

Professionalism is a Clinical Skill: Building Integrity, Accountability, and Professional Identity

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What Is Professionalism?

Defining Professionalism in Veterinary Tech

More than how you speak— it's an identity

Professionalism is a group of sustained behaviors that reflect the values, ethics, and competencies expected in a given field.

Professionalism is a measurable, teachable, competency

Attributes of the Veterinary Professional

1

Integrity

Honest, transparent, consistent
— even when no one is watching

2

Accountability

Own mistakes, follow through on
commitments, deliver on time

3

Compassion

Empathy for patients, clients,
and colleagues

4

Teamwork

Collaborative, respectful, reliable
within the clinical team

5

Lifelong Learning

Openness to feedback;
commitment to continuous
improvement

6

Appearance & Decorum

Professional presentation,
punctuality, appropriate
demeanor

2 Why Professionalism Matters

The evidence for institutional and patient-level impact

Professionalism Is a Patient-Safety Skill

Small behaviors create real clinical consequences.

Professional Behavior	Clinical Impact
Clear communication	Fewer missed instructions and preventable misunderstandings.
Accurate documentation	Better continuity of care and clearer team follow-through.
Accountability	Earlier error reporting, faster correction, and stronger trust.
Respectful teamwork	Safer handoffs, smoother workflow, and better patient flow.

Professionalism is not a “nice to have.” It directly shapes patient care.

Professionalism Builds Credibility

How veterinary technicians carry themselves shapes how the entire profession is understood and valued.



Unprofessional behavior can reinforce outdated perceptions of technicians as assistants rather than credentialed professionals.

Credibility is built — or weakened — one interaction at a time.

3 Key Traits of Professionalism

Communication

Verbal, written, and nonverbal — all three are assessed

Verbal Communication

- Appropriate tone, pace, and vocabulary for the audience
- Active listening — not just waiting to speak
- De-escalation and client empathy

Written & Nonverbal

- Medical records: accurate, complete, timely
- Professional e-mail etiquette with supervisors and clients
- Body language in clinical spaces: confidence, approachability
- Phone communication with clients: protocol-driven

Accountability & Reliability

Students who cannot own their mistakes in school will not own them in practice

- Arrive on time, stay the full shift, and notify supervisors in advance.
- Follow through: if you say you will do something, do it.
- Report errors promptly; delayed disclosure can escalate risk.
- Take ownership of outcomes — not credit for wins alone.
- Document what you do. "It isn't done if it isn't documented."
- Own the work you submit. AI may support learning, but not replace accuracy, originality, or judgment.

Ethical Conduct in Practice

Professionalism is revealed by how students respond when they do not know something, make a mistake, or recognize a safety concern.

Honesty & Accountability

Own mistakes and acknowledge assistance.

Protect confidentiality in academic and clinical settings.

Take responsibility for the accuracy of your work.

Speaking Up & Responsibility

Ask questions and admit errors early.

Raise safety concerns through respectful channels.

Psychological safety supports honesty — not a pass on accountability.

Commitment to Improvement

Verify information rather than guessing.

Seek feedback and use it professionally.

Correct errors and demonstrate growth over time.

Responsible AI Use: School vs. Practice

The setting changes, but accountability does not.

In School

- Follow assignment rules.
- Disclose AI assistance when required.
- Demonstrate your own reasoning.
- Verify facts, citations, and sources.
- Own the final submission.

In Practice

- Follow hospital policy and scope of practice.
- Protect patient, client, hospital, and employee confidentiality.
- Never substitute AI for clinical judgment.
- Verify information through approved clinical resources.
- Own the final decision and documentation.

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Teaching Professionalism

Responsible AI Use Is Professionalism

Not automatically cheating — but never outside integrity, judgment, or confidentiality

The question is not whether students will use AI.

The professional question is whether they understand the boundaries.

AI can support learning, drafting, review, and reflection.

Misrepresenting AI-generated work is an integrity issue.

Students remain responsible for accuracy and clinical judgment.

Confidentiality still applies to patients, clients, hospitals, and classmates.

Responsible use must be taught, modeled, and assessed.

Where Does Professionalism Fit in Curriculum?

Three integration models — choose what your program can sustain

Standalone Module

A dedicated "Professionalism in Vet Tech" module typically in Year 2/Quarter 6. High visibility, easy to assess.

Thread Model

Professionalism competencies woven into every course — clinical, pharmacology, communication. Includes responsible AI use, documentation integrity, confidentiality, and verification habits across courses. Reinforces that professionalism is always on. Requires faculty coordination.

Clinical Integration

Evaluated during all lab and clinical rotations via structured rubrics. Closest to real-world application. Requires trained evaluators and calibration meetings.

Professionalism in Our Programs

Different program models can teach the same standard — they just observe it differently.

Workplace-Based Online Model

Students are already employed in veterinary practice.

Mentors and hospital managers provide workplace observation.

Faculty can follow up on clinical skills, progression, and work authenticity concerns.

Professionalism is assessed through coursework, mentor feedback, documentation, and workplace patterns.

Clinic-Based In-Person Model

Students work beside faculty and peers in a school-based clinical setting.

Faculty can directly model and correct professional behavior in real time.

Professionalism can be observed during client communication, teamwork, and patient care.

Example: APEX College of Veterinary Technology uses an on-site clinic model.

Strategies for Teaching Professionalism

Evidence-informed approaches for vet tech programs

- Case-based learning — place students in realistic ethical and professional dilemmas before clinical rotation
- Standardized patient encounters (actor clients) — assess communication and emotional regulation
- Reflective journaling — students articulate how their behaviors reflect professional values
- Peer feedback exercises — calibrate self-assessment against peer and faculty observation
- Narrative documentation — students write "professionalism moments" they observed or experienced
- Simulation debrief — structured professionalism discussion immediately after clinical simulation

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Modeling & Observation

Role Modeling in Clinical Settings

The hidden curriculum: students learn from what they see, not just what they're told



Explicit Modeling

Faculty verbalize professional reasoning: "I'm choosing to have this conversation privately rather than in front of the client because..."



Tacit Modeling

Students observe how you handle a difficult client call, a mistake made under pressure, a disagreement with a colleague.



Counter-Modeling

Acknowledge when you see unprofessional behavior in clinical settings — don't ignore it. Name it, debrief it.

Teaching Students to Get Involved

Professional identity grows when students connect beyond the course shell.

Start with SCNAVTA or State Associations

Have students locate their state practice act and follow state association updates.

Use No-Cost Professional Communities

VSPN, Clinician's Brief, VetTech Café, and specialty-focused groups can expose students to the larger profession.

Discuss Current Issues

Bring in topics such as utilization, mid-level practitioner proposals, public health concerns, and technician title protection.

Interview a Professional Exemplar

Ask students to identify someone at their site and interview them about career values, professional growth, and advocacy.

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Assessing Professionalism

Measurement strategies that are fair, consistent, and defensible

Why Assessing Professionalism Is Hard

The challenge is not whether it matters — it is making expectations observable, consistent, and fair.

Subjectivity

Evaluators may score the same behavior differently.

Context Dependence

Behavior may vary online, in lab, at work, or in externship.

Halo Effect

Strong skills can inflate scores; weak skills can unfairly lower them.

Feedback Avoidance

Faculty and mentors may delay hard conversations to avoid conflict or pushback.

Lack of Documentation

Without examples and follow-up, concerns become difficult to defend or remediate.

Professionalism assessment works best when behavior is observed, documented, discussed, and reassessed.

Practical Assessment Tools

Use tools veterinary technician programs can realistically apply in courses, labs, mentorship, and externship.

Rubrics

Observable criteria for communication, reliability, confidentiality, teamwork, and accountability.

Clinical Evaluations

Document behavior during simulations, skills checks, and externship experiences.

Direct Observation

Observe one interaction or task, then give behavior-specific feedback.

Concern Documentation

Record the incident, expectation, corrective action, and follow-up date.

Student Reflection

Students examine feedback, decisions, mistakes, and growth across the program.

Remediation Plans

Set measurable goals, support provided, timeline, and reassessment point.

Keep the tools simple enough to use consistently — and specific enough to be fair.

Benchmarking Student Progress

What does "professionalism growth" actually look like over two years?

Year 1 Quarters 1-2

Baseline: self-awareness,
punctuality, appearance,
basic communication
norms

Year 1 Quarters 3-4

Integration: applies
ethics in simulation,
handles conflict in lab
settings

Year 2 Quarters 5-6

Application: professional
behavior in externship;
responds to real
feedback

Year 2 Externship Quarters 7-8

Mastery: mentors junior
students; demonstrates
consistent independent
judgment

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Feedback That Builds

The Professional Feedback Flow

A four-step cycle: Observe → Document → Deliver → Follow Up

1

Observe

See a specific behavior. Resist labeling. Describe only what you observed.

2

Document

Record it within 24 hours. Use behavioral language. "Student was 8 minutes late and did not notify supervisor."

3

Deliver

Private conversation. SBI format: Situation → Behavior → Impact. End with a clear, achievable expectation.

4

Follow Up

Set a check-in date. Acknowledge improvement explicitly. Re-document if pattern continues.

Giving Effective Professional Feedback

SBI + SMART — the two frameworks every faculty member needs

SBI Framework

S — Situation

"During Tuesday's clinical rotation..."

B — Behavior

"You interrupted the client twice while they were speaking..."

I — Impact

"The client visibly disengaged and the visit ran 12 minutes longer."

SMART Goals After Feedback

S

Specific behavior to change

M

Measurable outcome or frequency

A

Achievable within the rotation

R

Relevant to patient/client care

T

Time-bound: next check-in date

Common Feedback Pitfalls

What we do instead of feedback — and why it doesn't work

Pitfall	Why It Fails
"The Sandwich"	"You did great, but... great job overall." Students hear only the praise and dismiss the critique.
"The Generality"	"You need to be more professional." This gives the student no actionable information and cannot be assessed.
"The Delay"	Feedback delivered three weeks after the incident is not actionable and feels punitive rather than developmental.
"The Public Critique"	Correcting a student in front of a client or peer damages trust and shuts down openness to learning.
"The Drop"	Delivering feedback once and never following up teaches the student the concern wasn't serious.

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Building a Culture

Recognition Requires Readiness

Programs do more than prepare students for employment — they prepare them to carry the profession forward.



Creating a Culture of Professionalism in College

Students need to understand from the start that they are entering a profession — not just completing courses.

State it publicly

Name professionalism as a program expectation in orientation, rubrics, clinical communication, and feedback.

Model it publicly

Program leaders, faculty, mentors, and clinical coordinators must visibly embody the standard they require.

Celebrate it

Recognize professionalism explicitly through shout-outs, portfolios, awards, and examples worth repeating.

Remediate early

Address minor concerns before they become patterns. Early feedback protects the student, program, and profession.

We are building the
future leaders of our
profession!