Career Planning and Opportunities: The Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology

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Some Facts
Earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology does not train you to become a professional psychologist.
The undergraduate major in psychology provides you with a foundation of knowledge and critical thinking skills that enables you to choose from three major career paths.

As we welcome the new year and begin the spring semester, it is important for Psi Chi faculty advisors and members of the faculty to review career plans and opportunities with psychology students earning the bachelor’s degree.

Frequently, students erroneously think that they are being trained as “professional psychologists.” Of course, they are not.

Professional careers in the field require advanced training at the master’s and doctoral levels. These degrees are needed if, for example, a person wishes to become a professional psychologist working in the clinical, community, or organizational areas. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2004), psychologists held approximately 139,000 jobs in 2000, and it is expected that jobs will increase 21% to 35% through 2012, based upon the demand for psychological services in a variety of settings. The job outlook is very promising for persons possessing advanced degrees and less so for bachelor’s degree recipients. For many students, however, graduate training is not the avenue they wish to pursue.

Landrum and Davis (2004, p. 17) reported that “there were 74,060 bachelor’s degrees awarded in psychology in the 1999-2000 academic year. In the same year, 14,465 master’s degrees and 4,310 doctoral degrees were also awarded from institutions of higher education across the nation.” Given these facts, it is clear that students must seriously consider the marketplace in terms of supply and demand as well as the attractiveness of their skills and abilities by prospective employers.

Three Career Paths
What career paths and opportunities are available to students majoring in psychology? First, students might entertain employment opportunities in entry-level positions in a variety of settings. Secondly, they might plan to pursue an advanced degree in the field of psychology itself. Finally, they might wish to obtain advanced training in other disciplines such as law, business, medicine, or even education. Whatever the decision, it is important for students to realize that they already possess human service and research skills, which are acquired during the tenure of their undergraduate academic experience. Furthermore, these are the very skills that prospective employers look for in psychology majors with a bachelor’s degree.

Career Analysis
Assume for the moment that you have decided upon the first career path: that is, to search for an entry-level position related to
your degree in psychology. Some job titles included counselor, caseworker, assistant, or even high school psychology teacher if you met state certification requirements. For a more exhaustive list of job titles, refer to the research of Langley (2000) which identified over 300 positions.

Consider the skills that you already possess. Several experts in the field (Appleby, 1999; Indiana State, 2003; Lloyd, 1997a) agree that employers look for skills and abilities, knowledge, and personal traits in psychology majors. Let’s take a closer look at each of these areas (Table 1) and focus upon some of the things you already possess in your career repertoire.

**Skills and Abilities**

Table 2 identifies some of the more obvious skills and abilities that many experts in the field (Appleby, 1999; Indiana State, 2003; Landrum & Davis, 2004; Lloyd, 1997a) say students in psychology develop during the course of their academic pursuits. As you can see, your selection of specific courses enables you to develop these skills.

In addition, Landrum and Davis (2004) summarized a collection of qualities and skills that potential employers want you to acquire and possess: these are based upon the findings of many researchers. Taken together, these included: utilizing resources, working effectively with others, acquiring and using information, using technology to problem solve, communication, computation/numeracy skills, problem solving, personal traits, flexibility, and proficiency in the field of study. Given this information, you can more effectively create an academic course of study that maximizes your achievement of these desirable skills and abilities. Realistically, you may not be able to achieve all of them, but you certainly can create a program that helps you to become competent in several areas.

**Knowledge**

Prospective employers also expect you to know something about your major and your curriculum. It is vitally important for you to think about your course of studies, what you have learned, and convey this information to them in a clear and comprehensive fashion.

Table 3 highlights some examples of knowledge bases that you might consider as you conduct your career analysis and create your career plan. You may add or delete any of those on the list that do not apply to your experience.

**Personality Traits**

Your personality is one of your greatest assets. Accordingly, you should spend a considerable amount of time rating yourself on the personal traits listed in Table 4. Closely examine this list and score yourself on each characteristic. How did you rate yourself? Which areas do you need to work on? Create a strategy to build or strengthen these qualities.

Research conducted by Jobweb (as cited in Landrum & Davis, 2004) showed that the top 10 qualities employers seek from bachelor’s degree recipients were oral and written communication skills, honesty and integrity, teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, motivation and initiative, strong work ethic, analytic skills, flexibility and adaptability, computer skills, and self-confidence. These findings went hand in hand with research by Landrum

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“History is made from the union of ideas and the power of personality.”
— Henry James
and Harold (as cited in Landrum & Davis, 2004) on employers’ perception of important skills. They further highlighted listening skills, ability to work with others, getting along with others, desire and willingness to learn, willingness to learn new and important skills, focus on customer and clients, interpersonal relationships skills, adaptability to changing situations, ability to suggest solutions to problems, and problem solving skills. This research certainly demonstrates that it is very important for you to design and plan a course of study that allows you to develop and enhance your skills and personal traits. Prepare for your future career by noting these three areas and use your college experience to turn your weaknesses into professional strengths. It is up to you to develop a successful career plan.

Your Career Options

Recently, the American Psychological Association (2003, p.7) reported that “the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics expects that opportunities in psychology will continue to grow over the next decade,” especially for persons earning the master’s or doctoral degree. So, what can you do with your bachelor’s degree in psychology?”

It is important to realize that employers have different expectations of job responsibilities relative to one’s level of education. Even today, the research of Pinkus and Korn (1973) remains true. They claimed that employers expect bachelor degree recipients to be generalists and favored those with positive personality characteristics and some type of supervised field experience. Clearly, experience plays a major role in career planning. Academic grade point alone is insufficient. Therefore, you need to involve yourself in internships, mentorships, and memberships in such organizations as Psi Chi, your Psychology Club, or other student groups.

Earlier, I noted that there are several paths that you might consider in your pursuit of a professional career. The first career path is employment in an entry-level position. As you can see in Table 5, psychology majors work in paraprofessional roles that overlap with the duties and responsibilities of the professional psychologist. However, the paraprofessional does not have the advanced degree, job responsibility, or salary of the professional psychologist. Again, some job titles included counselor, caseworker, researcher, technical writer, or psychology assistant.

Based upon data obtained from the National Association of Colleges and Employers in 1998. Murray (2002) claimed that starting salaries for entry-level positions in the fields of business, education, government, and health care, and social and human services ranged from $18,000 to $45,000 (depending on the type of job and location of position). In fact, the average salary for psychology majors in 2001-02 was $29,952. Specifically, she further noted that most jobs were offered in the fields of management (average salary: $30,488), teaching ($25,378), counseling ($24,724), social work ($26,988), and sales ($34,451).

It appears that business, education, and human services continue to provide the most jobs for majors in psychology. There are, however, many other career fields, you might consider in your pursuit of a job as shown in Table 6 and noted in the work of Appleby (1999), Landrum and Davis (2004), and Lloyd (1997b).

Good luck in your academic planning! Your bachelor’s degree in psychology certainly equips you with a variety of skills and abilities, knowledge, and personal traits that will lead you to an enriching and exciting career.

References


Table 5

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<th>Entry Level Positions in Social Services</th>
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<tr>
<td>Case Manager</td>
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<td>Probation Officer</td>
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<td>Crisis Counselor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Assistant</td>
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<td>Resource Counselor</td>
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Table 6

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<th>Some Career Fields</th>
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<td>Advertising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>Government</td>
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<td>Health Care</td>
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<td>Hotel Management</td>
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<td>Human Resources</td>
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<td>Management and Business</td>
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<td>Personnel Work</td>
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<td>Public Relations</td>
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<td>Sales</td>
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<td>Social Services</td>
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Denmark National Faculty Award —

Role conflict, dual-career families, and personality. She is the author of dozens of articles, book chapters (e.g., “Developing Job Search Skills: A Training Program for Psychology Majors” in Woods, P.J. [1988]; Is Psychology the Major for You?) and editor of two books, Resources for Affirmative Action, and Personality Psychology: Insights, Issues, Case Histories and Applications. She was honored with the Haskell Teaching Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1996, the 2003 Department of Psychology Distinguished Teaching Award, and the University of Massachusetts Lowell Student Organization Advisor for the 2003-04 year.