

Executive Summary

Defining the Path: Professional Identity in Career Development

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Background

This Leadership Academy project explored the pathways that lead individuals into career development work and the experiences that shape their professional identities. Understanding these pathways is increasingly important as the profession responds to rapid technological change, artificial intelligence, evolving workforce expectations, and continued transformation within higher education. A clearer understanding of how career practitioners develop their professional identities may strengthen recruitment, mentorship, advocacy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and public understanding of career development as a profession.

Career practitioners routinely help students and clients explore occupations, develop career identities, and build professional networks. Although professional identity has long been recognized as an important component of career development, counselor preparation, and professional practice, comparatively little attention has been given to understanding the professional identity development of career practitioners themselves. This project addressed that gap by examining the experiences and pathways that influence professional identity development, with the goal of informing strategies that support the continued growth and advancement of the career development profession.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to examine the experiences, influences, and developmental pathways that contribute to professional identity formation among career development practitioners. Specifically, the study sought to better understand:

- The pathways and influences that led practitioners to careers in career development.
- The experiences that shaped their professional identities after entering the profession.
- The values practitioners associate with career development work.
- How these findings may inform future recruitment, professional development, and advocacy efforts.

Methodology

The study began with a review of the literature on professional identity, career development, and the influence of a clearly articulated professional identity on public understanding of the profession. Next, a national survey was developed to examine practitioners' educational backgrounds, career pathways, professional experiences, and identity development. The survey was distributed nationally through NCDA Headquarters.

A total of 46 to 47 practitioners responded to individual survey questions, depending on item completion. Responses included both quantitative demographic information and qualitative narrative responses. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across participants' stories.

Major Findings

Participants represented an experienced sample of career development practitioners. Most identified as female (77%) and White (81%), worked full time in the profession (87%), and were affiliated with higher education or private practice (83%). Participants also brought substantial experience to the study, with 48% reporting 12 or more years in the field, including 20% with more than 25 years of experience.

Eighty-one percent reported working in another professional field before entering career development, and 87% indicated they had considered other careers before ultimately choosing this profession. Participants' experiences spanned education, business, and mental health careers. Although nearly half of respondents reported previous exposure to career counseling during college, over 13% had no previous experience with the profession before becoming a practitioner. Respondents were nearly split in their preference for a professional identity term with slightly more preferring the term *career counselor*. These findings reinforce the diverse and often non-linear pathways into career development.

Respondents endorsed helping others; passion for lifelong learning; personal change; and advocacy as the values and factors that best represent the profession of career development. Practitioners also endorsed internal influences as stronger inspirations for choosing the field.

Three survey questions explored what drew respondents to the profession, what experiences shaped their professional identities, and what moments made career development feel like the right career for them. Across both the quantitative and qualitative findings, four major themes consistently emerged.

1. Professional Identity is Built Through Belonging

Participants frequently described professional identity as developing through relationships with mentors, colleagues, professional organizations, and meaningful work experiences. Identity formation was not viewed as occurring upon graduation or employment but through ongoing participation in professional communities. Mentorship, inclusion, experiential learning, and opportunities to contribute all strengthened participants' sense of belonging within the profession.

2. Personal Experiences Become Professional Assets

Many practitioners described personal career transitions, uncertainty, adversity, immigration experiences, or previous careers as foundational to their work. Rather than viewing these experiences as separate from their professional identity, respondents described integrating them into their practice through empathy, advocacy, and stronger connections with clients.

3. Client Transformation Sustains Professional Commitment

Respondents consistently described "lightbulb moments" in which clients discovered purpose, confidence, or new possibilities. Witnessing these transformations helped practitioners recognize career development as deeply meaningful work and reinforced long-term commitment to the profession.

4. Professional Identity Expands Beyond Career Placement

Participants described a shift from viewing career services primarily as job placement toward understanding career development as work connected to identity, purpose, wellbeing, advocacy, and human flourishing. Many described increasing awareness of systemic barriers and the importance of advocating for individuals within educational and organizational systems rather than simply helping people adapt to them.

Overall, the findings suggest that professional identity within career development is cultivated through relationships, experiences, and meaning-making rather than conferred solely through credentials or job titles.

Recommendations

The findings suggest several opportunities that align with the National Career Development Association's strategic priorities.

Cultivating Community: Experience and Belonging

- Recognize the diverse pathways into the profession and acknowledge that professional identity develops through relationships, experience, reflection, and meaning-making.
- Expand mentorship, experiential learning, and early exposure to career development as a profession.
- Strengthen collaboration with graduate programs and adjacent helping professions to increase awareness of career development as a viable career path.

Career Empowerment: Understanding Professional Identity Needs

- Examine potential gaps between what credentialing is intended to signify and what practitioners value in their professional identity development.
- Explore opportunities for credentialing to better reflect the learning, mentorship, community, purpose, and meaningful practice experiences that practitioners identify as central to professional identity formation.
- Continue research on pathways into the profession, experiences of belonging, and the distinctions between career development and related helping professions.

Advocacy: Articulating Professional Identity

- Increase recognition of career development as work that supports identity, purpose, wellbeing, opportunity, and human flourishing.
- Strengthen articulation of the profession's identity, expertise, and scope to enhance recruitment, legitimacy, and public understanding.
- Equip practitioners with the language and tools needed to advocate for the profession and its broader societal impact.

Conclusion

This project suggests that career practitioner professional identity is cultivated through relationships, reflection, participation, and meaningful experiences rather than simply through credentials or position titles. Professional identity develops as practitioners integrate their personal narratives, experience client transformation, engage with professional communities, and increasingly recognize the broader social impact of career development work.

Ultimately, the profession faces an important challenge. While practitioners develop strong professional identities rooted in purpose, belonging, and advocacy, the pathways into career development remain varied, and the profession's identity is often difficult to articulate to external audiences. Addressing this challenge represents an important opportunity for NCDA. By strengthening professional identity, expanding pathways into the profession, and clearly communicating the value of career development work, NCDA can help cultivate the next generation of practitioners while strengthening the profession's visibility, legitimacy, and societal impact.