

Advising and Identity Development: Insights for Political Science

Bobbi Gentry

Bridgewater College

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Part of the college experience is to develop our sense of who we are, both as a person and as a professional. How we develop these identities can vary across groups and experiences. Advising can be a crucial part of helping students come to understand who they are as a professional. As students begin to think about their future careers, aspirations, and goals, faculty can help that process by providing feedback about their strengths, achievements, and help students find their interests in our field. Identity development is a process and understanding that process can help our students navigate expectations of other and themselves, including identity crises which can happen when students realize that they do not want to go to law school or have decision paralysis with too many choices about careers. This paper examines identity development in the context of advising and gives concrete examples of how to support students in political science, including differences that our discipline faces in comparison to others.

One of the great opportunities as a professor and advisor is to see how our students grow and develop as people and as professionals. In recent years, there has been a shift towards thinking about education as a means to an end to a good paying job. Parents and Administrators, alike, see the need to explain to prospective students about what a program offers and how a program prepares students for a career after college graduation. This work examines how advisors and programs can better prepare students for a career after college through an advising model that centers professional identity development as a process. Understanding the process allows faculty and programs to see ways to guide students towards a professional identity that can help students see the value of their college experience and prepare themselves for jobs in political science or related fields.¹

In addition to thinking about the developmental process of professional identity, we also need to understand the contextual factors that influence access of our students, such as economic, racial, gender, and family characteristics among others that can directly affect the opportunities our students have access to. Understanding our students as individuals that can have barriers to access education and job opportunities is essential to creating a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable society. While some principles in advising can be used across advisees, some consideration for potential barriers must be acknowledged and institutional support systems, such as paid internship opportunities or counseling services, need to be available to students.

This work formulates a developmental model of professional identity development and suggests ways for faculty advisors to provide guidance throughout the process. By using tools

¹ One aspect of this work is grappling with the fact that some students may not want to enter the field. Should we, as advisors in political science, want every student to enter a profession that deals with political science? Do we expect this? What does it mean to have an effective program? Just that our students are in fulltime jobs or do we want something else?

and techniques, we are better able to prepare political science majors and advisees for careers. This work will also help student learning outcomes of professional or career readiness and program assessment of career outcomes.

Literature Review

Over a decade ago, work in career preparation in political science focused on what departments were doing to prepare students for careers in the field. In a survey of departments, 84% had faculty as academic advisors and 80% “expected their faculty to provide career advising” (Collins et al, 2012, 89). However, the bias in advising overemphasizes preparation for law and graduate school. Fewer programs prepare students for a wide range of jobs after college.

Rethinking the model of a political science major can include a career focus. Rogers (2021) presents two models for career-oriented majors, which have tracks that identify clear career paths for students and parents. Considering political science’s public relations problem of not having a clear career trajectory and producing students who are prepared for some of the most hated professions (388), a track model with specific career outcomes overcomes some of these concerns. Providing concrete examples of jobs and careers in political science is a much better way to recruit students into our programs rather than abstract ideas of politics and government or citizenship preparation.

Surveys of students show the pressure to choose a major with high paying jobs (PRNewswire, 2019), where 61.2% of students feel this need. Parents and prospective students are focused on the types of jobs that students can do with their degree. Public concerns were illuminated with discussions about how higher education prepare students for a career or lack of

preparation in media. Selingo identifies problems that current graduates face such as underemployment and limited soft skills in order to be promoted. Any faculty member that has attended an open house knows that parents care about what careers recent graduates have or what a student can do after they graduate.

Professional identity development is not new to higher education. In a review of the literature, Trede et al highlight the challenges that much of the literature faces such as the general definition of professional identity, the need for a more general approach to understanding professional identity when students may not go into fields of the discipline, and the need for student active engagement in the process (2012, 378-381). Developing a professional identity is more than just being a “political scientist,” but a process that happens through time and is a reflective. A professional identity is belonging to a professional community with the knowledge, skills, values, as well as differentiating oneself from the community (2012, 380). A person’s professional identity is both made up of the social aspect of belonging, but also how a person is an individual with unique perspectives, behaviors, and values.

From a liberal arts perspective, a liberal arts education is one that prepares students for a wide variety of career opportunities. Rust argues that we can make the concepts of a liberal arts education clearer in advising (2011). Communication, critical thinking, cross disciplinarity, and citizenship are all goals of a liberal arts education. However, we do not always communicate to our students in our classes how they gain these skills. In addition to engaging in a diverse and everchanging world, students of the liberal arts learn marketable skills and are prepared for a variety of careers (2011, 10). For political science, one aspect of liberal learning stands out—“liberation from social constructs” (2011, 9), which allows students to question the social, economic, and social limitations of thought and opportunity. Advising is a chance for faculty to

let students know what skills and knowledge they are learning and how these opportunities actually can create graduates who are prepared for a wide variety of jobs and even prepare students for jobs that have not yet been imagined.

Development of a professional identity has many different dimensions. Reid et al suggest gaining knowledge about the profession and engaging with the tasks and activities of a profession help students to connect “their personal and professional self” (2011, 86). In their assessment of the educational design of programs in political science, early on in a student’s career they are exposed to knowledge and theories about politics and systems. In the later part of coursework, students are exposed to skill-based learning specifically “develop the students’ abilities to investigate, analyze and compare different political systems” (2011, 93). Students of other majors are better able to develop a professional identity because they have problem-based learning and engage in tasks that someone in the profession would do (90). However, the specific process about how development happens is not clear and the stages that students may go through is lacking.

In a European Union Commission on education and professional work, a study of freshmen and seniors found interesting differences between political science and other programs. In a comparison to other programs, political science has a low professional identity (Hult et al, 2003), which means that students of political science, both as freshmen and seniors, do not know what careers there are for political scientists. Compared to engineering and psychology, political science students actually know what skills political scientists utilize, but they do not know the careers available. Students learn skills of analysis, problem solving and evaluation, and take on the identity of investigators who are “watchdog[s] for democracy and social justice” (Hult et al, 2003, 4). However, developing a professional identity of a political scientists or professional is

limited due to the lack of knowledge about what careers are available. Students knowing what political scientists' skills are but not their specific job options is an interesting puzzle. What this might mean is that we train our students well in skill development, but do not make clear what jobs or careers are available for our students after their studies. Our students feel like they belong to the discipline, but not the profession.

Evidence based practices in higher education recommend supporting students through the advising process and using resources across campus to reduce barriers for student academic success and degree completion. The Institute for Education Sciences focuses on advising in a context of professional advisors² rather than faculty advisers, but some of the same principles can be applied to faculty work with students. Recent work on advising suggests meeting “students where they are developmentally and recognize their individual needs” (2022, 6). However, the recommendations of best practices for effective advising are not clear what they mean with the developmental process, and do not articulate development of a professional identity. This lack of a process model limits where advising can help students in their development.

Professional Identity Development Model

Developmental Stage	Student Actions	What we see as advisors
Avoidant	Student avoids discussing professional goals/potential jobs, and does not make plans to explore options	Student avoids discussions and does not seem to respond when we ask about professional goals
Explorer	Student seeks out information about different careers, professions, and actively	Student asks about potential career goals, attends departmental events, looks

² Professional advisors are individuals who are hired at an institution of higher education to advise students in their majors. At these institutions, faculty may mentor students but to not directly help students choose courses or a plan of study.

	seeks opportunities to know more	like they are seeking out options
Pre-Destined	Student is sure of their professional career goals, knows what they are going to do, Parents have decided what the student will do	Student seems sure of themselves, does not want to talk about other options
Realized	Student has assessed their career potential, gone through questioning, knows what they want to do and what they do not want to do	Student has gone through the process of deciding what works for them, are willing to receive feedback about options, and has balanced what they want for themselves versus what other people want for them

Professional identity development includes acquiring the knowledge, skills, beliefs and behaviors necessary to do a career. Focusing on the process of development of a professional identity rather than an outcome of identity allows for external interventions in learning about a profession and seeing the behaviors that lead a student towards becoming and identifying as a professional in the field.

The professional identity development model includes four stages. While not every student is going to go through all of these stages, identifying which stage a student is in can help advisors to know how to engage in conversations about professional development. For avoidant students, these students do not want to discuss or think about “life after college,” they do not know what they want to do and they do not want to work on finding out. We can see this both in first-year students and fourth-years.

Explorers are students who are trying to figure their future careers out. They actively seek information and will try on different professions. On the other hand, students who are predestined, with little to no exploration and questioning of choices, can come in two varieties:

parental and self. Students who are parental predestined come to college with the profession that they want to do in mind and this profession is decided by their parents or guardians. For example, the student who wants to be a lawyer because their parents tell them that they like to argue, so they should be a lawyer. On the other hand, a student might come in with a predestined professional identity. These students already know what they want to do with little questioning or insight into why they want to do it. There is very little reflection or information gathered for a student who has a predestined identity.

A realized identity students have gone through a process of discovering what they want to do and why they want to do it. Oftentimes students have taken the time to reflect on their personality, values, and goals to decide on a career or path that suits them (Rounds and Armstrong, 2014). Students can use the values, interests, personality and skills model used in career development (Rust, 2022) as a personal assessment and that can be used as a guide for advisors.

The process of professional identity development includes exploring different professional options. However, we know that political science has not been a profession with a clear professional identity (Hult et al, 2003). Our students do not necessarily know what they can do with a degree. As a result, we have to be more intentional in this process.

Another part of the process is reflection. What are my professional goals? What knowledge and skills do I have? Is this really the best option for me? Is this career what I want for myself or is this what someone else wants for me? Students need to assess what makes them unique and what they can contribute to the workplace. Reflection about what makes them part of a professional community and what makes them stand out are essential to becoming part of the community. Both belonging and individuation are important aspects of being a professional.

Lastly, the process is about belonging to a professional community and being able to differentiate oneself from others. In this step within the process, students are identifying what it means to belong to a professional community and sharing values as well as ways of practice. Our curricula specifically teach knowledge, skills, and values, but not necessarily what professional communities are out there. Even within the discipline, we have different ways of knowing and debate the merits of each (Bennett, 1991).

In developing a professional identity, students transition between Avoidant and Explorers when they are willing to discuss and think about potential options in career goals. Explorers become Realized in their development when they decide on their career path and make a choice for themselves, not for others. Consider how a student might personalize their career path and make it their own, such as I want to study law because I want to be involved in environmental law addressing how businesses violate water regulations. Independence and agency in choice are an important part of the process. Students need the opportunity to make a decision that is best for them in their future careers and need the ability to have control over those life and career choices.

For students who have a Predestined identity, they come into college with their career goals already set. These students have a difficult time with considering that they might not go onto the career path that they or their parents have set out for them. Sometimes we will see these students in our office after a crisis of identity, where the student has evidence that they might not have the skills or desire to pursue their predestined career. Consider the student who wants to be a lawyer, but who does an internship and realizes that they do not want to pursue law. Crisis can result in world-shattering beliefs about self, where students can break down and doubt their abilities and educational purpose.

Having a predestined identity can be reassuring for some students and offer a sense of purpose of their studies, however security is not what helps to form a professional identity. Students need to personalize their career goals and identify why they want to pursue the work. A Realized identity is one where the student has concrete knowledge of the career path rather than vague notions of what the work will entail.

Throughout their professional identity process, students should assess their perceptions of possible careers, seek out different options for careers, ask questions about careers and their trajectories (the path to a current career is not always a linear and neat as students like to believe). Faculty advisors and programs can work to improve professional identity development through a variety of transformative interactions with students.

What specifically can Faculty Advisors Do?

Faculty Actions	Program Actions
Discuss Professional Aspirations with students	Create a 4 year developmental map for what students should be doing each year to reach their professional goals
Broaden Horizons for Careers and Professions	Invite Alumni on campus to discuss their career trajectory
Discuss Values, Interests, Personality and Skills	Host departmental events that have speakers who work in the field
Follow up on Action items with students (ie career fair, internship searches, speaking with alumni)	Offer workshops on getting an internship
Discuss Professional goals in terms of Goals, Reality, Options, Will	Create opportunities for paid internship funds
Build student agency to dream and aspire to a career	Build community connections for volunteer, service learning, and internship opportunities
Go to career fairs to see what opportunities are available and meet potential internship providers	Host Peer to Peer advising on courses and skill development
Discuss skills learned in a class	Provide events where students can meet role models in the field
Discuss with students their Strengths	Provide information on careers that alumni have in a physical and digital space

Faculty Advisors

Faculty advisors in their work with advisees can take time to discuss professional aspirations. What does the student want to do with their degree? Having these discussions early on in the student's academic career can encourage them to begin thinking about what they want to do after college. This can also guide a student's course recommendations. During advising sessions, faculty should check in with students about their career goals and update the information as it develops and changes.

During sophomore year, advisors can discuss with students potential careers in the field, and discuss what careers recent alumni have pursued. The broadening of career and professional options lets students know about the wide application of the field to a variety of careers. Communicating specifically what options there are out there allows students to explore different options available.

In junior year, discussing a self-assessment with the student is an important reflective practice to identify what kinds of jobs will be preferred over others. In self-assessment, students identify what their values, interests, personality and skills are (Brown and Hirschi, 2013). Values are what the student values in their lives, workplace and society; these can also be understood to be priorities. Interests include interests outside of the classroom, such as extra or cocurricular activities. These are important places to consider multiple career paths and skills learned. Personality characteristics such as intro/extroversion, preference for a desk job or in the field, and wanderlust are all characteristics that can inform potential careers and advice that the faculty member can give. Lastly, skills that the student has from work experience, classes, and interests should be highlighted and discussed in a resume and cover letter. Additionally, faculty

in their syllabi can highlight the skills learned and developed in their classes to increase transparency in what students are learning beyond academic knowledge.

During advising sessions, faculty often make recommendations, but do not follow up with the student on these recommendations. Working on follow ups with students would take additional time and effort, but can be real chances for faculty to connect with students. These follow ups can be about action items that were agreed upon in the advising meeting, such as check out non-profits, or search for internships.

In the process of identity development, students need to have agency to make decisions for themselves and have the confidence that they can make decisions about their professional futures. One challenge that I have seen in recent years is students' lack of ownership of their own future. Either their futures are already decided or that they have little to no control over their futures. The external locus of control where students believe that their future is outside of their control are often affected by circumstances outside of their own choices such as family responsibilities, monetary constraints, and personal challenges.

Faculty can work across campus to create collaboration with Alumni Office and Career Services. Working with these offices gives faculty the opportunity to shape events and to connect with community members. For instance, faculty can attend career fairs to find out employers in the area and opportunities for internships for current students. Connecting with alumni can lead to mentorship of current students, as well as open up internship and job opportunities. Advising faculty do not need to hold all of the information about professional development and can work to improve and expand these options.

Lastly, a framework that faculty can use in talking with students about their professional goals is GROW: Goals, Reality, Options, and Will (Whitmore, 2010). Identifying career goals and steps to achieving those goals opens up the conversation to talk about reality. What are the circumstances and contexts that expand or limit our career paths? For instance, discussing acceptance rates to particular law program, or the percentage of people who become a social media influencer. Options offer students the chance to think about what options are out there and what are careers that they can create on their own. Will is a student's determination and perseverance to make their career goals a reality. Within this framework, the faculty advisor has the opportunity to discuss the student's strengths with them, such as written and oral communication, passion for social justice, or thinking outside the box.

Programs

As a program, faculty can work across the department to enhance career development by offering specific experiences to question, explore, and personalize the journey towards a career choice. Discussing as a department, or program, what is expected of students at each year of their college career that leads towards their professional life is helpful. Questions such as when should students begin thinking about internships? What skills should students develop throughout their time in our department?

Hosting alumni on campus to discuss their career trajectory could be done within the program or in partnership with other programs and initiatives such as Homecoming. Community members or alumni are also good sources of knowledge for students to learn about different careers, connections, and paths to achieve professional success. These professionals can also act as mentors and role models for students. Giving students the opportunity to meet someone in the field gives students concrete knowledge about what careers are available and contacts within the

“real world”. Events do not solely need to be on campus, but can be in a digital space either for students or only that the speaker is digital.

Partnering with Career Services can also result in possibilities for coordinated internship, networking or skill building workshops. Career fairs are also helpful for faculty to learn about potential volunteer, service learning or internship experiences available through community partners. Building relationships with community partners offers opportunities for faculty and current students to provide skills and knowledge to address community problems. Building connections with community partners offers volunteer, service learning, and internship positions. All of these positions can lead to a career in the field or networking connections that can help our students to consider jobs outside of the box.

Internships as a high impact practice work because they help students connect their classroom learning with real world applications (Kuh, 2008). Combining skills and knowledge in the workplace allows majors to directly apply learning to work. Internships also provide students with opportunities to try out different professions. Programs should work to provide a variety of opportunities to students, so that students can consider opportunities that they might not have before such as working for non-profits or being a political journalist. Programs should also understand that not all internships are accessible to all students, and should therefore work to create an internship fund to help students pay for their tuition, or be paid for their unpaid internship.

Upper division students can also help others with their advising. To allow for more time to focus on career development, the program can share responsibility with upper division students. Students in Pi Sigma Alpha can use 4 year advising plans to help others choose courses

and discuss courses that deliver skills in the major. This practice allows faculty advisors to focus on the bigger picture of career development.

Programs should provide concrete options for potential careers in a physical and digital space. Just like Rogers suggests concrete tracks with potential career options, programs can provide concrete success stories for career placements. For current students, an opportunity to show them what people do after college could be a glass case of business cards of alumni. This helps to show current students with the variety of opportunities, and makes possible a wider network. A departmental LinkedIn can also provide this information in a digital space.

Puzzles

There are some puzzles that we also face as faculty advisors. How do we offer this in-depth advising to our advisees with limited time, resources, and institutional support? Not all of the work needs to be done by faculty. Programs can be responsible for creating opportunities for discovering potential jobs. Student clubs can also be places where students have guest speakers and professionals come to discuss their career trajectory.

Does every major need to get a job that is political science related or should we be happy that they are employed full time? Do we expect this? Do we account for jobs outside our field in our assessment of professional outcomes? Not all of our majors are going into careers that deal with the discipline of political science. One way that we can rethink assessment of professional outcomes is to assess based on related versus not related to the discipline. This puzzle is also a value judgment, meaning that we might value work that students do in the field rather than other fields. We would need to untangle the student preference versus departmental preparation as to why students chose careers outside of political science.

Should we discuss with students what jobs we think that they would succeed in? Should we discuss weaknesses? Areas of improvement? Are we providing too much guidance and not allowing our students to have agency in their own choices? With advising, there is a fine balance between too much hand holding and too little guidance. Some students need more guidance and others need less. However, our guidance should not supersede the needs of the student to become an independent thinker. We provide students with feedback on their work in many different courses. We make judgment calls on students' knowledge and skills within the major, and having honest conversations about areas of improvement that the student can focus should be part of the process.

Conclusions

Thinking about the developmental process of a professional identity allows us, as faculty advisors, to think about ways that we can encourage students to develop and decide upon a professional choice. Creating an advising model that accounts for professional identity development is new, but not unlike the career advising that faculty do. Faculty advisors are also not solely responsible for guiding the students through the process; the program has particular activities that it can do as a collective to ease the burden and expand conversations about professions in the field.

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