Where Psychology Majors Work

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All of us involved in undergraduate education go to great lengths to ensure our curriculum provides training in the content, methods, critical thinking, and communication skills appropriate for a major in the science of psychology. But despite that training, neither employers nor psychology students presume they have the skills important for success in the world of work. In a 2012 paper, educational psychologist Todd Haskell (Western Washington University) and colleagues pointed out how this irrational belief persists, with negative consequences for our field and our students — particularly when it comes to their career choices and the opportunities they seek. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the five most common jobs for bachelor-level psychology graduates age 35 and under are (most to least): social work, elementary/middle school teaching, counseling, management, and nursing.*

Those jobs are essential in our society, and we need to continue serving students with those interests. But there are so many other types of jobs for which our students are well prepared. Why aren't they being employed based on the many skills they have developed as a psychology major? For instance, few undergraduate majors on any campus require more preparation in statistics or questionnaire development than psychology. Those skills are highly valued by any employer with a website. Why aren't our students getting jobs that make greater use of those skills?

In fact, many new types of jobs would benefit substantially from the skills of our psychology majors. Here are a few:

Consumer Science: I would certainly prefer to see our majors using their knowledge to make up the hundreds of satisfaction surveys that I'm asked to complete each year. They might even provide good data to improve those products and services. Relatedly, each year I attend a meeting of researchers in smell and taste that is also frequented by the many companies that use our research to create products. These companies need research technicians by the hundreds to inform product testing. A psychology major who understands preference testing can find their way to a career in a massive industry that has trillions of dollars of annual revenue in the United States alone.

Software Design: Wouldn't it be great to see our majors working to improve software design even if they never double majored in computer science? Someone with an understanding of the human side of the interface would be a tremendous boon to the industry and society, whether they were designing the interface or just making error messages that users can actually understand.

Nudge Science: It has now been 10 years since Nobel laureate Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein introduced the rest of the world to the impact behavioral science can have on health, compliance, and productivity in work that draws directly on decades of psychological science. Increasingly, we are seeing our graduates involved in the public policy arena and other areas where evidence-based interventions are effective for achieving changes that benefit individuals and society.

Social Media: A student who has a good grasp of statistics and social behavior would be a tremendous asset to the burgeoning social media industry. We train thousands of students with those skills. Why aren't they being hired in those roles in greater numbers?

Data Science: This is the current "hot" career pursuit on many campuses. Psychology majors are trained extensively in the applied statistics that underlie this field and could function competently in many entry-level positions or use their major as a stepping stone to an advanced degree in this science.

Safety Science: You may not have heard of safety science, but you are familiar with many of its products: reducing distracted driving, improving safety in stadiums and other places attracting thousands of people, keeping pilots and drivers awake when they need to be awake and asleep when they need to sleep. This is a huge new industry and it is an obvious place of employment for new graduates trained in our programs.

There are many more examples of areas where psychology majors' training in project and data management, research design, collaboration techniques, understanding of human behavior, and other skills make them a good fit for entry-level positions. Even so, most employers in these fields don't explicitly seek out psychology majors to fill their jobs. Furthermore, these are not the types of jobs our students imagined when they selected psychology as a major. We may not like it, but most people — including our students early in their training — do not view our discipline as a science or see it connected to more than mental health (Lorig & Dragoin, 2015).

Public perception has not kept pace with the robust growth of neuroscience, cognitive science, and social and developmental psychology in the past 20 years. Those fields have branched out to collaborate with engineering, economics, decision science, business, public policy, education, medicine, policing, law, and community planning. Psychological science, which has always been a broad field of study, is now even broader and it is being applied to real-world problems in many more ways and with far more success. That application has the potential to make life better across our planet, but few people outside of psychology departments know it.

When we identify our field as "psychology," it brings about a very specific set of expectations for students, employers, and others. That is a problem for those students who want to pursue these "new" jobs and would never imagine psychology was the right place for them. Likewise, employers may hire psychology majors to work in call centers or in the complaints departments but would never realize that a psychology major would be a good match for their social media research unit.

The challenge, then, is to increase the public's awareness of the full breadth of psychology as a science and applied discipline. As a first step, maybe it's time to make it clear to prospective students and our academic colleagues in other departments that our field has many parts, each with important scientific findings and applications that include, but are not limited to, mental health. The National Science Foundation took this step almost 30 years ago by creating the Social, Behavioral and Economic Directorate. Perhaps it is now time for departments to choose a name that conveys and includes *all* of what we do. My university has just taken this step. After a unanimous vote of the full faculty, our department, formerly the Department of Psychology, is now the Department of Cognitive and Behavioral Science. Maybe this way we can stop talking about non-traditional careers in psychology and begin to discuss the many typical careers for someone with training in behavioral science.

This report considers all bachelors-level psychology majors as members of the liberal arts no matter the Carnegie classification of the college from which they graduated.

References

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