

Howard Gardner & Lee S. Shulman

The professions in America today: crucial but fragile

Whether one sees the professions as a high point of human achievement, or, in George Bernard Shaw's piquant phrase, as a "conspiracy against the laity," there is little question that they have played a dominant role in industrial and postindustrial society since the early twentieth

Howard Gardner, John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, devised the theory of multiple intelligences, a critique of the notion that there exists but a single human intelligence that can be assessed by standard psychometric instruments. His most recent books are "Changing Minds" (2004), "Making Good" (with Wendy Fischman, Becca Soloman, and Deborah Greenspan, 2004), and "Good Work" (with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon, 2001). Gardner has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1995.

Lee S. Shulman, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2002, is president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University. His latest books are "Teaching as Community Property: Essays on Higher Education" (2004) and "The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach" (2004).

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century. It is difficult to envision our era without the physicians, lawyers, and accountants to whom we turn for help at crucial times; or the architects and engineers who shape the environments in which we live; or the journalists and educators to whom we look for information, knowledge, and, on occasion, wisdom.

Some forty years ago, in a *Dædalus* issue devoted entirely to the professions, guest editor Kenneth Lynn declared, "Everywhere in American life, the professions are triumphant." He went on to comment, "Given this dramatic situation, it is truly extraordinary how little we know about the professions."

We appear to know much more about the professions now than we did forty years ago; certainly there is no paucity of scholarly and popular literature on specific professions, if less on the professions in the aggregate. But the professions themselves have not remained frozen over that time. Indeed, they have recently been subjected to a whole new set of pressures, from the growing reach of new technologies to the growing importance of making money.

In recent years, the professions have not always had good press. Worried by evidence of incompetence and dishonesty, the general public seems to have lost its uncritical admiration for the pro-

fessional. Some in higher education see creeping professionalism as the enemy of liberal learning. Perhaps most dramatically, potent market forces, untempered by forces of equivalent power, have made it increasingly difficult to delineate just how professionals today differ from those nonprofessionals who also have power and resources in the society.

Triumphant on the one hand, under critical scrutiny on the other, the professions stand in need of fresh attention today. In the essays that follow, our authors review the professions in contemporary America – and the very idea of having a vocation or calling. We raise the question of whether the professions will survive in their recognizable form, evolve into quite different entities, or dissolve entirely; and whether the methods that have been developed for educating professionals are adequate to the current intellectual, practical, and ethical demands of these roles.

Generically, professions consist of individuals who are given a certain amount of prestige and autonomy in return for performing for society a set of services in a disinterested way. At mid-century, American sociologists like Bernard Barber, Everett Hughes, Robert Merton, and Talcott Parsons limned the defining characteristics of the professions. Barber, for example, identified four attributes: a high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge; a primary orientation to community interest rather than personal interest; a high degree of self-control of behavior through a code of ethics; and a system of monetary and honorary rewards that symbolize achievements of the work itself. In more recent times, important studies of specific professions have been carried out by Andrew Abbot, Howard Becker,

Elliot Freidson, Anthony Kronman, and Paul Starr – just to name a few who have approached the professions from a sociological perspective. These authorities have stressed the role of explicit training regimens, formal licensure, and procedures whereby untrained, incompetent, or unethical individuals can be excluded from practice.

In our view, six commonplaces are characteristic of all professions, properly construed: a commitment to serve in the interests of clients in particular and the welfare of society in general; a body of theory or special knowledge with its own principles of growth and reorganization; a specialized set of professional skills, practices, and performances unique to the profession; the developed capacity to render judgments with integrity under conditions of both technical and ethical uncertainty; an organized approach to learning from experience both individually and collectively and, thus, of growing new knowledge from the contexts of practice; and the development of a professional community responsible for the oversight and monitoring of quality in both practice and professional education.

The primary feature of any profession – the commitment to serve responsibly, selflessly, and wisely – sets the terms of the compact between the profession and the society. The centrality of this commitment defines the inherently ethical relationship between the professional and the general society. It also sets up the essential tension between the two poles of professional responsibility: the duty to serve the interests of one's immediate client and the obligation one has to the society at large. The lawyer's dual responsibilities of serving as both an officer of the court and as a zealous advocate for her clients exemplify this tension. Failure to deal responsibly with

this tension frequently creates the conditions that we have termed ‘compromised practice.’

Second, every profession lays claim to a theoretical knowledge base – a body of research, conceptions, and traditions that is the normative touchstone for its efforts. Whether that knowledge base is a body of biomedical research and theory, a collection of sacred texts, or a body of laws, regulations, and legal decisions, professions rest much of their authority on knowledge that, to some degree, develops both independently of the practice of the profession and in conjunction with it. For this reason, most of the professions, properly understood, have a place in the academy, the world of higher education. Both during professional education and through the course of one’s career, the practicing professional is expected to remain current with the growth and changes in that knowledge base.

Third, the defining characteristic of any profession is its mastery of a domain of practice. Professions are essentially practical performances. It is no accident that we regularly refer to professional ‘practitioners’ and professional ‘practice.’ The technical skills of analysis and argument, treatment and ritual, deliberation and diagnosis, action and interaction, are the hallmarks of any profession. We typically identify professions by the very practices in which their members engage. These practices have often developed quite independently of the putative knowledge base and ethical norms of the profession. There is thus a predictable conflict in practice between the norms of the academy and the norms of the professional practice community. How that conflict plays out in defining the standards for competent practice and malpractice, as well as the conditions for approved professional educa-

tion, is a drama that unfolds regularly in every professional domain.

Fourth, the hallmark of all professions, even beyond the prototypical practices of each, is the ubiquitous condition of uncertainty, novelty, and unpredictability that characterizes professional work. While much of professional practice is routine, the essential challenges of professional work center on the need to make complex judgments and decisions leading to skilled actions under conditions of uncertainty. This means that professional practice is frequently pursued at or beyond the margins of previously learned performances. That circumstance creates two related challenges for professional practice and education: professionals must be trained to operate at the uncertain limits of their previous experience, and must also be prepared to learn from the consequences of their actions to develop new understandings and better routines. They must also develop ways of exchanging those understandings with other professionals so the entire professional community benefits from their insight.

The need for professional judgment and action under conditions of uncertainty gives rise to the fifth commonplace of professions: the continuing need to learn from one’s experience – to grow smarter, wiser, and more skilled through the very experience of engaging in professional practice thoughtfully and reflectively. But no single practicing professional can accomplish that end and adequately aggregate and judge the lessons of practice while working in isolation. The conditions of professional practice and professional learning demand the establishment and smooth functioning of professional communities.

The sixth feature is therefore connected to learning to practice as a member of

*The
professions
in America
today:
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a professional community, charged with responsibility for establishing and renewing standards for both practice and professional education, for critically reviewing claims for new ideas and techniques and disseminating the worthy ones widely within the community of practice, and for generally overseeing the quality of performances at all stages of the career.

At the present time, few would dispute the claim that physicians, lawyers, architects, accountants, engineers, and clergy are professionals. Most would consider nurses, social workers, and teachers as members of critically important, albeit less prestigious, professions. (The lower prestige of the latter group of practitioners is generally attributed to the status of those whom they serve, and to the fact that their ranks have long been populated primarily by women – a situation that may be changing.) Other practitioners such as politicians, journalists, and foundation program officers have some claim to professional status. We would not consider artists, entertainers, athletes, or businesspersons to be professionals in the usual sense; but it is worth noting that any individual or group may choose to behave as a professional. And we can suggest as well that some groups of workers, like engineers, have improved their standings as professionals, while others, such as accountants in recent years, have undermined the status of their profession.

Whatever the fine points of definition, the professions date from ancient times – the Hippocratic oath, for instance, has been with us for millennia. Aspects of training, expertise, membership, and exclusion were characteristic of the medieval guilds. When universities were created centuries ago in Europe, they were intended primarily as institutions for

the preparation of professionals: physicians, theologians and clergy, lawyers, and teachers of the disciplines. It was already clear in the late Middle Ages that preparing young people (and they were unimaginably young!) to ‘profess’ was a serious challenge, and that a new institution – the university – needed invention to accomplish that end.

Across the centuries, controversies have swirled around the ways the professions organized themselves for practice. Varieties of guilds and professional societies, as well as diverse educational institutions, set standards of quality and licensure. Their purpose has been to ensure quality through controlling access, thus protecting the public from the dangers of incompetent practitioners, and to safeguard the professions against the slings and arrows of outraged clients, political leaders, and organized (as well as disorganized) competitors.

At the start of the twentieth century, various authorities wrote foundational works on the professions. From the sociological perspective, Max Weber emphasized a moral, as well as a technical and pragmatic dimension, across the learned professions. Surveying the medical profession in the United States, educator Abraham Flexner emphasized the critical connections between the medical profession and the recent explosive growth of science; this trend called for the embedding of professional education within the universities. In the United States, the Progressive movement of the era both enhanced the prestige of the professions and conferred upon them an elite status. Professionals were expected to put aside personal motivations and to behave in a selfless and socially responsible way.

At midcentury, as documented in the earlier *Dædalus*, the professions had attained the heights of status, and the best

in each profession were admired as role models. However, admissions policies and licensing predilections largely barred the professions to women and those who lacked a privileged background. The trends of egalitarianism in the 1960s opened up the professions to a much wider pool of talent; at the same time, however, the ideal of the disinterested professional became more elusive, and criticism of the 'elite' professions mounted.

It is worth noting that now, at the very time when professions are being challenged in America and other Western societies, attempts are being made to consolidate them in other parts of the world. In contemporary China, for example, strenuous efforts are underway to establish the law as a realm independent of the state, and to train lawyers to see themselves as officers of an independent judiciary. Controversy swirls in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland about the degree to which journalists should defend the state, engage in self-censorship, report in a neutral manner, or serve as a counterweight to official propaganda. It would be ironic if professions were to gain credibility in East Asia even as they are becoming delegitimized in societies where they once thrived.

Roughly a decade ago, reflecting trends in psychology and education, two groups – the Preparation for the Professions Program and the GoodWork Project – embarked on large-scale studies of professional life in America today. The goals of these empirical investigations were to survey a number of American professions and to draw broader conclusions about the status and prospects of professional training and life. Both studies include a comparative dimension and have turned out to be syn-

ergistically complementary to one another. Most of the thematic essays in this issue of *Dædalus* grow out of these two research groups' decision to collaborate on a set of papers that draw lessons from the groups' joint efforts.

Led by scholars at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the Preparation for the Professions Program has sought to understand the nature of professional training today in a variety of fields, including medicine, law, engineering, teaching, nursing, and the ministry. Scholars at Carnegie are also studying the Ph.D. as a professional degree that prepares individuals for careers in the academic professions of mathematics, history, neuroscience, chemistry, English, and education. Thinking of the Ph.D. as a program of professional preparation sheds entirely new light on the concept of a 'doctor of philosophy.' The work of the Carnegie team looks primarily at the period leading up to professional practice, most of which occurs in formal educational settings. The commonplaces laid out above have emerged during the first phases of the Carnegie study.

Under the direction of scholars at Claremont Graduate University, Harvard University, and Stanford University, the GoodWork Project examines more mature practice – the experiences of both new and veteran professionals as they attempt to cope with changing conditions and powerful market forces. The GoodWork Project has investigated journalism, genetics, theater, law, philanthropy, and higher education, among other fields. As currently conceptualized, good work consists of three facets: excellence in practice of the profession; an enduring concern with the social and ethical implications of one's work; and a feeling on the part of the practitioner that he or she is en-

*The
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gaged in work that matters and that feels good.

Much of the impetus of the Good-Work Project came from our realization that unchecked market forces constitute a strong challenge to the professions. When no line remains inviolate save the bottom line, the distinction between professionals and 'mere workers' disappears. It is our observation that the current emphasis on market models and principles, in the absence of significant counterforces of a religious, ideological, or communal sort, constitutes an enormous challenge to all professions. This observation is confirmed by our studies of young workers. While all acknowledge and applaud the features of good work, a significant number of young professionals feel unable to pursue good work at this time. And so they console themselves with the belief that once they have attained monetary success they will be able to pursue it – a prototypical triumph of ends over means.

Taken together, the essays in this collection attest to the continuing importance of the professions in America and elsewhere; to their perennial fragility, particularly in the face of powerful and relatively uncontested forces; and to the need both for excellent and ethical training during formation and for strong educational and institutional support throughout one's professional life. It took centuries for professions to achieve their central role in a complex society; it would take far less time to undermine their legitimacy. As a society, we need to decide whether we value our professions enough to provide sufficient continuing popular and institutional support.