

Courses on Careers for Psychology Majors

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Over the past 10 years, courses on careers for psychology majors have made a debut in the undergraduate curriculum. Why such courses, and why now? Consider the following points: (a) the current undergraduate population includes many students who are uncertain about why they are in college, but who assume that a college degree will guarantee them an interesting and well-paying job; (b) the psychology major, like other liberal arts and sciences majors, is general in scope and not intended to develop skills directly and obviously tied to specific jobs; (c) relatively few psychology majors enter graduate school and only a small proportion of this group goes on in psychology; (d) for those who elect graduate study, the graduate school application process is a complicated one.

Thus, for many reasons, today's students need assistance if they are to become strong candidates for jobs or graduate school. "Careers" courses are helping to meet that need. Such courses are typically of two types: introductory and "capstone." The latter courses, geared toward seniors, are usually designed to help students clarify their career goals and to prepare them for the job search or the graduate school application process. Courses aimed at first- and second-year students cover these issues as well, but also inform students about important aspects of the major (sequencing of courses, independent study options, etc.), identify useful minor and elective courses, and spell out things to do—inside and outside the classroom—to enhance students' chances for entry-level jobs and slots in graduate schools.

Both types of courses have their advantages. In junior-senior-level courses, students are better informed about the discipline, more mature and focused, and more interested in course issues because the job market or graduate school is looming. In first-and-second-year courses, students still have time to schedule courses they might not have considered taking and to get involved in career-relevant volunteer work and student activities. Such courses can also help students decide whether psychology is the right major for them in time to change majors without jeopardizing their graduation date. In addition, introductory-level careers courses convey, early on, the value of high grades, high GRE scores, and good letters of recommendation.

¹ Lloyd, M. A.. (2002). Courses on careers for psychology majors. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001* (chap. 6). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

Critical Elements of a "Careers" Course

In my view, there are two critical things "careers" courses should teach students. First, students need to learn the importance of becoming "free agents"—i.e., assuming an active role in their post-baccalaureate success (Carney & Wells, 1999). This process involves electing courses and taking part in activities and volunteer work to ensure they will have the knowledge and skills required to gain entry to the workforce or graduate school and skillfully "marketing" themselves to prospective employers or admissions committees (Carney & Wells, 1999). Second, these courses should help students bridge the gap between the major and the marketplace (or graduate school). Thus, faculty need to inform students about the knowledge and skills that employers and graduate schools seek and identify courses in the core curriculum, psychology major, and minor and elective courses that will help students develop such knowledge and skills.

An Introductory-level "Careers" Course

At Georgia Southern, psychology majors are required to take Careers in Psychology. This one-credit course is graded on a pass/fail basis and is typically taken in the sophomore year. Among other things, the course aims to help students clarify their academic and career goals and to familiarize them with the application process for both jobs and graduate school.

Lecture topics in a typical semester include the following: entry-level jobs for psychology majors; skills employers seek and ways to develop these skills; exploring abilities, interests, skills, and values; graduate school options and considerations; what's involved in applying to graduate school; preparing résumés and cover letters; Internet resources; and campus and departmental resources. Three additional class sessions are devoted to speakers on selected careers—e.g., psychotherapy, corrections, and business.

In addition to reading course-pack materials and *Psychology: Careers for the Twenty-first Century* (APA, 1996), students complete a number of in-class exercises and out-of-class assignments. The assignments include: (a) writing a career-related autobiography, (b) developing an academic plan, (c) computing a projected GPA upon graduation, (d) taking Holland's (1994) Self-Directed Search and identifying relevant academic major and career options, (e) conducting an informational interview, (f) writing a résumé and cover letter, and (g) compiling a course portfolio consisting of course notes, hand-outs, and completed assignments for later use.

A copy of a recent course syllabus is available at *OTRP-Online* via the web portal for the Society for the Teaching of Psychology: <http://www.teachpsych.org>.

Course Outcomes

In recent years, many psychology departments have instituted career development courses to supplement advising programs (Ware, 1992). Several such courses have been described in the literature. For example, Buckalew and Lewis (1982) described a broadly

focused, upper-division senior seminar that covered such topics as psychology's problems and future, ethical issues in psychology, career opportunities, résumés and business letters, personal development, financial investment, and money management. Also, Davis (1988) has written about a one-credit academic course that stresses graduate school preparation.

Several well-controlled evaluations of career development courses have been reported. In a for-credit, elective course, Ware (1988) found increases in students' information about themselves, the world of work, and job search skills, as well as decreases in career-related anxiety, fear, and guilt. More recently, Dodson, Chastain, and Landrum (1996) described and evaluated a three-credit, upper-division, pass-fail elective that emphasizes opportunities in and preparation for graduate school. Based on a survey of 42 students at the first and last class meetings, Dodson et al. (1996) reported lowered expectations about graduate plans (from doctoral to master's degree) and very favorable ratings of the course.

Key Issues in Developing a "Careers" Course

In developing such a course, here are some key questions to consider:

1. What are the objectives of the course (introductory or "capstone")? Course objectives will guide how the course will be titled.
2. In what year should students take the course?
3. What readings will be required (books, hand-outs, course-packs, etc.)?
4. What assignments will help students develop the insights and skills they need?
5. How many credits will the course be awarded (how many meetings, how long will the class sessions be, and what will be the nature of the workload)?
6. Will the course be required or optional?
7. Will grades be pass/fail or academic ("A," "B," "C," "D," "F")? This decision will impact how you grade assignments and the degree of "control" you have over the quality of students' work.
8. What is the optimal class size? (I know of courses ranging from 18 to 200—the latter utilizes graduate students to lead smaller break-out sections.)
9. Are there any scheduling considerations--e.g., scheduling multiple sections at the same time with access to a large room in order to share the same speaker?

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