrations have been given in class.

More Sections Proposed

Presently, there is only one section of foliage plants taught. There are plans to open additional sections dealing with palms, ferns, orchids, and flowering potted plants.

The opportunity is available to integrate students into the agriculture science school. How can student enrollment be increased? One way is by offering innovative subjects that excite and satisfy the student's needs. One such course is the care of indoor plants for the home.

If further details are desired, please contact me during NACTA Conference or at this address:

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Nominations Due For NACTA Teaching Fellow And Ensminger-Interstate Awards

The Teacher Fellow and Ensminger-Interstate Awards will be made at our annual convention at California State University, Fresno, California, June 16-18, 1975.

If you have any questions or desire nomination materials, please contact:

Dr. Robert D. Seif, Chairman
NACTA Teacher Recognition and Evaluation Committee
Department of Agronomy
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The deadline for submitting nomination materials is April 1, 1975. Remember, encouragement of good teaching is important, so make the extra effort and nominate one of your institution's outstanding teachers.