

# Student Notebook: Opportunities for Pursuing a Passion in Psychology

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My passion for learning about human behavior and mental health dates back to grade school. But while I had no doubt that I wanted to pursue a career in psychological science, I had difficulty finding opportunities that aligned with my interests and allowed me to gain valuable experience. Luckily, I was able to get creative and find some amazing opportunities that helped me to grow as a student, a person, and, hopefully, a (future) psychologist. Here are some suggestions for other students considering majoring in psychology.

### **Get Involved With a Nonprofit**

One rewarding way to gain experience and make a tangible difference is by finding a nonprofit that aligns with your passions. There are nonprofits that center around everything from mental health to education programming. Additionally, volunteering may actually result in a positive change in your well-being (Lawton, Gramatki, Watt, & Fujiwara, 2020). One of the first nonprofits that I became involved with was my local chapter of Mental Health America ([mhanational.org](http://mhanational.org)). This experience not only allowed me to volunteer for a cause I was passionate about but also gave me the inspiration and momentum to eventually start my own nonprofit to bring together two of my passions—cycling and mental health advocacy. I started Move for Mental Health ([moveformentalhealth.org](http://moveformentalhealth.org)) in 2016, and I hosted two bike rides to benefit mental health organizations, each with more than 250 participants in attendance. This has no doubt been one of the most important learning experiences in my life. I learned so much about what it means to be an advocate, but I was also able to learn firsthand how to plan large-scale events. Most often, nonprofits will appreciate any time you can offer while you gain greater insight into a topic you're passionate about.

### **Look for Volunteer Research Positions**

Perhaps you are interested in eventually applying to graduate school, or maybe you are passionate about a specific area of research. Although it can be intimidating to contact a researcher, being a research assistant can be an amazing opportunity to learn about the research process and help with a project you are interested in.

At the start of high school, I saw an amazing speech by a psychologist whom I greatly admire. I followed her work over the years and eventually reached out via email to let her know that I would be interested in helping around her lab in any way if she needed an extra set of hands (knowing that it was very unlikely that I would get a response). I ended up hearing back, which was exciting in itself, but she was understandably busy. I reached out again a year later, and she offered me a position as an intern in her lab for the summer. Not only did I meet amazing people that I still keep in contact with today, but I was also given the opportunity to present a final project to the entire lab. I will forever value this experience, as it gave me the confidence and skills I needed to move on to another research position in college. If you are looking for a place to start, I would highly suggest checking out research opportunities on the [American Psychological Association website](http://www.apa.org).

Additionally, if you have specific research interests, it may be beneficial to narrow your search to find labs that align with them. Personally, I am interested in research on obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and have found the [International OCD Foundation](http://www.oCDFoundation.org) to be extremely helpful. Engaging in research pays dividends far beyond building your academic resume—it can help you to develop critical skills, such as perseverance in the face of obstacles (Petrella & Jung, 2008). Additionally, you may be able to

develop technical skills that will be incredibly helpful later in your career.

## **Read!**

Books are extremely helpful resources, whether you have a specific topic of interest or are looking for a comprehensive overview of popular topics in psychology. I have a growing collection of books that I know I can reference when I am curious about a research question or simply looking for a way to learn something new. If you are interested in current research in the field, it can be beneficial to start reading peer-reviewed articles that revolve around your interests. Databases like PsycInfo and PsycArticles can be especially helpful, as they allow you to search thousands of articles by keywords. Not only is reading a way to learn more about a subject that interests you, but it can also be a starting point for eventually beginning your own research project.

While collecting relevant books or articles, you may also start to notice gaps in the literature. If you end up pursuing research, you might be able to fill in those gaps and add to the literature someday!

Each of these resources and opportunities has helped me in my educational career—especially when I had no idea where to begin. If you're looking to get into psychology, don't be afraid to start small. Each of these tips will help you to discover and pursue your passions on whatever path you choose.

## **References**

Lawton, R.N., Gramatki, I., Watt, W., & Fujiwara, D. (2020). Does volunteering make us happier, or are happier people more likely to volunteer? Addressing the problem of reverse causality when estimating the wellbeing impacts of volunteering. *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-020-00242-8>

Petrella, J. K., & Jung, A. P. (2008). Undergraduate research: Importance, benefits, and challenges. *International Journal of Exercise Science*, 1(3), 91–95.

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