

# Champions of Psychology: Laura L. Koppes

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*This is an ongoing series in which highly regarded professors share advice on the successes and challenges facing graduate students.*

Laura L. Koppes is Professor and Chair of the Psychology Department at the University of West Florida. After completing her PhD in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology at The Ohio State University, she began her academic career when she joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh to rebuild its graduate program. Before joining the University of West Florida, she was Director of Work-Life at the University of Kentucky and Associate Vice President in Academic Affairs at Eastern Kentucky University, where she also held a faculty position in the psychology department and established a new graduate program. Koppes has consulted and published numerous articles, book chapters, columns, and notes on various topics, including work-life, the history of I-O psychology, training, performance appraisals, credit reports and selection, and master's education. She was the editor of *The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist* (TIP), the official publication of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and has edited a scholarly book, *A Historical Perspective of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. She is currently co-editor of a special issue on work-life for *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*. Koppes is a U.S. Fulbright Scholar and is currently named as a Fulbright Senior Specialist Candidate to consult organizations in other countries. She is a member of the Association for Psychological Science, SIOP, American Psychological Association, and the International Association for Applied Psychology. Koppes was the recipient of the 2007 SIOP Distinguished Service Award.

## **What led you to choose psychology as your career path?**

I am not really sure, except I know I have always been fascinated with human behavior and I thoroughly enjoyed science classes in high school and college. I remember telling my high school guidance counselor I wanted to be a psychologist. She tried to persuade me to not pursue this career because of how long it would take to earn an education. During my first semester in college, I took an introductory psychology course with a graduate student who was a great teacher and encouraged me to pursue my goal. He also introduced me to faculty and other graduate students.

## **How did you go about developing your current research interest?**

After a volunteer experience in a psychiatric hospital during college, I realized that clinical psychology was not the area I wanted to pursue. Because I was/am passionate about psychology, I explored other areas. It was serendipitous that my intro psych teacher was studying I-O psychology; he opened my eyes to this discipline. I have conducted research on a variety of topics. I currently consult and research in the area of work-life (also known as work and family). My dissertation was on stress in the workplace, probably because I was experiencing stress in graduate school and wanted to understand it better! But also, I've always been interested in the employee's experience at work. I am especially interested in how both employees and organizations develop strategies and solutions for the effective management of professional and personal responsibilities.

**How did you select your graduate program?**

I was engaged in faculty research projects and took graduate courses as an undergraduate student at The Ohio State University. I wanted to stay at Ohio State so I could continue with these projects. On a personal note, my grandmother graduated with a four-year degree from Ohio State in 1924; being a loyal Buckeye is a long tradition in my family!

What were the most rewarding aspects of graduate school for you?

I liked having specific goals and working diligently to accomplish those goals. I enjoyed teaching introductory psychology and collaborating with peers. My favorite aspect was taking statistics courses with Bud MacCallum. I realized I could actually learn and conduct statistical analyses from him!

**What common mistakes do you see graduate students making?**

I worry that psychology is becoming too compartmentalized with specialties and that graduate students are prepared in a narrow subject rather than the broad discipline of psychology and other content areas. Graduate students can become too focused in their studies. I also think graduate students can take on too many projects, jobs, and other responsibilities and consequently lose sight of their work-life balance.

**What suggestions do you have for choosing a mentor?**

It's important to choose a mentor who will have a genuine interest in your success and development. I see graduate students selecting mentors based on their "fame," but who never take the time to guide or counsel students. A mentor should be actively engaged in the mentoring process and also be someone with whom you feel comfortable.

**How do graduate students become first-rate researchers?**

Students should become involved with many diverse research projects that allow them to use a variety of research skills. Students need to proactively pursue opportunities with faculty and with peers. It's important to find projects in which they can apply their knowledge of research methods and statistics.

**What advice would you give to graduate students who want to have careers in academia?**

An academic career can be very rewarding, but students need to decide which type of academic careers they want and then prepare accordingly. For example, one academic career is in a college or university where teaching is the emphasis. In this case, students should gain extensive teaching experience and learn how to be effective teachers. Another academic career is in a research university where research is the emphasis. In this case, students need to understand the grant-writing process and have experience in submitting grant proposals and working on grants.

**What do you see as the future of psychology?**

World War I and World War II had significant impact on the evolution of psychology as a profession and science. I see the world events of today having the same impact. As the world continues to flatten, the role of psychology will continue to increase in importance because of significant human complexities.

**How did you go about getting your first job once you had attained your degree? How long were you employed in your first job?**

My first job was in a human resources department of a large financial institution. I had an internship in the same department when I was a graduate student. Being proactive, networking, and conducting informational interviews helped me to attain the job. I worked for two years in that position and then

decided I wanted to pursue an academic career.

**If you could design the ideal program for training graduate students, what would it be like?**

Many superb graduate programs exist so I don't think I can add components to the training that would make it ideal. When I have designed graduate programs, I made sure that students had a solid foundation in psychology, research methods, and statistics, as well as ethics and professional standards. It's important to be exposed to teaching, research, and consulting. And of course, a broad education in the core areas of psychology, which distinguishes us as psychologists.