

Thinking of Expanding Your Practice Area(s)?

MEMBERS OF THE College are required to be competent in their self-designated areas of practice. Principle 2 of the College's *Code of Ethics* states that "Members should undertake assignments and offer opinions only in areas in which they are competent." However, biologists are innately curious about the world around them, and often have a desire to expand their knowledge and practice to an ever-growing list of species, methods, and to different sub-disciplines of biology. There are many ways in which you can expand your area(s) of practice to achieve a varied, fulfilling career, and doing so confidently and competently requires undertaking a number of distinct steps.

Conduct a literature review

Just like any student embarking on learning about new topic area, members should initiate a literature review to become informed of the current state of knowledge pertaining to a new species, methodology, or field of interest. This will entail referencing academic journals and text books to gain an understanding of the physiology, ecology, or life history of species that are beyond your current area of expertise; to acquaint yourself with new monitoring, field data collection or data analysis techniques; and to be informed of population trends or other indices of the dynamic interactions between animals, plants or humans and the environment. Become informed of the current legislation

and regulations that impact upon your desired area of practice, which begins with the often challenging task of finding out which levels of government and which departments have jurisdiction over the biological resources and/or development activities in question.

Enrol in formal training

Enrolling in relevant courses offered by academic institutions is an excellent way to expand one's theoretical knowledge base, and can also increasingly provide applied training relevant to a broad range of practice areas. Universities and colleges are beginning to recognize the need for more applied training to better equip students and professionals with transferable skills, and have responded by offering courses in a variety of formats and lengths (ranging from a few hours to a few years) to improve accessibility. Examples of relevant applied training courses include habitat assessment methods, erosion and sediment control, ArcGIS training, electrofishing, species ID, and Riparian Areas Regulation methods.

The plethora of online courses has also significantly improved access to post-secondary training opportunities in recent years. Provided you have a secure internet connection, you can now access high-quality academic courses regardless of how remote your base is. In a similar vein, attending workshops and conferences can both expose you to the

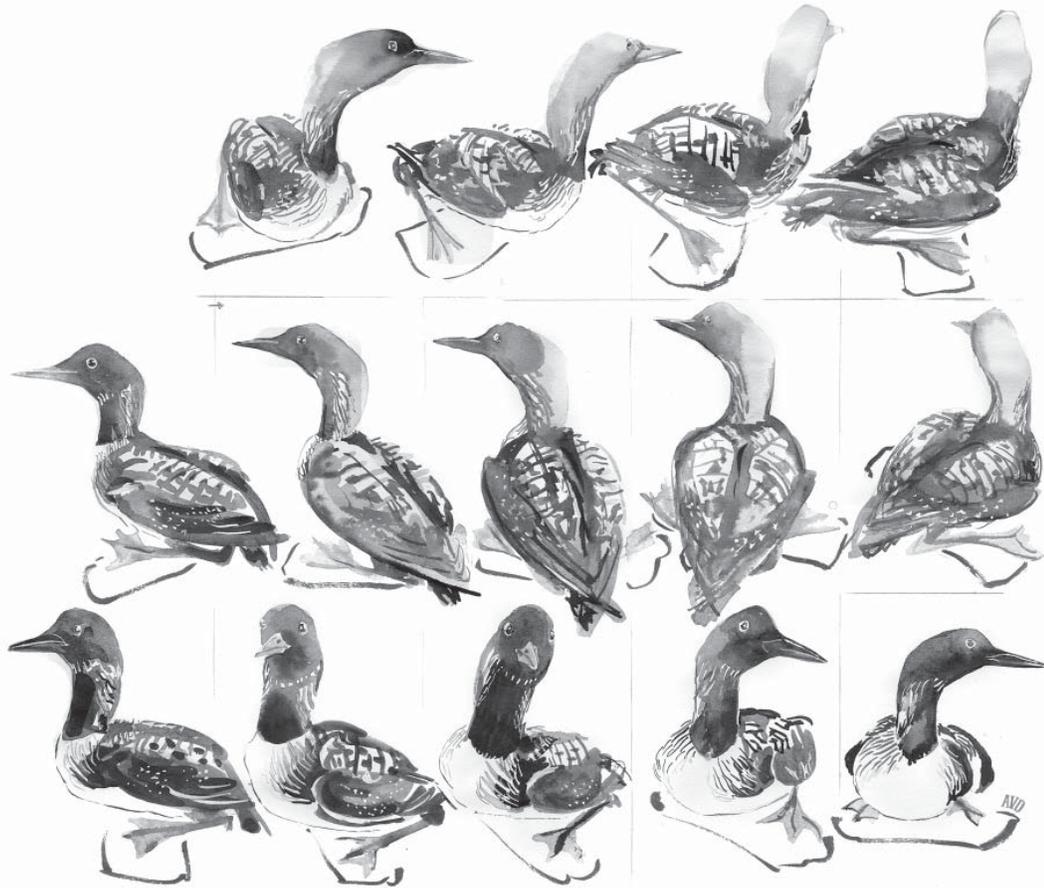
most up-to-date findings in a particular field of practice, and allow you an opportunity to network with experts and prospective mentors. This leads us to...

Find a mentor

Finding and securing a mentor with appropriate expertise to guide you into a new area of practice is an important component of expanding your practice area(s). Suitable mentors should be able to direct you to the most pertinent resources to guide your study, answer questions to inform your theoretical understanding, and also provide you with opportunities to get your hands dirty and learn new applied skills, such as doing field surveys. A mentor should be able to commit to you for the long-term, as you advance from learning about your new practice area, to practicing it in a junior capacity under the supervision of, and in consultation with, experts or senior biologists.

Ensure peer review of your work

The College's *Code of Ethics* asserts that competency is demonstrated "...by the ability to complete a task to the same standard as trained professionals in similar situations." Although a sometimes humbling experience, subjecting your work to peer review is a key step in the process of gaining competency and earning legitimacy



in a new practice area. Requesting reviews of your work by your mentor or other experts will ensure your work and findings are in-step with those in the broader applied biology community and will validate your efforts to gain currency in a new practice area.

Members are also encouraged to develop learning plans to map out a path toward expanded practice areas, which document goals, learning resources, methods, and measures of achievement. Learning plans would typically include elements of all of the aforementioned activities, and should be reviewed by your mentor. When filed with the College, learning plans allow members to claim unlimited Continuing Professional

Development (CPD) points for informal learning activities such as self-study.

While this to-do list may at first seem onerous, many biologists naturally undertake these activities in the course of their day-to-day work. At an individual level, expanding your practice area(s) is an important investment in your career and professionalism that can keep many career options open and help you maintain resiliency in our unpredictable economic and environmental context. Collectively, expanding the scope of practice areas and diversity of skill sets across the College's membership will ensure a competent contingent of applied biologists is available to respond to the many needs on our horizon. 

Illustration by Aimée van Drimmelen.
www.aimeevandrimmelen.com