

# Offering a Careers Course in Psychology Opportunities and Challenges

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How many times has a student said to you...

- o *I just declared Psychology as my major. What can I do with it?*
- o *How do I get into grad school?*
- o *Is a school psychologist the same thing as a guidance counselor?*
- o *I'm a Psychology major, but I'm not sure that's what I want.*
- o *I want to be a criminal profiler like on CSI.*
- o *I'm going to grad school in psychology, but I'm only going to apply here because I don't want to relocate.*
- o *What's a vita?*

Instructors likely find themselves fielding statements and questions like these repeatedly. From a developmental perspective it makes sense that students may lack the information they need to make informed decisions about their degree and career goals. One efficient and effective tool for reaching out to students and addressing a host of career and major issues is to implement a Careers in Psychology course. Careers in Psychology courses can be beneficial in many ways (e.g., Thomas & McDaniel, 2004), but the prevalence of these types of courses is unclear. In a relatively recent survey of 357 psychology departments, 34.2 percent offer some careers-type course and 77.9 percent of these departments require the course (Landrum, Shoemaker, & Davis, 2003). In a more recent study, however, Green (2008) found that although a careers course was more likely to be part of the curriculum at larger universities, the prevalence of such a course was fairly low — only about 7 percent of the surveyed institutions required a careers course, and 6 percent offered it as an elective. Regardless of the study, it is clear that these data mean that the majority of departments of psychology do not offer this type of course.

Although a portion of psychology majors pursue graduate studies following graduation, most students graduating with a degree in psychology will look for employment (Borden & Rajecki, 2000). Hettich and Helkowski (2005) assert that, “Too many students assume that mastering the coursework of their academic major prepares them for work and life” (p. xiii). A Careers in Psychology course is also one resource departments can implement to provide students with job-search and career-development tools — tools students will likely find themselves needing repeatedly in their lifetimes.

## **Topic Coverage: Potential Ingredients for a Careers in Psychology Course**

In terms of topic coverage, Careers in Psychology courses (and associated texts) fall into three broad categories. Some courses and texts cover career-related issues (e.g., Kuther, 2006), others cover descriptions of the subfields of psychology (e.g., Kuther & Morgan, 2010), and others cover both (e.g., Helms & Rogers, 2011). Using this framework, we examine the associated topics.

Career-related issues coverage typically focuses on two goals, with much overlap between the two. The first is preparation for entry into the job market after completion of an undergraduate degree in psychology. These topics include selecting coursework that provides more hands-on experience (e.g., practica), development of job application materials (e.g., cover letters and resume), and finding jobs that are consistent with the student interests and education level. The second goal concerns those students who plan to attend graduate school either upon graduation or at some point in the future. As a result, these topics focus on developing research skills (e.g., encouraging completion of directed research projects) and applying to graduate school (e.g., studying for and taking the Graduate Record Exam [GRE], developing a vita and statement of intent). Overlapping both of these goals are such topics as developing career goals, getting the most out of the undergraduate program (e.g., getting involved with psychology-related clubs), curricular issues (e.g., choosing and scheduling coursework), and general study tips for success in the undergraduate program. Table 1 provides a listing of some of the typical career-related issues covered.

The second broad category of topics covers the subfields of psychology. Although seemingly endless, focus generally is placed on the larger subfields. Table 2 lists those subfields typically covered. The treatment of the subfields often includes information on preparation specific to a particular subfield (e.g., elective coursework that may be helpful) and opportunities to work in the general area with bachelor's degree (e.g., human resource jobs for those interested in the industrial-organizational psychology area). Additionally, the necessity of obtaining graduate education in order to be a psychologist in any of the subfields is emphasized.

## **Potential Assignments and Grading Opportunities**

As is the case for any course, the selection of assignments and assessment of student learning are dependent on the goals and objectives of the course. Certainly, assessment via examination is as viable in this course as any other. Instructors can easily develop examinations that measure retention of information from lecture and texts (e.g., define the subfield of neuropsychology, compare and contrast neuropsychology and health psychology, identify the headings usually found in a vita). Beyond these obvious measures, there are quite a few opportunities specific to a Careers in Psychology course that provide additional learning (and grading) opportunities.

Orientation to the psychology major is often a first step or assignment in a Careers in Psychology course. One typical assignment includes course planning. In addition to plotting out coursework that will get them to their goal of graduation, the assignment can also highlight the importance of choosing courses that will help them reach their particular goals. For example, students wanting to attend graduate school may be encouraged to minor in Statistics or Biology (depending on the interest area). Students wanting to enter into the business world (as most undergraduate psychology majors do) may be encouraged to minor in Business.

In terms of career-related issues, completion of career interest inventories is often a good place to start for students. When not available or feasible, meeting with and reporting on a session with a counselor in the university's career services department is also a common assignment. In order to avoid overwhelming career services, instructors can also have students attend a career services function (e.g., career fair, resume writing workshop) and report on it. In this vein, having students develop a mock job application with a cover letter and resume can be helpful. This activity emphasizes both what they are currently lacking and what they will need to focus on over the remaining undergraduate years to achieve the resume they desire (e.g., volunteer experiences, grade point average [GPA], leadership skills).

A similar process to the mock job application is encouraged for students interested in attending graduate school. The mock graduate school application assignment provides an opportunity to develop a vita, a cover letter, and a statement of intent. This assignment sheds light on the complexities involved in applying to graduate school as well as emphasizes the realities associated with gaining admission (e.g., required GPA and GRE scores, research experience). This type of reality check is helpful and supports our statements in the course about the requirements necessary.

Prior to beginning the mock application process, a practice GRE can be assigned. Instead of students receiving a grade on the actual score, students receive feedback on their scores and grades on their plans to improve their scores (e.g., attend GRE preparation workshops, take additional practice tests, improve writing for the Analytical Writing section). The experience of taking a practice GRE is often reported by students to be one of the more memorable experiences.

The following are additional activities and assignments for students:

- o Interview a professional in the subfield of interest to you.
- o Complete a scavenger hunt to gain familiarity with the department, campus, web resources, etc.
- o Develop a personal budget based on where you believe you will be upon completing your educational goals. Compare your budget to starting salaries in the careers of interest.
- o Locate and read a publication of a faculty member in the department. Write a one-page summary of the publication.

Regardless of the type of activity or assignment, the overarching goal is both an introduction to the professional field of psychology and a dose of the realities about the road ahead, acknowledging the support available in the department to meet those realities.

### **Challenges in Developing a Careers Course**

The development and inclusion of a new course into a curriculum is seldom an easy task. A Careers in Psychology course is no exception and due to its nature presents some unique challenges. There is clearly no one perfect way to design and execute a course like this. For example, the Project Syllabus resource on the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) website currently shows three fairly different examples of syllabi for a Careers in Psychology course. With potential differences in mind, we present a few of the major issues in the development of a careers course, questions to consider, and in

some cases some of the corresponding advantages and disadvantages to different approaches.

**Defining the scope of the course.** What is the ultimate purpose of the course? Some departments may be interested in designing a course that simply provides students with an orientation to the major as it exists at their school. Others may focus on a broad range of topics including the subfields of psychology, employment opportunities for psychology majors, job search strategies, the graduate school application process, advising issues, key organizations in the field (e.g., APS, APA), the scientific method, APA style or some combination of these. In any case, students come into a Careers in Psychology course with a wide range of motives and questions. Some may be looking for specific information about how to market their Psychology degree and find a job, while some want information about the graduate school application process. Others may be interested in learning more about specific subfields of psychology and the career options related to those areas.

*Advantages of a broadly focused course:*

- o The course will be more likely to meet the needs of multiple students
- o The content of the course may reduce the advising load as students are better-informed about their major
- o The course may allow for coverage of non-psychology professions (e.g., social work)

*Disadvantages of a broadly focused course:*

- o There could be significant portions of students in the course who are indifferent to any given topic (e.g., a student who wants to learn how to market her psychology degree may have no interest in applying to graduate school). This may make large content areas of the course feel less relevant to them.
- o The instructor has to wear many hats and be effectively able to teach content (e.g., subfields) and process skills (e.g., writing a resume).

**Who's going to teach it?** This can be a thorny issue in that careers courses often entail so many wide ranging topics. Are there faculty members in the department with strong interests in career development issues as well as expertise in various areas? For example, although our clinical backgrounds enable us to talk easily about clinical and counseling psychology, our ability to talk in more depth about cognitive psychology and give students a true picture of the field is more limited. Fortunately, we are able to enlist the help of guest speakers from our departments who can effectively engage students on this topic.

**To require or not require.** Should the careers course be offered as an elective or a required course?

*Advantages of requiring the course:*

- o Allows all students in your department to be “on the same page” in terms of career and advising information. This can ultimately cut down on situations where faculty find themselves repeatedly answering the same informational questions from students (e.g., “How do I apply to graduate school?”, “What’s a vita?”, “How do I sign up for doing research with a professor?”)

- o Makes explicit the department's interest in facilitating students' career growth and development

*Disadvantages of requiring the course:*

- o Some students may feel they have a good handle on their career goals and find such a course unnecessary
- o Are there enough sections and/or large enough classes to meet the student need?
- o Increasing credit hour requirements for graduation can create scheduling difficulties for students as well as administrative challenges for the department and college

**When Should Students Take the Course?**

*Advantages of taking the course early:*

- o Students who take this course early in their academic careers will be better informed as to whether Psychology is a good fit for them
- o Students interested in graduate programs will have more time to thoughtfully plan the application process (e.g., investigate programs, think about potential letter of recommendation writers) as well as pursue coursework and opportunities that make them more competitive as applicants (e.g., field experience)
- o Students will gain awareness of a variety of opportunities (e.g., research with a professor) and have more time to take advantage of them
- o Relatively early in their academic careers students will come out of the course with some tangible products (e.g., a resume) that they can continue to revise and build
- o Equipped with information earlier, students can take a more proactive approach to their academic and career planning
- o This approach reduces the number of last semester seniors taking the course — students who may feel they are getting this information “too late.”

*Disadvantages of taking the course early:*

- o Students taking a careers course early may feel that some of the course content is not relevant for them because graduation or graduate school seems so distant.

**Majors only?** Should the course be offered only to Psychology majors or to non-majors as well?

*Advantages of a “Majors Only” approach:*

- o Makes course enrollment more manageable for institutions with a large number of majors

- o Limits students from other disciplines taking the course because “It fits my schedule” or “I just needed 3 more credit hours to be full-time.”
- o If the course is required, this approach better ensures majors will be able to get enrolled in the course and not “lose their spot” to a non-major

*Disadvantages of a “Majors Only” approach:*

- o May lose potential students who are considering Psychology as a major and feel such a course would help them make a decision
- o If the course is limited to majors does this mean those minoring in Psychology would be excluded from the course?

**Number of credit hours.** Should the course be offered for 1, 2, or 3 credit hours? If offered for 1 or 2 credit hours, then how does this affect faculty teaching loads and class scheduling? In Green’s (2008) survey, a 1-credit-hour course was the mode; however, there were departments **offering** the course for 2 and 3 credit hours.

So What’s the Bottom Line?

Despite the challenges involved in designing a Careers in Psychology course, such a course can offer a substantial payoff that makes navigating these challenges worthwhile. For example, Thomas and McDaniel (2004) found that students taking a Careers in Psychology course demonstrated increased knowledge about career opportunities in psychology as well as career opportunities a psychology major might pursue outside of the field (e.g., business). Additionally, students strengthened their level of vocational identity as well as their confidence in making decisions about their careers. In short, a Careers in Psychology course can achieve a number of the following goals:

- o Give students a deeper and more realistic understanding of the various subfields of Psychology as well as the related career opportunities
- o Provide students with critical graduate school information including admission requirements, the application process, and the graduate school experience
- o Inform students on a number of advising issues, including major requirements, and provide an orientation to the major
- o Provide students with information about the importance of unique opportunities within their major (e.g., becoming a research assistant)
- o Provide students with the resources and tools necessary to effectively use their psychology degree effectively in the job market (e.g., resume writing skills, interviewing skills)
- o “Myth-busting”: clarify common misconceptions about career development (e.g., “Everybody else knows what they want to do.” “People choose a career once and stick with that career the rest of their

lives.”), careers in psychology (e.g., “Criminal profiling jobs are common.” “You can’t get a job outside of psychology with a psychology degree.”), and graduate school (“I’ve done well in classes so I’m sure I’ll get into a graduate program.” “I can ask my professors to write me letters of recommendation two weeks before they’re due.”)

- o Equip students with career development theory information so that they better understand the process of making career choices and are able to make more informed decisions

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