The two chapters that follow examine how professions are organized to carry out collective tasks relating to their mission in society. Chapter 1 provides a general overview of the nature of professions and Chapter 2 takes an in-depth look at the professional status of early childhood education.

These chapters offer a perspective about professions from the outside looking in. They will be most interesting to advanced students and to those wanting to learn about the sociology and philosophy relating to professions. Those whose primary interest is the implications of the study of professionalism for day-to-day work with children might find this book more beneficial if they begin their reading with Chapter 3 and come back later to read Chapters 1 and 2.
What Is a Profession?

Far and away the best prize life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.
—Theodore Roosevelt

This chapter comes first in this book because an overview of professions provides the foundation on which a discussion about what it means to be a professional can be built. Anyone who works with young children is aware that what we do is important, and that it requires knowledge, skill, and hard work. Yet we early childhood educators often ask ourselves why we don’t receive salaries that are commensurate with those earned by professionals in established fields, and why we aren’t acknowledged with the recognition and respect afforded to others who serve society. An academic discussion of professions may seem like a detour that impedes getting to what you are most interested in—early childhood education—but it provides a basis for understanding what follows.

What do the words profession, professional, and professionalism mean? What makes a profession different from other occupations? What makes professionals different from other workers? How can we identify professional practice? This chapter provides a brief historical context, examines popular and scholarly use of terminology relating to professions, discusses eight criteria used for determining whether an occupation is a profession, and addresses some issues about professions. This information will contribute to your growing understanding of the field of early childhood education and what it means to be an educator who demonstrates professionalism in work with young children. It
can also help to provide a framework for understanding the nature of professions and some insights into how we can work collectively for greater recognition as a profession.

**Historical Context for Understanding Professions**

*Profession* is a term that has been used for hundreds of years. The earliest meaning of *profession* was a solemn declaration or vow made by a person entering a religious order. To “profess” meant to make a fundamental commitment to work for something that was worthwhile. The religious origins of the term remind us that professions are imbued with moral and ethical elements and suggest that professional roles are extensions of moral character. The term *profession* originally referred to what were historically called the “learned professions”—law, medicine, and the ministry.

“Traditionally professionals were individuals who pursued a learned art in the spirit of public service—only incidentally did they view it as a means to secure a livelihood. Consequently, the professions have long been understood to be moral endeavors, demanding moderation of personal interests in order to provide beneficent service to others” (Wineberg, 2008, p. 1). Because of its religious origins and service orientation, a profession is sometimes referred to as a “calling.” This idea will be revisited in Chapter 6.

These historical origins contribute to the current view that professions serve society and that professionals are committed to meeting important societal needs. Becoming a professional was a call to selfless service for the common good, in contrast to a career based on the desire for profit. To be a professional meant to be someone who possessed specialized training that enabled that person to meet a need in a society. For this reason, the services of the professions historically were highly valued and professionals came to enjoy respect and influence.

**What Do the Terms Mean in Popular Culture?**

The terms *profession* and *professional* may be confusing because they can mean very different things. The way these terms are used in everyday conversation and in the popular press are quite different from the ways they are described by philosophers and sociologists who study professions. Even in conversation and the popular press, the terms are used in a variety of ways.

**Professional: Committing to a job done well.** Perhaps the most frequent use of the term is in referring to someone who does his or her job with skill and competence and who is committed to the task to be accomplished. For example, one of my friends describes the proprietor of a neighborhood shoe store as a “consummate professional.” By this she means that the proprietor is a good
communicator, knows her products well, knows her customers, and always helps them to find the “right” shoe. When I relayed this compliment to the owner, she replied by saying, “It’s because I have a passion for the work I do.”

**Professional: Being a good employee.** The term *professional* is often used in the literature of business and other fields to discuss the behaviors that make a person successful in a work environment. Such attributes as punctuality, appropriate dress, the ability to get along with coworkers, and a pleasant manner are often referred to as professionalism. You may find these things listed under the heading “Professionalism” in your annual performance evaluation.

**Professional: Providing reliable, competent service.** In their advertising, many businesses describe themselves as professional. The Yellow Pages of any phone book advertises professional termite control, hair stylists, gutter repair, house cleaning, pet grooming, and many others. This suggests that these businesses want the public to believe that they can be relied on to provide competent and reliable service and products.

**Professional: Getting paid for what you do.** Another common use of the word *professional* makes a distinction between those who do a job for money versus those who do it as recreation. In sports, *amateur* refers to those who play on school or community teams and *professional* to those who engage in the sport for pay. Similarly, in other endeavors we distinguish between amateurs who are engaging in an activity as a hobby and professionals who do it for pay.

**Professional: Just plain good.** The word *professional* has such a positive implication that it is sometimes used to describe something as worthy even when the word is not meaningful in the circumstance discussed. For example, a 2007 review in *Car and Driver* described a new model of Infiniti as “a serious machine: . . . professional, poised” (infinitiusa.com/g_sedan/awards-reviews/reviews.html).

It is clear from the ways it is popularly used that the term *professional* doesn’t have one precise, agreed-on meaning. But although these uses of the word do not tell us exactly what a professional is, they do suggest that being professional means possessing attributes that are highly desirable. Popular usage suggests that professionals have knowledge and skills that make people seek out their services and that instill trust in their work.

**What Do the Terms Mean in Scholarly Literature?**

Sociologists, philosophers, and other academics who study the nature and function of professions provide a more instructive way to comprehend what *professional* means. To understand the way these scholars think about the professions
and professionals, we need to begin by thinking about the responsibilities that accompany different roles in society. In complex, modern societies responsibility for different aspects of people’s welfare is assigned to specialized experts who are called professionals. These people provide something that is viewed as critical to the overall well-being of the members of a society. Not only do professionals provide a significant service but they are also, because of their training, the only ones who are equipped to provide this service. In other words they do something that other people cannot do for themselves or for one another. Thus, professionals who are committed to serving their clients are, by extension, serving society as a whole (Cooper, 2003; Kultgen, 1988).

An accepted academic view of a profession is a vocation that promotes a significant value and whose work is honored by the society. For example, medicine and nursing are meant to promote the value of wellness, law the value of justice, structural engineering the safety of roads and buildings, and teaching the value of learning and preparing future citizens. A professional’s work involves expertise that comes from a high degree of generalized and specialized knowledge. The ideal for a professional follows the historical context—a calling to selfless service to the community, as opposed to a career based on serving individual self-interest.

In A Grammar of Responsibility, Gabriel Moran writes, “In trying to cope with the complex decisions of the modern world, we have created a class of people called ‘professionals.’ Whatever their specialty, these people are supposedly trustworthy because there are guided by a professional code of ethics. The central term in most of these codes is ‘responsibility.’ A professional is above all else a responsible person” (1996, p. 16).

A general definition of profession, then, is that it is an occupation that serves the public welfare and that requires specialized educational training in some branch of learning or science. This brief definition, focusing on the essential dimensions of every profession, helps us to consider the meaning of the terms professional and professionalism. Obviously, there can be no professionals unless there are professions. A professional can be defined as a person who carries out the work of the profession. To be a professional an individual must obtain specialized educational training, demonstrate competence, and assure society that he/she will serve the public good. Professionalism is the expertise held by a professional and the ways that person utilizes her knowledge and skills to serve the society. The knowledge and skills applied by professionals are used to achieve specific outcomes, follow accepted standards, and require judgment to decide on appropriate action. Professional behavior (including trustworthiness, competence, and other attributes) is demonstrated in daily practice and reflects the profession’s commitment to the welfare of the society.

1Exclusive reliance on the pronoun she when a singular pronoun is called for does not acknowledge the presence of men in the field. In order to avoid the awkward usage of she/he I will alternate the use of she and he.
Chapter 1 • What Is a Profession?

The significant point that emerges from this discussion is that all professions are committed to meeting an important societal need. Much of the writing about professions emphasizes that each profession has an implied contract that spells out its mission and declares its intent to serve (Kultgen, 1988; Nash, 1996; Wineberg, 2008). Professional status, therefore, implies a relationship of mutual trust between society and the profession.

Criteria for Determining If an Occupation Is a Profession

In an article about law as a profession, Debra Bassett wrote, “Elevating an occupation to the status of a ‘profession’ accords that occupation with a distinct mantle of honor, respectability, and intelligentsia” (Bassett, 2005). Many occupations describe themselves as professions. But this does not mean that society views them this way. This leads to the question of how one determines if an occupation is a profession.

Over the years sociologists and philosophers who study professions have described a number of criteria that can be used to determine if an occupation is a profession (Bassett, 2005; Cooper, 2003; Kultgen, 1988; Moran, 1996; Nash, 1996). And while there is not complete agreement among these scholars, there is a good deal of overlap regarding which of these criteria they regard as important.

Following is a brief description of eight criteria that frequently appear in the literature about professions. This chapter discusses these criteria as they apply to the study of professions in general. In the chapter that follows, these same criteria will be used as a lens for examining the professional status of the field of early childhood education.

A specialized body of knowledge and expertise. A profession bases its work on a particular body of knowledge and specialized skills that are required to meet the individual needs of clients. This knowledge is based on theory and on research relevant to the discipline and is not normally possessed by others in the society (for example, a surgeon has unique knowledge of the physiology of the body). The knowledge is accompanied by skillful application (a structural engineer applies mathematical knowledge to the design of buildings that can resist earthquakes). A profession also has a collective obligation to conduct and make use of new research that will further its mission.

Prolonged training. A profession requires its practitioners to acquire systematic knowledge by participating in prolonged training that leads to a degree. The training is based on principles that are drawn from research, theory, and practice and involve judgment about their application, not a precise set of procedures that apply in all cases. Training is rigorous and involves both study and practical experience. It is delivered in institutions that have been accredited by a board of examiners in order to ensure uniformity of training across institutions and to
determine that the program meets established standards. Many professions require continuing professional training.

**Rigorous requirements for entry to training and eligibility to practice.** Admission to training programs for established professions like medicine, law, and engineering is generally quite competitive, and is based to some extent on scores from standardized entrance exams. Graduation from an accredited program is necessary, but professionals may not be authorized to practice until they take a required examination to make sure that they possess the requisite knowledge and skills, and go through screening procedures required for licensure. The license to practice is generally issued by states.

**Standards of practice.** Professions have agreed-on standards of practice (sometimes referred to as standards of performance). These are recommended procedures that are considered appropriate for dealing with situations that are regularly encountered in the workplace (for example, in dealing with a broken bone, a physician is expected to x-ray, put the bone in position to heal properly, and then immobilize it with a cast or splint). A professional must be aware of and guided by standards of practice, but the decision about how to act will be based on the specifics of a situation. Professionals are not expected to follow a predetermined recipe for action (in the case of the broken bone there may be several acceptable ways to set the bone and to treat the accompanying discomfort).

**Commitment to serving a significant social value.** An essential attribute of every profession is that it has a commitment to serving a significant social value. It provides a service that is essential to a society and has as its primary goal meeting the needs of others. Professions are dedicated to the public interest and are altruistic and service oriented rather than profit oriented.

**Recognition as the only group in the society who can perform a function.** A profession provides a social benefit and acknowledges its duties and responsibilities to its clients and to the society. Based on its important function and the specialized knowledge and skill of its practitioners, a profession gains recognition as the only group in the society that can perform a particular function.

**Autonomy.** Professions are characterized by autonomy—self-governance that results in internal control over the quality of the services provided. Professions regulate themselves based on the claim that others in the society do not have the technical knowledge required to oversee their work. Most professions have a national organization to develop standards for entry, oversee the admission of candidates into membership, create and enforce ethical guidelines, investigate reports of incompetent or unethical behavior, and provide continuing education.
Chapter 1 • What Is a Profession?

Code of ethics. A profession’s code of ethics is a document that spells out its moral obligations to society and its guidelines for moral behavior. Because a profession is the only group in a society that can perform an important function, it must demonstrate a strong moral commitment and instill confidence that it will serve the public good. In order to ensure that moral commitments are upheld, professions establish and enforce standards for professional practice through their codes of ethics and hold their members accountable to these standards.

Other criteria. A number of other criteria for defining professional status are mentioned in literature about professions. These include: a professional culture that strives to increase the knowledge base, group solidarity, prestige based on guaranteed service, profits that do not depend on capital, widely recognized status, a distancing from clients to enable an objective perspective, and high levels of compensation (Bassett, 2005; Kultgen, 1988). Some of these appear to be more side effects of professional status than criteria that define it.

A Continuum of Occupations

Sociologists and others who study professions have proposed a number of different ways to determine if an occupation has achieved professional status. The most widely used of these is called the “traits approach,” which involves listing the characteristics of occupations that demonstrate the greatest level of professionalism and judging other vocations as professional or not based on a comparison to this ideal (Bassett, 2005; Kultgen, 1988). Using this approach for assessing the status of occupations is difficult because there is no agreement about which criteria should be used. Moreover, the characteristics are matters of degree and all are present in greater or lesser measure in many occupations. Some scholars maintain that it is not possible to formulate a satisfactory definition of a profession because there is a lack of consensus about which traits should be considered.

In the article “Redefining the ‘Public’ Profession” Debra Lyn Bassett cites an article by sociologist William J. Goode who “has identified two ‘core characteristics’ of professions from which other characteristics are derived; these core characteristics are ‘a prolonged specialized training in a body of abstract knowledge, and a collectivity or service orientation’” (as cited in Bassett, 2005).

In the widely cited 1964 article titled “The Professionalization of Everyone?” Howard Wilensky wrote that medicine, law, civil engineering, architecture, accounting, and dentistry could be considered “established professions” (p. 143). These established professions are sometimes called paradigm professions, to suggest that they are examples that define the term. Other occupations such as nursing, teaching, librarianship, pharmacy, social work, physical therapy, speech
pathology, radiologic technology, veterinary medicine, financial planning, and hospital administration also serve society and are in various stages of making the claim to professional status. They are sometimes called emerging professions or semi professions.

In his book *Legal Ethics*, philosopher and ethics specialist Kenneth Kipnis suggests the idea of a continuum. He writes, “The development of an occupation into a profession is a lengthy process. Occupations may be located at virtually any point along a continuum with day laborers at one end and doctors and lawyers at the other” (1986, p. 8). Thinking about a continuum is helpful because it suggests that professional status is not an all-or-nothing affair and that an occupation can change its position along the continuum. As some groups work toward professional status others may move backward on the continuum. For example, doctors, whose autonomy has been reduced by corporate decision making in the health care system, do not have the professional autonomy they previously enjoyed.

Wilensky summarizes the process by which an occupation attempts to be recognized as a profession: “An occupation wishing to exercise professional authority must find a technical basis for it, assert an exclusive jurisdiction, link both skill and jurisdiction to standards of training, and convince the public that its services are uniquely trustworthy” (1964, p. 138).

**How Do We Expect Professionals to Behave?**

Because of the important role professionals play in people’s lives, there are some societal expectations for what they should be like and how they should behave. Professionals are expected to be *competent*—to have mastered the specialized knowledge and skills required to perform their function in society. They are expected to be committed to knowing and maintaining the skills necessary for the provision of service, to use appropriate scientific knowledge, and to be able to grasp the theoretical foundations of their discipline and apply them accordingly.

We also expect professionals to be *dedicated to service*. This dedication includes being reliable and responsible and committed to the quality of their work. Dedication to service includes the expectation that professionals should subordinate their own interests to those of the person being served.

Because a professional is performing a necessary service that no one else in society can provide, the client is dependent and often powerless. We therefore expect professionals to know and act in accordance with *moral standards*. Guidelines for ethical behavior are a part of every profession and include honesty, integrity, loyalty, and discretion.

In *Ethics and Professionalism* John Kultgen points out, “Some personal qualities are specific to each profession. One expects a different sort of person to be attracted to the person-oriented activities of the attorney, teacher, or social

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worker, than the project-oriented activities of the engineer, architect or accountant, and to activities that combine the two such as those of the physician, military officer, or business manager” (1988, p. 94).

Professionals who deal directly with human welfare have a special obligation to behave in ways that benefit those they serve. Values that are foundational to professions based on human relationships are caring, compassion, empathy, respect for others, and trustworthiness.

**Issues Regarding Professions**

In the book *Ethics and Professionalism* (1988) John Kultgen describes an ongoing debate regarding the value of professions. Some scholars maintain that professions serve important social functions and that professionals use their expertise for the good of all, are knowledgeable and competent, and do their jobs with high moral standards. But, of course, this is not always the case. We have all heard about, or experienced, professionals who do not act in ways that are consistent with the high expectations that society holds for them. We know that though expected, service and altruism are not always the primary motivating factor in the behavior of professionals.

Criticisms abounds. Some scholars believe that the concept of professions is fundamentally flawed. They argue that professionals are interested in furthering the status and prosperity of the profession as much or more than they are in serving humanity. Other scholars claim that professions are male dominated, have a strong middle-class orientation, reinforce the existing social system by making training and licensure available to only a chosen few, and provide more and better services to the upper classes than to the poor. These scholars also argue that professionals purposely and unnecessarily maintain a distance from clients and receive undeservedly high status and rewards.

Kultgen concludes that, “The authorities thus are arrayed against one another. The situation seems to be this: The professions have accomplished a great deal for humanity and we cannot abandon the ideal of professionalism in work. Those who see the professions as a force for the good are impressed by their accomplishments and protestation of high ideals. The critics are impressed by how far short they fall in realizing their potentialities and see the pretension to high ideas as an apology for the status quo” (1988, p. 63).

It should be apparent from reading this chapter that defining the nature of professions is complex and subject to much consideration. And while there are some reservations about the value of professions, there is no doubt that the purpose of a profession is to serve society, and it is generally agreed that most of them do just that. This chapter on the nature of professions lays the foundation for the chapter that follows. Perhaps it has started you thinking about your experiences in the field of early childhood education and what it means to be a professional. Next, we’ll take an in-depth look at how these ideas about professions apply to our field.
Reflection Questions

Reflection questions focus on how chapter content relates to personal experiences. They can be used as the basis for small-group discussions or as topics for journal writing.

- When you hear the term profession, what images come to mind?
- What do you mean when you say a person is a professional?
- What do you mean when you say a person acts like a professional?
- What do you expect from a person who is called a professional?
- Think about a professional who served you at some time in your life who you think of as a model of professionalism as it is described in this chapter. Give some specific examples of how that person behaved and what made you think that behavior demonstrated “professionalism.”
- Think about a situation where a person you regarded as a professional behaved in a manner that you didn’t think was professional. What did the person do? How did you feel about it?
- How have you seen the term professional used in the media? What does it suggest about how the term is understood?

References