What We Can Do to Help Undergraduate Students Not Going on for Graduate Studies

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"I want to go to graduate school and become a professor of psychology." Who doesn't receive a thrill when a promising student declares an intention to become an academic? Is there anything in the world more flattering than someone sharing our ideals, mimicking our behavior, reinforcing our belief that we made "the right career decision" and that we are "really neat people?" Aside from stroking our academic egos, and for some faculty signaling professorial success, our more pragmatic side may view these students as "more valuable" because they can assist us in our careers. We can honestly say that we are helping students, for example, by providing them with research activities in our lab. They will learn more about research than they could from a textbook, they may get a chance to present research at a conference, and they may even find their name on a publication. However, we are also benefiting by finding an employee who is willing to work for "free."

The reinforcing nature of these students can easily lead us to design classes that are biased toward the needs of the "pre-graduate" student. This may occur unwittingly as we pay more attention to these students inside and outside of class due to the human tendency to interact with people who have similar interests. Or it may even become purposeful when a professor decides to dedicate his or her energies to students who are "serious" about the field. Regardless of the reason, this tendency to aim our lectures and activities toward students going to graduate school may do a disservice to our other students. Most of our students, particularly in first and second year courses, will not pursue master's degrees and even fewer doctoral degrees in psychology. Thus the question becomes, "How do we serve the needs of undergraduates who are not planning to go to graduate school?" In this article I will first discuss skills that are likely to increase a person's quality of life, then how a major in psychology can fulfill many of these needs and, finally, I will present some specific activities designed to make students aware of the careers available to them with a bachelor's degree.

What Skills Are Necessary For Success
Although a college education has the potential to enrich a person's life in a myriad of ways, some skills are more likely to lead to success than others. For example, although I am now a master at short-sheeting a bed, it is a skill that has nothing to do with my current position! Two areas of expertise that are closely linked to success after college are work and interpersonal skills. These abilities may at first seem to have little in common, but success in one is likely to influence the other.

Work Skills
What do employers look for in a potential employee? At the most basic level employers want people who are intelligent, can read and write well, and have solid mathematical skills (Landrum, 2001). Appleby (2000) asked employers who were willing to interview psychology graduates about what they were looking for in a good candidate. Social, personal, and communication skills were perceived to be of the greatest value to the employers. More specific examples of these skills include the ability to deal effectively with a wide variety of people; work productively as a member of a team; demonstrate

initiative and persistence; hold to high ethical standards; speak articulately and persuasively; write clearly and precisely; and demonstrate appropriate interpersonal skills. There are numerous ways that an instructor can provide students with opportunities to hone these skills.

- Assign group projects that cannot be completed successfully unless every member of the group contributes to the task. Corporations lament the inability of many new hires to work successfully in groups. Considering that most academic assignments are completed individually, difficulty working in groups should not be a surprising outcome.
- Help students to develop persistence by providing projects that require the completion of multiple stages.
- Have students hone their oral persuasion skills through in-class debates. Unlike physics or chemistry, psychology is not bound by laws. Instead, our science is full of competing theories providing numerous chances for our students to take a position and forcefully defend it.

Interpersonal Skills
Multiple sources (e.g., Johanson & Fried, 2002; Yancey, 2001) indicate that interpersonal skills are important factors in the workplace. In both studies cited above, recent psychology graduates ranked interpersonal skills as first in importance in their jobs. The question then becomes, what exactly are these interpersonal skills that everyone thinks are so important? Yancey, Clarkson, Baxa, and Clarkson (2003) suggest that the following interpersonal competencies are important: effective communication, the ability to accurately interpret others' emotions, sensitivity to others' feelings, strong conflict resolution skills, and politeness.

However, work success is not the only reason to improve interpersonal skills. From a liberal arts perspective, friendship, love, and civility to our neighbors are important reasons to improve our interpersonal skills. If we want to have a circle of friends who care for us and provide support, intimate others with whom to share our lives, and neighbors from whom we borrow garden tools, we must constantly seek to improve our ability to listen accurately and communicate clearly.

How Psychology Can Help

Competencies That Make up a Psychology Education
The general principles inherent in psychology content provide the framework needed to improve students' career chances and interpersonal relationships. When professors think about preparing students for graduate study, they think a lot about content issues – do students understand the history of psychology, the major theories in their proposed field of study, and research methodology? However, knowing what year Wundt started his laboratory in Leipzig is unlikely to get someone a job, and probably is not the strongest pick-up line either! Does this mean a separate set of courses is necessary for students not interested in pursuing a graduate degree? Not at all.

The APA's Taskforce on Undergraduate Major Competencies recently proposed 10 goals (Halonen, Appleby, & Brewer, 2002) and related learning outcomes for psychology majors that echo this idea. The first goal is to create a knowledge base of psychology. The next four involve the application of psychological concepts to the solution of real world issues (e.g., use of research methodology, application of values). The five remaining goals involve knowledge, skills, and values consistent with a liberal arts education that have the potential to be developed further by psychology. For example, the

taskforce argued that communication skills and personal development should be augmented through one's experience as a psychology major. In essence, the suggested goals and outcomes emphasize that psychological content is only one small component of a psychology education. Psychology majors acquire a set of competencies that increases the likelihood that they will be successful in whatever work and personal situations they encounter. Psychology has the potential to fulfill this overarching goal in that it is unique in the breadth of skills that it provides to its graduates (Hayes, 1997).

Emphasize Literacy
In order to secure work, psychology majors should be literate upon graduation (Hayes, 1997). Psychology majors have an advantage over other majors in that they are trained to write in multiple formats. Aside from expressing themselves in essays like students in most majors, they also are frequently required to learn to write reports in pre-established formats as they write experimental/research papers (Hayes, 1997).

To insure the development of these abilities, instructors need to emphasize students' practicing their writing in different formats. One end of this spectrum could include reaction pieces when students express their feelings and thoughts in writing. These papers allow students to learn to write "in their own voice" while being relatively easy to grade. For example, in a social psychology course students could watch Milgram's *Obedience* film, imagine themselves as subjects, and describe how they would react to the situation. At the other end of the spectrum, research methodology courses frequently require research projects where information must be presented in a very precise format. The expectations for the technical writing that underlies research papers are different from the more prosaic writing that is appropriate for reaction pieces, and students not only become facile with different formats, but also with expressing themselves with different vocabularies and styles.

Emphasize Numeracy
Hayes (1997) also points out that although some other majors may produce students with more mathematical skills, the combination of literacy and numeracy skills found in psychology majors is unparalleled. Although qualitative research is gaining acceptance in the behavioral sciences, psychology still emphasizes quantitative methodology, a key part of which is the use of inferential statistics to make informed decisions about human behavior.

Assign journal articles as part of the course. Virtually every journal article provides students with an opportunity to see numbers discussed in the midst of prose, but even more importantly to see these numbers interpreted and discussed. To insure that our students become adept at understanding numbers, it would help if we had them read primary sources. Frequently, texts boil down and summarize journal articles; a necessary simplification if a large amount of material is going to be covered in our classes. Yet, at the same time, assigning a handful of journal articles each semester is not a large expense for students in terms of time or money.

Use journal articles as extra credit. Another avenue to getting students to read more research articles is to provide extra credit assignments for reading primary research sources. One approach I take is to provide students a list of our departmental faculty, direct them to find an article written by a faculty member, and write a 2-3 page article summary. Aside from gaining familiarity with reading and interpreting research, ancillary benefits include students becoming more familiar with the faculty and the idea that professors apply in the "real world" that which is discussed in class.

Ethical Standards and Decisions
In our post-Enron society, there is a focus on whether students, particularly college students, are being provided with the tools to make ethical decisions. Psychology provides an excellent arena for a discussion of ethics. Whether one's preference is an applied or a research setting, psychology is rife with good and bad examples of ethical decision making and ambiguous situations in which the rules are unclear. There are many opportunities to discuss ethics throughout our curriculum.

- Students in abnormal psychology courses could be presented with the key parts of the APA code of ethics and then be asked to imagine or role-play scenarios where the ethical guidelines would be useful in guiding professional behavior.
- An exercise for understanding ethics in research would be for a class to appoint a mock Institutional Review Board to evaluate research proposals written by other class members. Although the specific ethical guidelines that they face in their career field may be different, students will receive practice in thinking in terms of ethics.

Ability to Understand Emotions and Behaviors
Psychologists do not have some mystical ability to look inside the hearts and minds of other people, but our students are provided with numerous tools for studying and understanding human emotion and behavior. For example, learning the major theories of personality provides a basis for understanding general tendencies in human behavior and courses in social psychology provide evidence that casual observers frequently make mistakes in their interpretations of behavior. Most textbook authors say that they highlight these mistakes so that students become aware of them and may perhaps become more effortful and less mistake prone in their processing of social information.

The good news is that these efforts may be paying off. Research indicates that psychology students move somewhat beyond casual observation and explain human behavior less simplistically than natural science students (Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, & Reeder, 1986). Although knowledge does not guarantee better interpersonal skill (Hayes, 1997), knowledge of one's perceptual biases may help a person more accurately interpret people's emotions and behaviors. Further, being aware of the perceptual sources of misunderstanding may enhance students' conflict resolution skills.

Use of Psychology in Everyday Life
Faculty get students' attention and make psychology "real" when they share stories about their lives that draw attention to the use of psychology. This moves the discipline from something to be memorized to an approach to living and a useful set of tools.

- Students are fascinated and appalled when they discover how findings from research on persuasion are applied to advertising and marketing campaigns. Some of the most captivating explorations of consumer psychology have revolved around how my students make decisions in the grocery store.
- If you are feeling brave, elicit stories from the students about their pets. Use these stories to demonstrate to students that learning theory can be used to understand the behavior of our animal companions. I often tell the tale of how my in-laws had an outside dog that would sneak inside at times. They would then entice the dog back outside with a yummy dog bone. It doesn't take students long to figure out why that dog was found more and more often in the house (usually sitting by the back door and drooling in anticipation!).

- Did psychology assist you in your parenting and if so, how? Sometimes I kid with my students that my knowledge of psychology increases my neuroses when it comes to parenting. For example, I find myself asking questions like, "Did I respond to my son's needs quickly enough or is he going to develop a sense of mistrust?" If your children's behavior was more interesting or your parenting methods were influenced by your knowledge of Piaget or Erikson, share these moments and anecdotes with your students.
- How does the research literature on attraction and proximity explain why students have a crush on the person sitting to their left or in the dorm room next door?

Guiding Toward Appropiate Careers

Although students will come to appreciate the skills gained during their college career, they also want answers to the question "What kind of work can I find with a bachelor's degree in psychology?" Students often ask this in panicked voices that suggest that they believe the answer to the question is "none," or that they better get used to asking, "Do you want fries with that?" In reality, however, the skills described above can be applied to a multitude of careers. Thus, the diversity of careers available to psychology majors suggests that multiple approaches need to be taken to insure that students gain the information required to make intelligent decisions about careers.

Useful Print and Internet Resources

Countless sources list and describe the careers available to psychology majors (see References and Recommended Readings). These lists provide an excellent starting point for students in their exploration of career fields. Although students will profit from these sources, the use of interactive modes of communication may prove more beneficial.

Use Former and Current Students as Resources

Psychology clubs and honor societies can play a role in providing information about potential careers. One option is for Psi Chi chapters to invite alumni to conduct presentations and answer questions about their careers. I attended one of these sessions as an undergraduate and was surprised by how many people had what I considered to be fascinating jobs that did not require going to graduate school and were difficult to categorize as "psychology." In addition, with alumni permission, departmental Web pages can contain biographies and e-mail addresses of former students willing to answer questions about different career tracks.

Include students in the advising process. Seegmiller (2003) designed a peer advising course where knowledgeable students were trained to provide information not only about graduate school but also careers in psychology. For our purposes, a psychology major or two trained by the college or university placement office to work with peers has great potential. Non-official peer advisement systems already exist at every college, but these unofficial systems may pass on flawed or incomplete information. Training students to advise effectively should only have positive results.

Zechmeister and Helkowski (2001) created a career course that culminated in a student-run career fair open to students not enrolled in the class. Students in the course chose a career to investigate, designed a portfolio containing important information about the career (e.g., opportunities, how to prepare for the career) and then created posters and handouts that were presented at a career fair that was heavily advertised to psychology students. The benefits of this process were that the students in the class became knowledgeable about a career that interested them, and other students became more aware of the fields

potentially available to them. One caveat is that Zechmeister and Helkowskis' course was aimed at master's-level careers, but it could easily be adapted to careers appropriate for bachelor's degrees.

Utilize the University's Placement/Career Office
Although there are many things that can be done to assist our students in their search for meaningful employment, we should remember that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Every college campus has an office of professionals who are trained to help students find work during and after college. Departments need to develop strong relationships with their career/placement offices. Further, certain class assignments can be designed so that they highlight important psychological principles while also providing practical assistance to a student who will soon be looking for employment. For example, industrial/organizational psychology courses provide a perfect excuse for students to practice writing and evaluating resumes. Students can be directed to the placement office for resume templates, at least insuring that you have taught them where the office is located! Mock interviews can be utilized in social psychology classes to highlight the importance of impression formation and to discuss various elements of persuasion.

Conclusion
A large number of psychology majors do not choose to pursue advanced degrees upon graduation, and many of our students will not find jobs in "psychology." Our responsibility is to be aware of and sympathetic to the needs of these students. Although our first instinct may be to focus on students who intend to attend graduate school in psychology, we need to be supportive of, listen to, and spend time with students who are interested in psychology as a liberal arts degree.

Helping students lead productive, ethical lives both in and out of the workplace is an important measure of our success as teachers, and a source of pride faculty often overlook. At the end of the day, or the end of our careers, isn't that what teaching is all about?

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