



Developing and Maintaining a Professional Identity

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An important part of the transition from student to professional is having a professional identity. So what, exactly, is a professional identity? In a research setting, a professional identity means having a clear sense of the skills and specific research agenda that characterizes your role as a scientist. Knowing your professional identity and the goals that accompany that identity can help to improve your competition for research funding.

Clinically, a professional identity can net you referrals from other practitioners and health insurance companies. As a faculty member, your professional identity may attract graduate students who want to work with you. When people know who you are and what you have to offer professionally, then this may also increase opportunities for invited talks and publications.

How do you develop a professional identity? In graduate school, many people identify primarily as a student in their specific field or as the student of an advisor. When that is no longer your primary identity, though, how do you go about developing and maintaining a professional identity?

First, it is important to think who you are broadly, as well as more specifically. For example, you may be a psychologist and clinician broadly, with a specific interest in cognition in older adulthood or the role of mental health in long-term care facilities. You may be a gerontologist and researcher broadly, and more specifically interested in aging-related stigma and stereotypes. Establishing who you are or want to be is important in shaping your career and the opportunities available to you. Some of this identity will be guided by decisions you have already made and work you have already done. Your graduate program and degree, advisor, and line of research (your master's thesis and doctoral dissertation, for example) will determine part of your identity. Look for themes in your research, clinical practice, and other professional activities to help determine your specific professional identity. When you identify these themes, continue to refine and build on them. Publish in your subject areas, give conference presentations about your specific topics, seek research funding to develop your program of research, and find continuing education to keep current on the clinical areas in which you practice. It is important to identify projects, skills, workshops, and learning opportunities that can help make you an

indispensable researcher or clinician in your specific area(s). Don't be afraid, though, to continue cultivating this identity. Networking, maintaining memberships in professional organizations, and attending professional conferences can help you develop areas in which you may be interested but have not had the opportunity to pursue. Balance exploring a limited number of new areas with your already established identity. It may not be helpful to belong to six organizations in different fields, but joining one additional organization or attending a new conference may prove to be beneficial to your professional identity. It allows you to learn about a new field or area, network with other professionals, and introduce your work to a new audience. In tenure-track positions or other research-focused positions, it is also helpful and in some cases, necessary, to develop relationships outside of your institution in the community that can help foster your research. Becoming too disparate in your professional identity may make it difficult to focus on your trajectory and for others to understand



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who you are. The members of GSA come from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Thus, the key to marketing your identity well is to identify your strengths and skills and remember your audience. Speaking to your skills in a way that your specific audience values and understands can help shape and improve opportunities for different disciplines to connect and work with one another. As a member of GSA, it is also important to shape your identity as one in which you are an expert in gerontology with knowledge vital to a variety of fields, such as social work, medicine, nursing, or psychology. Bringing two distinct but related disciplines together in your professional identity provides an opportunity for unique contributions and skills without seeming unfocused. You can bring your discipline-specific knowledge to GSA, and bring your gerontology knowledge to your discipline. As we embark upon the end of 2016, it is a great time to reflect on accomplishments and strides made toward developing a professional identity. It is equally helpful to begin a new year with specific goals in mind towards accomplishing all that is required of our professions, whether it be research, teaching development, service, or clinical work. This new year, consider how these goals may advance and improve your professional identity. Best wishes for happy and healthy end of the year!