The Problem of Professionalization

In the arts and sciences, we can no longer afford to view the word ‘professional’ with disdain.

We hear a lot these days about how graduate students must professionalize themselves to survive. But what does it mean to be "professional" anyway?

Professionalization is about conformity. You learn to observe the demands of a community that you want to enter. Conformity has its pluses and minuses. Learning to stay within the lines may increase your productivity, because old and established ways usually promote efficiency. On the other hand, too much time inside the lines may lead you to forget that you can go outside at all — or even that there is an outside.

The American view of freedom leads to an almost reflexive scorn for conformity, while the American culture of professionalism — which created the middle class — adores it. But those views rarely converge to form ambivalence. Instead, they remain separate, floating contradictions in academic consciousness. We want our graduate students to follow the rules, but we also want them to be creative and innovative. Rather than try to resolve that opposition, we tend to think about professionalization very narrowly. For graduate students, academic professionalization typically becomes a synonym for "learning how to publish."
That’s a big loss. For both teachers and graduate students, professionalization amounts to self-making. When graduate students gain a sense of their professional selves, they acquire a professional identity. Their desires and skills — not just how to publish — locate them in the hierarchy they’re bidding to enter. When we talk about teaching graduate students what we call professionalism, that ought to mean teaching them about who they should want to be as an academic.

Research suggests that graduate school does none of those things very well. Janet Malanchek Egan argued in a 1989 article in *Teaching Sociology* that academic professionalization turns graduate students into people "who define themselves as capitulating to the organization by following its rules." The education scholars Chris M. Golde and Timothy M. Dore's influential 2001 study — "At Cross Purposes: What Do the Experiences of Doctoral Students Reveal About Doctoral Education?" — showed that Ph.D. students don’t even understand what those rules mean and, furthermore, believe that their graduate-school training is disconnected from its eventual uses.

Surrendering to rules that you don’t understand or endorse translates into self-denial. It means that you’re not becoming the kind of professional, or the kind of person, that you wish to be. In other words, the nature of professional conformity in graduate school stifles the creative soul. It threatens to turn young minds into reflexive followers of authority, and creates an incoherence in graduate students’ lives.

It doesn’t have to be that way. Graduate students can professionalize without becoming drones. But if their teachers are going to help them, it will require a certain rethinking of means and goals. Academic professionalization is deeply flawed right now. It teaches narrowness, and neglects self-awareness.

Graduate students need the precise opposite: a big and varied professional self, and the reflectiveness to use it. They need preparation to do more than one thing — and the consciousness that they can *be* more than one thing. Any well-connected faculty member in any discipline will know which
departments best prepare their graduate students for academic employment, because those students stand out when they apply for professorships. Certainly that’s part of professionalization. But most graduate programs help students seek academic jobs only.

Some farsighted graduate schools are changing that. The solution lies in integration. Advisers usually do their best work preparing students for the academic job search, but when a graduate school complements the adviser’s work with information on nonacademic careers, that fills in the rest of the picture.

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Louisville offers a great example of how to do this. In 2012 the school instituted a comprehensive professionalization program for all graduate students called PLAN — referring to professional development, life skills, academic development, and networking.

Two of the program’s architects, Beth A. Boehm and Ghanashyam (Shyam) Sharma, describe those four areas as "rubrics for skills" that "students must actively cultivate."

Indeed, Boehm’s and Sharma’s positions speak for the value of such cultivation. Boehm is dean of the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies at Louisville and vice provost for graduate affairs, but Sharma, now an assistant professor of writing and rhetoric at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, was a Louisville graduate student intern when he helped develop PLAN. The collaboration between Boehm and Sharma invented the program and also defines it.

The professional-development program links its four main elements through a coordinated series of workshops, about 20 to 30 each semester, that emanate from various departments, programs, and offices throughout the graduate school. Together the workshops form a cycle that covers the whole graduate-student experience. There are sessions on getting one’s bearings in graduate
school, teaching for the first time ("The Teaching Toolbox"), summer planning (through "Backwards Design"), preparing for different kinds of job searches (including "Developing an Online Portfolio for the Job Search"), and many other subjects.

Scholarly protocols and skills are obviously in the mix, too: The program runs workshops on subjects like "Writing a Literature Review" and "Argument and Evidence" in graduate-student writing, as well as a "Grant Writing Academy" for graduate students. Workshops on job interviews and writing a job talk are offered too.

Boehm and Sharma said their goal in developing PLAN was simply to equip graduate students with tools to get through their Ph.D. programs and end up with a degree.

But it was also to "provide them with opportunities outside of their academic programs to develop skills necessary to become successful professionals." The program, they said, was designed to help graduate students take responsibility for their careers.

The means to that goal, Boehm said, was "to create a culture" that encompasses both graduate students and faculty. The program is a lean operation that’s affordable for an urban public university like Louisville: Besides Boehm, there are only three graduate-school employees working on PLAN, and two of them are part-time. Together they publicize the workshops and make sure they are consistent with the program's goals. The PLAN website, said Michelle Rodems, its program manager, serves as a "central clearinghouse for all things graduate student."

Meanwhile, graduate students, faculty members, and staff administrators all step forward to run the workshops. "Getting people to volunteer for extra work is a miracle," said Boehm, but they do it, she thinks, because the program gives the graduate school a sense of community.
PLAN also sponsors faculty development. When I visited the university last year to see the program in action, I attended a reading-group meeting for graduate directors from various departments.

Not surprisingly, those directors expressed different goals, including: what to do when faculty advisers oppose outside training for doctoral students (psychology), how to get additional teacher training (biochemistry), and how to introduce training for alternative-academic (alt-ac) jobs (English). Their collegiality was admirable, but I think it helps a university simply to gather a varied group like this so that its members can listen to one another.

Programs like Louisville’s point the way forward for graduate schools. Broadly conceived professionalism can no longer be the sole province of "applied" fields like business or engineering.

The word "professional" was once considered base in the arts and sciences. That was some time ago, when better job prospects for professors allowed them the luxury to imagine that academe, because of the rarefied campus air we breathe, was untainted by mere professional pursuits.

That view is obviously not sustainable in the face of today’s tenure-track job market, but its legacy remains. Professors "already think like entrepreneurs," said Eugene Krentzel, associate vice president for research and innovation at Louisville, but it’s hard to train them to realize that. And if they don’t know that about themselves, how can they teach their graduate students to think that way?

PLAN fills that gap at Louisville. Academics certainly need to gain entrepreneurial awareness — we need look no further than the beating that higher education takes in the public square every day. We need to do things differently, so we might consider Boehm’s suggestion: "Why not start with graduate students?"
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Professional Identity: A Luxury Few Can Afford

By Sarah Kendzior

In today's job market, you're judged not by what you've accomplished, but by your ability to walk a path untouched by the incongruities of market forces.

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