

# **Fostering the Development of Professional Identity for Gerontology Students**

Maria L. Claver, PhD, MSW

*CSU Long Beach, Gerontology Program*

One of my academic responsibilities at CSULB is to teach a required course for all entering Masters in Gerontology students titled, "Introduction to the Professional Practice of Gerontology." The course requires students to review major theories in gerontology, develop personal proficiencies such as writing and oral communication skills, and prepare themselves professionally through resume and job interview workshops.

An underlying goal of the course, sometimes explicit and mostly implicit, is to foster students' development of professional identity as a gerontologist.

My own academic training was in the field of Social Welfare (with a specialization in working with older adults). As a first year MSW student, the most difficult question I was asked was not about theory or research methods, but, "What is a social worker?" Adequately answering this seemingly simple question took almost a year. Also, I noticed a marked transition in my professional identity as a social worker once I was able to articulate my response to my clients, colleagues and family members, who wondered what on earth I was studying!

When I made a decision that my teaching and research career would focus on gerontology, I again had to go through the process of developing a professional identity, but this time as a "gerontologist." As an educator in this field, part of my mission is to assist students with developing their own professional identity as a gerontologist.

So what is a gerontologist? How is a gerontologist different than a social worker or a nurse? I have been involved with and witness to several discussions about this very issue. Memorably, during the 2009 Annual Meeting of the California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics (CCGG) an audience member posed this very question and it resulted in some interesting brainstorming sessions with my students and colleagues.

Although not the final word on this topic, students from two semesters of "Introduction to the Professional Practice of Gerontology" have articulated their chosen profession in this way: Gerontologists are integral members of an interdisciplinary team of professionals that work together to address the holistic wellness of older adults. Our most unique skill that differentiates us from other professionals is our ability to communicate effectively with everyone involved in the well-being of an older adult, including the older adult himself or herself, by being "conversational" in the "language" of many disciplines.

Simply entering into a conversation that aims to define gerontology is an important way to foster the development of a professional identity among gerontology students.

Encouraging the involvement of students in professional organizations such as the [California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics](#) (CCGG), the [Association of Gerontology in Higher Education](#) (AGHE), the [American Society on Aging](#) (ASA) or the [Gerontological Society of America](#) (GSA) is another way to introduce students to the profession and assist their sense of belonging to something bigger than their school's gerontology program.

Lastly, students should have an avenue through which to meet other gerontology students and network with gerontology professionals. At CSULB, we are able to achieve this through an active chapter of [Sigma Phi Omega](#) (SPO), a national gerontology honor society. My students have networked with SPO chapters from nearby colleges, raised money to support SPO member attendance at professional conferences, and have given presentations at other colleges about the importance of educating a workforce to serve our aging population.

It is important, as educators, that we provide our students with the course content to understand the needs of older adults, the skills to assist older adults with optimizing their function and well-being, and the opportunity to develop into thoughtful practitioners, researchers and leaders in this fairly "young" field of gerontology.