Psychologists make up only 16 percent of the behavioral health workforce in the U.S. What are the chances that a person needing practitioners’ skills and training will find his or her way to a psychologist’s office? The odds aren’t just low, according to Angela Londoño-McConnell, PhD, of Athens, Georgia. They are dire, especially when psychologists shut themselves away in their practices.

“The survival of psychology as a viable profession will depend on how the public, policy makers and other professions get to know us,” says Londoño-McConnell. And the only way for psychologists to do so is to get out of their offices. “Community outreach has to be a part of your professional identity,” she says. “It must be intentional, and it needs to be a priority.”

Informing, empowering and motivating
As an undergraduate student at Florida State University, Londoño-McConnell served as a peer educator and later as a health promotion advisor and consultant while obtaining her master’s degree in counseling at the University of Central Florida. She chose to pursue a counseling psychology doctorate from the University of Memphis because of what she terms the degree’s “historical emphasis on prevention.”

Londoño-McConnell says she’s always felt passionate about “informing, empowering and motivating,” and that “[psychologists] can be empowered and motivated to make informed choices only when we have access to accurate and relevant information.” She points to these three tenets as being at the core of the work psychologists do, whether through psychotherapy, advocacy or public education. After all, “research-driven information is practical only if those who can benefit from it can access it.”

The more she reaches out to her community, the more it reaches back. “I’ve become a recognized expert and resource,” Londoño-McConnell says, bringing a diverse caseload of therapy clients and consulting opportunities to AK Counseling and Consulting, Inc., the practice she runs with co-founder J. Kip Matthews, PhD.

Fluent in Spanish and English, Londoño-McConnell for years has taken to the airwaves to educate the Spanish-speaking public on psychological issues. From 2006-2007, as the host of the first Spanish-language TV talk show in northeast Georgia, she offered community resources to viewers, including information on gang membership prevention and help with recognizing depression. As the host from 2007-2008 of the weekly health segment Agenda Hispaña on Georgia Public Radio, she discussed such topics as effective discipline for children at different ages, domestic violence and PTSD. In recent interviews on CNN en Español, she has discussed APA’s Stress in America survey findings, how to minimize holiday stress and why children lie, among other issues.

While media work might not be for everyone, Londoño-McConnell recommends that all fellow psychologists take part in community forums. She served on a panel at a local middle school for a talk on the importance of parental involvement in students’ education. Through Goodwill Industries and their career resource center, she participated in a vocational fair for members of the community.

In outreach to the business community, Londoño-McConnell has assisted local businesses with creating guidelines for their day-to-day operations to address
concerns about high staff turnover. She also helped a local organization identify key characteristics of successful employees to enhance their hiring practices. In addition, Londoño-McConnell provides professional development trainings for administrators and their staff on stress management and wellness, personalities at work, benefits and perils of social media, and diversity initiatives.

She credits her involvement in these activities with helping her “learn what is happening in my community. This information, in turn, can help me to better understand what my clients are facing day-to-day, which informs and enhances my practice.”

And the more one is involved in the community, Londoño-McConnell says, “the more people will know about who you are and your clinical areas of specialization. It is inevitable that the public will see you as an expert and as a resource if you are visible and active in community outreach. For instance, after appearing on CNN, a media company contacted me to take part in short videos on specific health issues to be played in doctors’ waiting rooms.”

Londoño-McConnell suggests that her peers get involved in organizations and institutions in their community. She serves on advisory boards including the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Institute at the University of Georgia, the Community Connections Latino/a Advisory Board, and el Banco de la Oportunidad Executive Committee. Londoño-McConnell points out that one doesn’t need to speak Spanish to be an asset to the Spanish-speaking community. The boards on which she serves also have local non-Spanish-speaking lawyers and medical doctors who advocate for the needs of Latinos/as and who welcome someone plugged into the mental health community.

Nearly two decades of work on college campuses has given Londoño-McConnell an appreciation for the developmental challenges that college students encounter. These days, as universities recognize the benefit of reaching out to traditionally underserved populations, she speaks to high school, transfer and first-year students, as well as their parents, on how to help high school students make a successful transition to college. Londoño-McConnell assists Latino/a and first-generation college students with addressing the various barriers to academic success that they may face.

She’s also often asked by universities to assist with recruitment and retention efforts of diverse students, faculty and staff.

Londoño-McConnell found that staging a health fair provided valuable face time with local lawmakers. In her role as APA Public Education Coordinator for Georgia, Londoño-McConnell chaired the committee that brought the first Mind/Body Health Fair to the state capitol. The fair was geared toward educating legislators about the role that psychologists play in the lives of Georgians. The 12 exhibits from the Georgia Psychological Association included statistics about state residents related to aging, depression and workplace issues, along with American Psychological Association Help Center (apa.org/helpcenter) literature explaining how these areas affect people and how psychology can help.

“Legislators stopped by the exhibits, read the material, and were really surprised. For instance, they said to me, ‘I never knew how depression affects the elderly.’ Now other SPTAs [state, provincial and territorial psychological associations] are taking psychology to their capitol building, advocating not just for the profession of psychology but, more importantly, for those we serve.”

In addition to her public education work, Londoño-McConnell provides consultation services to for-profit and not-for-profit organizations and employee assistance programs on issues of staff diversification, team building, creating healthy work environments and leadership development.

“I find getting out into the community energizing. But even more so, I find that [community outreach] makes me a better psychologist.”

When asked whether she ever thinks about slowing down or scaling back, Londoño-McConnell says, “I find getting out into the community energizing. But even more so, I find that [community outreach] makes me a better psychologist.

“As a psychologist, I have the responsibility to be aware of what is happening in the world outside of my practice. If I want to reach people—and I do— I don’t have to just wait for them to come to me. I can also go to them.”