

# How Should I Wear My Hair?

by Jade Perry

During graduate school, I worked as the diversity program assistant in the primary career services department for the university. I could tell that some of my students weren't always paying attention to the resume/cover letter advice I was giving. They were looking at something else... my hair.

In my professional life, I have chosen to wear my hair naturally. This simply means that I wear my hair in the tightly coiled, curly form in which it grows. The hairstyles I choose include anything that allows me the least amount of manipulation to the way my hair naturally grows.

I cannot count the times that students, particularly women of color, have asked in hushed tones, "So... I'm meeting a recruiter/employer tomorrow and I'm hoping to get a job. I wear my hair naturally. So, what do you do... what should I do about my hair?"

This is one of my favorite questions because I know you're not asking for fashion advice. You are trying to figure out how to navigate identity politics. You are looking for understanding on how to be identity conscious and authentic in the workplace, even when that goes against dominant beauty standards. Questions about hair are, typically, never just about hair.

For many of us, especially women of color who have chosen to wear their hair naturally, navigating style politics and hair choices has a lot to do with our professional identity. We all want to be taken seriously in our careers. We want to have our personal and professional identity validated in the workplace. In light of that, here is what I share when students pose questions about hair and identity politics in the workplace:

- 1. Your experience is valid.**

Often times, students of color, low-income students, and/or first-generation students are already working through varying intersections of their identities in college. Throughout that process, I am hoping that you have been affirmed in your experiences, but on the other hand, you may have also lived through the difficulty of being silenced in either subtle or explicit ways.

Your experience is valid. Your questions about hair, identity politics, and navigating through the workplace in ways that are authentic are important.

The career search process does not just involve crafting resumes, writing cover letters, strategizing job searches, etc. Identity conscious student affairs professionals understand that there is an internal process going on as you navigate through the various identities that you hold (i.e. racial/ethnic identity, socioeconomic identity, gender identity and expression, etc.) We bring our identities with us during our career discernment process and we try to make sense of them in a variety of contexts. Your personal, lived experience is valid.

- 2. Reflect on your career values and the values you would look for in the work environment.**

I encourage you to brainstorm a few of the values that you hold: Large amounts of monetary capital? Cultural validation? Flexibility? Mentorship? Do some reflecting on the question, "Is it important to work in a context that is validating to your cultural sense of self"? This is your time to decide what you want out of a workplace experience. Try to find someone (a mentor, professional staff member, professor, etc.) that you trust that can encourage you as you sift through the opinions you may have

received from others about what is important in a work environment.

For example, you may say that you value authenticity in the workplace, and that straightening/processing your hair feels inauthentic, but you were told by a family member that you should straighten your hair to get the job. Take time to briefly reflect: Through what lens have you been given this advice? Does this advice line up with your values?

3. **Do your research on prospective employment opportunities. Search for information on the culture of the company/organization.**

The “culture” of an organization might include anything from organizational structures and reporting lines, spoken and/or unspoken workplace norms, leadership trends, and more. Learning this information helps you understand what a company values and can serve as a loose discerning point as to what it might be like to work there.

Ask the questions: Are there any professional affinity groups? Who is in leadership and what does that reflect? What can you perceive about the norms of a particular atmosphere? Do you have enough information? What insights does this give you about the culture of this organization? What might that mean for your personal choices in clothing and hair in this atmosphere?

Does this provide a direct answer to the question, “What should I do with my hair?” Not exactly. Yet it provides keen insight for you to make an informed decision on your career journey.

There are times that I have chosen to straighten my hair and pull it back for an interview process. This was particularly early on in my career path, when I did not feel equipped with enough experience or knowledge about the organization.

Three measurements allowed me to make my decisions about race/gender expression in an interview setting. These measurements always served as a guide for me after I researched the culture/climate of the organization I was interviewing for:

1. Do I feel comfortable with the process it took to get my hair this way?
2. Does this style allow ample room to see my face?
3. Will this style hold without touch-ups after arriving to the interview site?

These three measurements allowed me to show strong non-verbal energy and did not require me to compromise my own cultural validity.

**Keep it real and "mind the gap"**

Brene Brown talks about “the gap” in her book, *Daring Greatly*. She says, navigating identity politics in the workplace is complicated because of “the gap,” the space between what a company says they stand for (e.g. diversity) and what that company actually practices. While we hope for settings in which such cultural expressions of hairstyle are widely appreciated, there is also the reality that in some circles, the appreciation is not there.

So, as you think about questions about hair and navigating identity politics in the workplace, find a mentor that will help you to process through any “gaps” that you may encounter. These mentors might come from your career services center, multicultural affairs department, or residence life department. It might be a professor or an alumni mentor that you’ve found a connection with. Talking through questions about identity consciousness in the workplace allows you to understand what to do when there are gaps between what a company says and what a company practices.

You may be thinking, “This sounds awfully complex for such a simple question: How should I wear my natural hair for an interview or in the workplace?” And you are right. Navigating through identity politics is inherently complex.

Jade Perry is a writer and a Coordinator in the Office of Multicultural Student Success at DePaul University. Courtesy of the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#).