What is a professional association/organization? A professional organization is a group of people in a specific field that often provides leadership, regulatory standards and opportunities for career and educational advancement of its members. Professional associations go by many different names, but often include “association”, “organization”, “society”, or “institute” in the title. They can be local, statewide, national or international and often have different levels still connected to one organization. Examples: Soil Science Society of America, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Center for International Forestry research, and so many more!

How can I find an appropriate association or organization in my field? Often, many of your professors and employers in the industry will be members of or have knowledge of organizations in the industry. If you are looking online, start with the Career Services web page under your degree/career path at the following link: http://oregonstate.edu/career/what-can-i-do-degree. At the bottom of each degree page, there are links to professional associations that are relevant in each field.

Reasons to join a professional association now:

1 Keep current in your industry. Information and development in every industry is changing at lightning fast pace. Engaging with a group specifically dedicated to researching, organizing, teaching and updating industry information allows for you to stay on the cutting edge of news in your field of choice.

2 Learn, learn, learn! Professional organizations usually organize and host conferences, workshops, seminars, networking events and other opportunities for professional development and continued education. As a student and beyond, you can take advantage of the opportunities to connect with other professionals in your field and to learn from the experts!

3 Gain access to relevant job boards, career development services and support. Only about 20% of available jobs are posted online. The other 80% are available through the people connections you foster. In a professional association, you have access to both: options to network and strategic use of online resources.

4 Connect with people who are excited about what you are excited about. It is motivating and encouraging to get wrapped up in conversation (online or in person) with people who are nuts about the things that you are nuts about.

5 Student membership fees are MUCH lower than joining once you’re out of school. If you are a student, this is going to be one of the best uses of your limited funds. Who needs that extra pizza when you’ve got the future of your career path at your fingertips?

6 Resume builder! You have the option of volunteering with or working for professional organizations—helping plan and set up conferences, host workshops, or mentor other professionals and students. All of these experiences are great for your resume and to build your skills.
Questions to ask when choosing a professional organization:

Is the time commitment doable?

Can I afford membership fees?

Are people or companies I admire in this industry connected with this association? Would they recommend involvement?

What resources are available for networking and career development? (conferences, meetings, workshops, seminars, webinars, mentor programs, opportunities to present or volunteer, international or travel options)

Is there an associated publication to which I can subscribe?

How up-to-date is the organization's website? (An out-of-date website may signal a lack of stability or usefulness of the organization)

What is the mission/vision of the organization and do your values align with the organizational values?

Are there local or state chapters available and how frequently are there events associated with the more local chapters?

Is the organization active in social media? (LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter)

Is there an associated blog? (Then, read it! Is it interesting? You could even comment!)

What type of job and internship resources are used or were created by the organization? Do they seem to be useful (relevant positions posted, time-limited application processes, respected companies using the service, etc.)

The most important part of joining professional organizations is making sure that it is a good use of your time and energy. Do your research ahead of time and you will connect with organizations and people who will be invaluable in your career and personal development!