**Life Beyond the Bachelor’s Degree: A Primer for Psychology Majors**

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**Professional degrees or liberal arts and sciences degrees?**

As students in their freshman year of college begin to consider what their academic major will be, they often begin with the question, “What do I want to DO when I graduate?”  For some students their career aspirations direct their college major choice.  For example:  If a student wanted to be a nurse he or she would need to major in nursing, and likewise for careers in engineering, education, social work, and business.  In academia we call these majors *professional degrees*.

There are also many students in their freshman year who are not as sure of their career objectives.  Many of these students choose to study the liberal arts and sciences.  Within the liberal arts you find majors like: Anthropology, Economics, Foreign Languages, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Women’s Studies.  Within the sciences you find majors like:  Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Computer Science, Physics, and Psychology.

The difference between professional degrees and liberal arts and science degrees is how specifically courses within the college major prepare a student for a particular career track.  Professional degree programs are relatively narrow in focus and train students to perform jobs in areas such as nursing, engineering, pharmacy, and education.  Liberal arts and science majors are a bit different.  Namely, these majors do NOT prepare students for specific career tracks.  In fact, finding a job with a major in liberal arts and science can be considerably more challenging.  It is a challenge NOT because there are few jobs available, it is a challenge because students often lack (1) the ability to articulate the range of skills they’ve developed in their education, (2) knowledge about the job market and what employers seek, (3) decision making skills required to make career choices when the options are ambiguous, (4) and career planning skills that need to be developed and used early in students’ academic career.

Having a liberal arts or science major offers students a broad education and more varied choices in careers.

# Majoring in Psychology: Common misconceptions

Psychology is a discipline that is associated with many misconceptions and misunderstandings.  Give this a try:  Go to a close friend or parent and announce that you are planning to major in psychology.  I bet you will get one of the following responses:

● “Don’t analyze me.  Are you analyzing me? Don’t analyze me!”

● “Ooooooo!  Psychology!  Are you gonna be a shrink?”

● “I hope you’re planning to go to graduate school.”

● “You’ll never find a job with your bachelor’s degree.”

The first common misconception related to the discipline of psychology is that the undergraduate degree in psychology prepares you to analyze, diagnose, and counsel people.  This is completely false.  In fact, IUPUI’s psychology department offers only one specialized introductory course in counseling skills, which will not qualify a psychology graduate to practice counseling.  To be a practicing psychologist you need to acquire a Master’s degree, Ph.D., or Psy.D. in clinical psychology *and* pass a state licensing examination.

A second common misconception is that psychology is all about counseling.  Hopefully this course is teaching you that there are many areas of study in psychology like Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Experimental Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Cognitive Neuroscience, and Social Psychology - and counseling has nothing to do with these areas of psychology.

The major in psychology is excellent preparation for graduate training in psychology, social work, education, law, medicine, and even business.  Within each of these graduate disciplines there are multiple specialties one could pursue.  However, there is much more preparation involved in meeting the qualifications for acceptance in graduate programs.

# Some sobering facts about graduate school

Obviously, the prospect of going to graduate school in psychology has much appeal, as such training offers many rewards for the successful.  It comes as no surprise, then, that surveys showed that about 65% of all new psychology majors at IUPUI indicated that graduate school was one of their plans following graduation.  However, in reality only a tiny fraction of those individuals will ever reach that goal.  The problem is in the numbers of students who are admitted each year to Ph.D. programs.  Statistically speaking, the odds are against students who plan to pursue graduate school after completing their bachelors degree – wise students will formulate a backup plan in case they don’t initially succeed in gaining admission to a graduate program.

The first statistic to raise difficulty is the sheer number of undergraduate psychology majors in the United States.  Some 70,000 psychology baccalaureates are now awarded annually, and that figure is not expected to drop any time soon.  Compare that huge set of people with the absolute number of Ph.D.s that were awarded in about that same period:  some 1,000 per year.  This ratio of potential applicants to successful graduates is consistent with the American Psychological Association’s estimates that only about 10% of all psychology majors enter Ph.D. programs.

The next sobering statistic is the grade point average (GPA) needed to qualify for application to a good graduate program in the field.  Consider for a moment the minimum 3.5 GPA for admission to the national undergraduate honors society, Psi Chi.  If an undergraduate society can be that selective, imagine what it might take to impress a very selective graduate admissions committee!  Indeed, psychology graduate programs are *very* selective.  Moreover, it is generally the case that the average GPA of the few individuals actually admitted is even higher than the stated minimum for application.  Grade point information of this sort is available for most programs in the U.S. and Canada in the APA book, *Graduate Study in Psychology*.

The selectivity of most programs introduces yet another sobering statistic: the ratio of the number of qualified persons who apply, compared with the number of those persons who are actually admitted.  The following table presents a sampler of such ratios in recent years for selected graduate programs in Indiana.  *Keep in mind that these numbers reflect applicants from across the country, not just Indiana.* Masters programs are indicated by (M); doctoral programs by (D).

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *School and Program* | *Applied* | *Admitted* | *Ratio* |
| IU Bloomington |  |  |  |
| Social (D) | 31 | 1 | 31/1 |
| Clinical (D) | 105 | 5 | 21/1 |
| Notre Dame |  |  |  |
| Counseling (M) | 61 | 5 | 12/1 |
| Counseling (D) | 180 | 2 | 90/1 |
| Purdue (West Lafayette) |  |  |  |
| Industrial/Organizational (D) | 95 | 2 | 47/1 |
| Quantitative (D) | 11 | 1 | 11/1 |
| Social/Personality | 80 | 3 | 27/1 |
| Indiana State University |  |  |  |
| Counseling (D) | 95 | 8 | 12/1 |
| IUPUI |  |  |  |
| Clinical Rehabilitation | 30 | 6 | 5/1 |
| Industrial/Organizational | 55 | 5 | 11/1 |

Finally, regarding the actual graduate school experiences of IUPUI psychology alumni, during the 1990s some 5% reported that they were enrolled full-time in some type of doctoral program.  An additional 11% indicated that they were enrolled full-time in a masters program.  The area of study most frequently cited was social work.

Does this mean that your chance of getting into graduate school are very low?  Well it depends.  You must consider that it is a competitive process and it requires much planning. It’s also wise to have a backup plan ready in case you don’t get in.  Graduate schools are looking for strong scholars.  This of course means that you should take rigorous courses and earn high grades.  It also means taking additional steps, like getting involved in research, securing relevant work experiences through practica, service learning courses, or volunteering, and studying for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).  It also helps to be flexible.  You might look nationally for suitable graduate programs, rather than limiting yourself to programs in Indiana.  You might consider aiming for a Psy.D rather than a Ph.D., or consider applying to Masters Degree programs in Social Work and Education (e.g., counseling psychology, school psychology) in addition to those in Psychology. Here are the stories of recent IUPUI psychology majors who have successfully gone on to graduate school.

● One student transferred to IUPUI after changing her major several times. She had a mediocre GPA of 2.93 at the beginning of her junior year when she decided to pursue a major in psychology.  Over the next four semesters and summer sessions she earned straight As in all of her course work and managed to raise her GPA to a 3.5.  She also pursued research opportunities with faculty in the Clinical Rehabilitation Psychology Program.  She got involved in the SPUR program, completed an independent research project, and presented her research at a local conference.  She obtained excellent letters of recommendation from faculty who worked with her directly on projects, she preformed at an acceptable level on the GREs, and she wrote an excellent personal statement that highlighted her specific interest in Clinical Psychology.  She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology.

● Another student began attending IUPUI 10 years after being dismissed from IU Bloomington for poor academic performance.  As an older and wiser student, he quickly found his niche in experimental psychology and began working as a research assistant in the laboratories of two faculty members.  At IUPUI he earned straight As.  However it never fully compensated for the poor grades earned at IU Bloomington many years earlier.  Nevertheless he persevered and ended up gaining authorship on several research papers and presentations while an undergraduate, performing extremely well on the GREs, and earning very strong letters of recommendation.  He wrote a compelling personal statement that  explained his academic history and described his planned focus of research.  He accepted a full fellowship to a Ph.D. program in cognitive neuroscience.

# What possibilities are there besides graduate school?

Is graduate study the only option?  Can a rewarding and satisfying career be found with a bachelor’s degree in psychology?  Well, let’s start with some facts.

This study conducted by the National Science Foundation, found that 70% of the 1994 psychology baccalaureate recipients were employed by 1995.  Only 23% went on for further graduate study. Sixty-four percent are working outside the area of science. **(image taken from APA Research Office Web Page:  http://research.apa.org.bac1.html)**

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The results depicted below are based on a study conducted by American Psychological Association (APA) entitled 1995 Psychology Baccalaureate Employment Survey:  1992 Graduates, illustrate the variety of work activities pursued by psychology majors.  The largest area of employment for baccalaureate degree recipients in psychology in 1992 are the health and human services, and over 50% of the employed graduates found employment in ‘other areas” including business, management, research and development, sales, and administrative/clerical positions. **(image taken from  APA Research Office Web Page:  http://research.apa.org/bac10.html)**

Is a degree really necessary for securing jobs such as these?  Seventy-four percent of the 1992 respondents reported that having an undergraduate degree was very important or important, while 51% reported that having an undergraduate degree in *psychology* was important.  If you are not interested in pursuing a professional degree, then your *major* choice is not so critical.  In most liberal arts and science majors, courses in the major comprise only about 30% or the required undergraduate curriculum.  The remaining courses come from the other liberal arts and science disciplines.  What is most important is to focus on getting a solid undergraduate education in a major area that you find most interesting.  Some of you may choose Psychology. The jobs that psychology baccalaureates compete for are the same types of jobs other liberal arts and science majors compete for in a broad range of career tracks.

IUPUI routinely conducts surveys of recent graduates who are employed with a bachelors degree.  Of several hundred former IUPUI psychology majors who responded to questionnaires, only 6.9% characterized their job title as “counselor,” and as few as 6.1% described themselves as “health practitioner/technician.”  Psychology alumni were far more likely to describe themselves as involved in administrative support, management, administration, and marketing/sales. Are these the sorts of jobs alumni had in mind when they declared the psychology major?  Probably not.  Indeed, national studies carried out by the U.S. Department of Labor found the same trend for psychology majors in general.  The recent *Government Occupational Outlook Handbook* made the following clear statement: *Bachelor’s degree holders can expect very few opportunities directly related to psychology.  Some may find jobs as assistants in rehabilitation centers, or in other jobs involving data collection and analysis.* But there are other job opportunities for psychology majors.

At a recent Career Fair here at IUPUI, the following local employers specifically listed psychology among the majors from which they sought to interview students: State Farm Insurance Company, Damar Homes, Farmers Insurance Group, Finish Line, Hamilton County Department of Human Services, Northwestern Mutual Life, The American Funds Group, Noble of Indiana, Home Crest Corporation, Indiana United Methodist Children’s Home, Inc, Kmart Corporation, Marion Superior Court (Juvenile Division), Pizza Hut, REM-Indiana, Inc, The Standard Register Company, Airtouch Paging, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Children’s Bureau of Indianapolis, Inc., Intermedia Communications, Sears, Wernle, Inc., and  Target Stores Distribution Center.

The challenge for you is how will you stand out from the rest of the crowd?

**Standing out from the rest of the crowd.**

Employers are looking for students who can empirically demonstrate (on a resume, through letters of recommendation, and in an interview) skills gained throughout their college experience.  The following list is a compilation of skills identified in a report from the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills U.S. Department of Labor entitled, Skills and tasks for jobs:  A SCANS report for America 2000 (1992) on skills need to be most productive and marketable in today’s market, and the results of a survey of skills employers sought in new hires (Appleby, 1997).

● Communicates well both orally and in written form

● Listens and reads carefully and accurately

● Possesses social & interpersonal skills

● Thinks critically and creatively

● Identifies and solves problems based on research and knowledge

● Manages time and resources effectively

● Possesses an ability to use technology

● Is able to negotiate and arrive at a decision

● Possesses computer and quantitative skills

● Deals with a wide variety of people and work with others in a team

● Is motivated to work hard

● Has a positive attitude toward work and the organization

● Possesses the willingness and ability to learn new skills

● Is organized

● Possesses leadership skills

● Is mature

● Is flexible

● Holds high ethical standards for self and others

● Tolerates stress and ambiguity

● Behaves responsibly

● Demonstrates positive self-esteem

These results mimic what respondents to the 1992 Psychology Baccalaureate Survey report as being the most useful skills/knowledge used in their current position.  Respondents ranked communication and writing skills as most important.  The psychology skills they ranked in order of importance were communications (53%), writing (40%), analytical skills (16%), research and design skills (13%) “other” skills (7%), and computer skills (5%)” ( pg 7).

Employers are looking for individuals who are team players, leaders, flexible, and teachable in this ever-changing market.  Technology skills also are critical.  Finally, interpersonal skills and appreciation of diversity are valued highly in the expanding global market.

There are numerous classroom and non-classroom activities you can participate in to enhance the development and perfection of these skills.  But, how do you stand out?  *Choose an area of significant interest and skill, and pursue opportunities to develop them further*.  Here are a few recent success stories from the IUPUI Psychology Department:

● A recent psychology graduate had an interest in teen pregnancy prevention so she took several courses that overlap with her interest (Social Problems, Personal and Social Ethics, Social Psychology, Social Problems, Theories of Personality).  She also participated in an internship in the area of teen pregnancy prevention.  She is now working, and finds great satisfaction in her current position as a coordinator for a teen pregnancy education program for high school students.

● Another recent psychology graduate had a strong interest in research, statistics and data analysis.  As a student he took his math and statistics courses seriously.  He volunteered to work with faculty and graduate students analyzing data and performing statistical analysis.  He also participated in independent research studies to gain research experience.  He applied for and was hired to analyze data in an internship with Eli Lilly his junior and senior year.  When he graduated they hired him full time.

● A third recent graduate had an interest in business and industry.  She took several Industrial/Organizational (I/O) courses as an undergraduate student and decided to pursue an independent research project with a faculty member in the area of I/O psychology.  Her independent project investigated workers’ attitudes toward receiving feedback within a large midwestern retail company.  The company went on to hire her in the area of public relations.

● A current student who plans to graduate in May developed an interest in human

resources.  She took several I/O courses as an undergraduate student and participated in the I/O practicum.  She was placed in the Human Resources department at a local hospital for the semester.  She has been assured that she will be hired full time upon graduation.

While these cases are powerful reminders of how hard work, ingenuity, and perseverance can pay off, they are by no means the norm.  Unfortunately, job opportunities will not fall into your lap when you graduate.  Indeed, the fact that some former major somewhere got some particular type of job could lead to the wrong conclusions that seeking work with a psychology baccalaureate without careful planning and preparation insures (a) employment that is related to psychology, or (b) high job satisfaction

The lesson to be learned from all of this is clear: You must seek out creative, interesting, and satisfying positions by cultivating interest and skills while you are a student.  Whether you do this through volunteering, work experience, independent research, internships/practica, or various other leadership activities, you must not be passive about your pursuits.  If you do nothing with your major but coast through your classes with little effort given to organizing and planning for your future, you may well be disappointed with your job opportunities down the road.

# How do I learn what career choice is right for me?

1.       **START NOW!**  Don’t wait until you’re a senior.

2.       Explore different areas by taking courses in disciplines that sound interesting and exciting to you.

3.       Talk to people!  Ask faculty, friends, and practicing professionals about different career areas – it’s called networking.

4.       Evaluate your interests and skills.  Visit the Career Center and talk with a career counselor about taking interest and skills inventories.

5.       Read books in the University Library and on different career options.  (Ask for help finding resources)

**6.**       Try job shadowing with someone in your network. See what “a day in the life of…” is all about.

7.      Set up an interview with someone working in the field you are exploring.  Prepare lots of questions beforehand.  Visit a Career Counselor for advice on good questions to ask.

**How do I build the skills employers are looking for?**

1.       Get involved in clubs during your first couple of years of college. Then take on a leadership position. Consider joining the Psychology Club and/or Psi Chi.

2.       Don’t just take any old job; look for one that prepares you for your future career.  Visit the Career Center for information on jobs in the local area that will offer you related experience.

3.       Consider doing an internship.

4.       Get involved in research with faculty members in the Psychology Department. Talk with faculty in the Psychology Department or your academic advisor for more information.

5.       Volunteer a few hours a week in your field of interest.

6.       Take your courses seriously and put a lot of effort into your work. Be an active learner and don’t take courses to “get them out of the way” or just because they’re required.