Professional Development Workshop
Professionalism is BS and what we can do because of it and also despite it

Part of being a student is learning the "hidden curriculum" of academia[1]. Administrators, many faculty members, graduate admission committees, and others often expect a particular version of professionalism that we never explicitly teach to our students. There are two parallel conversations that we need to have about professionalism in academia:
1) Why professionalism is so problematic; and
2) What should students learn about the implicit rules of academia anyway?

1. **Why professionalism is so problematic**

   a. Norms about what 'counts' as professional were developed within white/male/cis/hetero culture and are naturally exclusionary. Because of this, professionalism and the respectability politics that come with it can often act as gate-keepers within the institution.
      i. "Professionalism is a funny term, because it masquerades as neutral despite being loaded with immense oppression. As a concept, professionalism is racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, classist, imperialist and so much more — and yet people act like professionalism is non-political. Bosses across the country constantly tell their employees to 'act professionally' without a second thought. Wear a garment that represents your non-Western culture to work? Your boss may tell you it's unprofessional. Wear your hair in braids or dreadlocks instead of straightened? That's probably unprofessional too. Wear shoes that are slightly scuffed because you can't yet afford new ones? People may not think you're being professional either."[2]
      ii. "Wearing suits instead of sundresses because I have to feels like being told that the who I really am – *underneath the dress pants and pencil skirts* – isn't good enough to be there. That's hierarchy in action. That's not okay. Every single person in every single office should be taken seriously and treated with respect no matter what they're wearing. It isn't just the logic behind dress codes, however, that makes them largely problematic. Dress codes make room to turn a lot of "isms" into policies – especially since typical standards of professional dress are, at the core, racist, sexist, classist, and xenophobic."[3]
      iii. "Even today there are blatantly problematic messages that are being communicated in our field—messages like telling women of Color that how they choose to wear their hair will have an impact on their perceived professionalism or that folks who don't conform to gendered expectations of professional dress should change the way they normally dress during interviews to increase their chances of being hired. It seems clear that these types of messages reinforce hegemonic professionalism, but what about the subtler messages that are conveyed? Messages like "no resume should *ever* exceed two pages" or "the *only* way to find a job is to attend a conference placement exchange" present the job search process in absolutes. These messages reinforce the notion that there is a hidden code of conduct with unwritten rules about *what will* and *what will NOT* get you a job. They're not inherently harmful messages, but they encourage a type of thinking that has job seekers terrified to step over some invisible line into the territory of *unprofessionalism*. They reinforce and reify professionalism as a single, solitary, homogenous set of behaviors and expectations for everyone—and that's harmful.[4]
   b. Most of what counts as professional (i.e. physical appearance, proper use of titles, perfect grammar, etc.) don't *actually* have anything to do with someone's competency or skill level.
      i. Obviously

[1] https://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/hiding-in-plain-sight-changing-the-unwritten-rules-of-academe/
[2] https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jacob-tobia/genderqueer-professional-_b_5476239.html
[3] https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/02/professionalism-and-oppression/
[4] http://www.myacpa.org/entity/standing-committee-women/blog/critical-reflections-rules-professionalism

2. **What should students learn about the implicit rules of academia anyway?**

   a. Unfortunately, the rules of professionalism still apply. What are some of the important ones?
   b. Make an email signature
      i. Name, university affiliation and major, name of research lab if applicable (with link to lab website or personal website), pronouns
   c. Address people by their titles (Dr., Professor, Mx., Ms.) unless you are told to do otherwise.
      i. Remember not to assume gender identity!
      ii. If in doubt, just start with "Hello," and avoid a title! But in very formal contexts or when a title is appropriate, here are some guidelines:
         1. If someone has a PhD, start with "Dr."; if you don't know whether they have a PhD, you can use Professor. If the person is neither a Dr. nor Professor, then you can default to other titles.
   d. Keep a regularly updated resume and CV.
      i. Resumes should be 1 page long, CVs can be as long as they need to be.
   e. Check email regularly and be responsive, within reason.
      i. In this environment it is often important to respond at times you wouldn't typically think is necessary, even if it as simple as "Thanks so much, I will take a look!" or "Great, see you tomorrow at 3pm."
   f. Go to office hours and get to know your professors. Start building these relationships early.
      i. Many opportunities for students to get involved (via research assistantships, teaching assistantships, etc.) are obtained when a student approaches a faculty member directly
   g. When I was a graduate student at conferences, I would attend the first day with tattoos and piercings covered to "feel it out" and make a decision about the rest of the conference after the first day. Do what you feel makes you most comfortable.
   h. In conversations, resumes and CV's, cover letters, etc. focus on explicit, hard skills that you have developed or specific experiences that make you qualified for the job/program.
   i. Let's make our lab page presentable and public! Use this regularly, and share it with folks via your email signature and at conferences.
   j. It is increasingly common for advanced students to have their own personal pages populated with a list of research projects, presentations, and a link to a CV.
      i. Once you have publications, create a GoogleScholar profile, as well
   k. Network!!! Twitter is the "hip" networking platform in academia these days. Get on there! #AcademicTwitter

In summary, I would like for you to know these "rules" so you can use them to your benefit, to the extend that you want to. I would also like to impart on us all the immense need for changing this dialogue in academia. There are many folks in the "new generation" of academia having these discussions, and I hope we can all join together to subvert this biased system of power. As Renata Baptista[4] said:

 "*I don't have all the answers—in fact, I have more questions than answers. What I do know is that I too have played into the rules of "professionalism". I've dressed the part and played the role and I too am complicit. There is a reality, for many with marginalized identities, that knowing or not knowing these rules can be real barriers to success, or said another way, that these rules represent a real type of social capital needed to navigate a hegemonic system predicated on their existence. Additionally, I also argue that it is important to recognize that **it is no longer enough to informally communicate these rules and hope that knowing of their existence will lead to success—we need to bring them to light, talk about them, deconstruct them and defy them.** It is only then that we will subvert the harmful realities of "professionalism" and hold true to the values of justice and equity that we educate and advocate for every day.*"

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[4] http://www.myacpa.org/entity/standing-committee-women/blog/critical-reflections-rules-professionalism