

## *Helping Your Students to Become Savvy Psychology Majors<sup>1</sup>*

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(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for May 2002.)

The English word “savvy” is related to the French word *savoir*, which means “to be aware of, to understand, or to know how” (Dubois, 1971, p. 243). When the French add the word *faire* (“to do”) to *savoir*, the result is *savoir-faire*, a phrase used to describe people who are both (a) knowledgeable and (b) willing and able to use their knowledge to accomplish their goals. Savvy psychology majors possess *savoir-faire*. This means they are aware of the importance of the following questions, they are eager to discover and understand their answers, and they are willing and able to translate their newly acquired understanding of these answers into success-producing actions.

- How can I survive my first year in college?
- How can I become a successful psychology major?
- What can I do with a bachelor’s degree in psychology?
- How can I identify, clarify, and accomplish my occupational goals?

Unfortunately, not all psychology majors are savvy. The media often portrays today’s college-bound generation as clueless slackers who lack the knowledge (i.e., are clueless) and ambition (i.e., are slackers) to achieve their goals. Research reported by Schneider and Stevenson (1999) in their book, *The Ambitious Generation: America’s Teenagers, Motivated but Directionless*, refutes the slacker component of this portrayal with data collected from current college-age students and a similar group of their peers from the 1950s. When these two groups were compared, the results were clear. Today’s students are far more ambitious than their peers from the 1950s because many more want to earn a college degree (90% vs. 55%) and many more strive to enter professional careers (e.g., medicine and law) as opposed to blue-collar jobs (e.g., mechanic and secretary).

The data related to the clueless component of this portrayal were less clear-cut. Schneider and Stevenson discovered that today’s college-bound students fall into two groups, those possessing aligned ambitions and those whose ambitions are misaligned. Those with aligned ambitions have complementary educational and occupational goals and are likely to construct educational plans that enhance their chances of successfully attaining their desired occupations. These students understand how they must change to reach their occupational goals (i.e., the knowledge and skills they must acquire) and are more thoughtful when they

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<sup>1</sup> Appleby, D. (2003). Helping your students to become savvy psychology majors. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2002* (Chap. 6). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/index.html>

make decisions about which courses to take, which organizations to join, and how to spend their time.

Students with misaligned ambitions are equally ambitious, but often find it difficult to fulfill their dreams because they are unaware of the steps that will enable them to achieve their ambitions. According to Schneider and Stevenson (1999, p. 4), their ambitions are “dreamlike and not realistically connected to specific educational and career paths. Regardless of how hard they try, they find themselves running in place and unsure of where to go.” They are the drifting dreamers who have limited knowledge about four crucial aspects of their futures:

- their proposed occupations,
- the educational requirements of their schools,
- the educational opportunities that can prepare them for their occupations, and
- the future demand for their proposed occupations.

The word clueless comes to mind when I think of students with misaligned ambitions. My wish for my psychology majors is that they will become just the opposite. I urge them to use their undergraduate education to become “clueful” (i.e., savvy) psychology majors who know what they want to do with their lives and how to use their undergraduate experiences to get what they want. I have three favorite quotations that help me communicate with my students about their journeys toward cluefulness.

The first part of their journeys to the land of cluefulness requires them to do what Socrates suggested more than two thousand years ago when he said, “Know thyself.” I advise them to begin—as early as possible in their undergraduate careers—the process of serious self-examination that will enable them to identify their skills, characteristics, goals, values, and resources. I spend a considerable amount of time explaining the student learning outcomes of both my department and my university so my students can become aware of the skills (e.g., writing, speaking, and critical-thinking) and characteristics (e.g., open mindedness and adaptability) they can acquire if they engage conscientiously in their education. I encourage them to think about their undergraduate experience as an authentic means for preparing themselves for their occupational futures, not just four years of burdensome requirements that must be “gotten out of the way” before they can begin their real lives. I refer my less-well-focused students to our career center where they can discuss their futures with well trained career counselors and engage in interactive software programs such as SIGI Plus, which can help them match their skills, characteristics, goals, values, and resources with the requirements and realities of thousands of vocational possibilities.

The second leg of their journey involves the famous advice Polonius gave Laertes in the second act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, “To thine own self be true.” Once they begin to know themselves, the next steps are (a) to discover who they would like to become and (b) to create a plan of action to reach their aspirations that fits their own unique set of skills, characteristics, goals, values, and resources. The Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) and the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) are particularly helpful resources at this point because they provide students with accurate “reality checks” on their intended occupations (i.e., is my dream job really what I envision it to be?). The DOT provides them with brief

descriptions of the requirements, demands, and training for over 22,000 jobs. The OOH describes far fewer occupations, but in much greater detail (i.e., the nature of the work, working conditions, employment statistics, training, outlook for the job, earnings, related occupations, and additional sources of information). Other valuable sources of career information are books such as *Career Paths in Psychology* (Sternberg, 1997), *Majoring in Psych? Career Options for Psychology Undergraduates* (Morgan & Korschgen, 2001), *The Psychology Major: Career Options and Strategies for Success* (Landrum, Davis, & Landrum, 2000), *Succeeding in Graduate School: The Career Guide for Psychology Students* (Walfish & Hess, 2001), and *The Handbook of Psychology* (Appleby, 1997). *Eye on Psi Chi* (the newsletter of our national honor society) also contains a wealth of career-oriented articles written specifically for undergraduates. For example, Huss (2001, p. 25) wrote an article entitled “What Is Forensic Psychology? It’s Not Silence of the Lambs!” He used this opportunity to inform the burgeoning number of undergraduates drawn to forensic psychology that, sensationalistic media portrayals [about forensic psychology] may not be accurate nor offer realistic employment opportunities. Students may become disheartened to learn that certain media depictions are less than realistic but should be excited to learn about the real possibilities forensic psychology has to offer

The third part of their journey involves putting their plans into action. I can think of no better way to state the urgency of this crucial component than by quoting Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, (speaking through her 21<sup>st</sup> Century commercial namesake) who says, “Just do it.” This final leg of their journey will put the “faire” into their “savoir-faire” and transform them into truly savvy psychology majors who know who they are, who know where they are going, and who are actually headed in the direction of their goals. Advising my students actually to “do” their intended careers by engaging in internships, co-ops, practica, and service learning projects is probably the best advice I give them during this stage of their journey. These experiences allow them to discover if they (a) possess the skills for the tasks their proposed occupations will require and (b) experience the passion for the challenges they will encounter on the job. As I tell my students, you will have found your ideal occupation (i.e., the one that makes you WANT to get out of bed and go to work in the morning) when you discover the career that exists at the intersection of your skills and your passion. Nothing can make you feel better about your job—and yourself—than being both good at and excited about what you do.

As I reflect upon three decades of college teaching, I am amazed at my pedagogical evolution. My initial strategy was to concentrate on insuring that my students became knowledgeable about the contents and methods of psychology (e.g., the location of the hippocampus, why the rat turned left, the duration and capacity of iconic memory, and the relative merits of the cross-sectional and longitudinal methods). I still teach my students these things, but my focus is now on who, rather than what, I am teaching. I make a clear and conscious effort to tell my students how they can use the subject matter of psychology to construct life plans compatible with their talents, values, and characteristics (i.e., to become savvy). I received a letter from one of our alumni (who sells new homes) that describes the results of my new strategy quite well. She ended her letter with the following paragraph, which I will use to end my essay.

My studies in psychology helped me to understand people and their differences. I think I may understand more than most the importance of listening and patience. Different people may respond to situations in different ways, but everyone wants the same thing. People want to be respected, listened to, and understood. Psychology helped me understand this, and I believe I am a better person—and a better new home sales consultant—for this. Thank you again for taking the time to care about and listen to your students. I hope this letter can help you show other psychology students that all psychology majors need not go to graduate school or become psychologists. There are many other fields in which psychology majors can be successful and happy!

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