

The Case for Requiring a “Careers” Course for Psychology Majors

Margaret A. Lloyd
Georgia Southern University

(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for August 2003.)

Courses variously called “Careers in Psychology” or “Introduction to the Psychology Major” are recent introductions to the undergraduate curriculum. A recent survey reported that 34% of departments offer such a course (Landrum, Shoemaker, & Davis, 2003). In some departments, these courses are required of majors; in others, they are electives. Departments typically designate as requirements those courses that cover key content areas and research methods in the discipline. I believe that the content covered in a “careers” course is not so much essential to understanding the discipline as it is essential to today’s students, a point I will elaborate on below. To be sure, one might argue that such courses are helpful to departments and advance the profession of psychology.

In my view, a careers course is one of many vehicles available to departments for delivering advising information to students. A partial list of other such delivery systems would include: (a) faculty-student contacts, (b) peer advising, (c) psychology clubs, (d) majors’ meetings and/or graduate school/career days, (e) majors’ handbooks, (f) display racks of advising materials, (g) departmental Web pages, (h) departmental library, and (i) departmental bulletin boards. Of course, an effective advising program will employ a variety of such vehicles by which to deliver information to students, not just one.

An effective advisement program should also provide students with academic, career, and graduate school information. As a key component of a department’s academic advising program, a careers course should address these issues as well.

Departmental Advising Today

In today’s climate, departments need to be assertive and thorough in their delivery of academic, career, and graduate school information to their majors. This need can be traced to the nature of the students, the major, the marketplace, and graduate schools. Many undergraduates are uncertain about why they are in college. Regardless of whether they are clear about why they are in school, many of them assume that a college degree will guarantee them an interesting and well-paying job. 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. Thus, majors typically need assistance to understand the relevance of what they learn in (and out of) the classroom to their future jobs. Today’s workplace is a rapidly changing one, and students need special strategies to succeed in it. Finally, the graduate school application process is a complicated one, and students need critical information (Graduate Record Exams, strategies for selecting schools to which to apply, application deadlines, etc.) to maximize their chances of gaining admission to programs.

Key Objectives of Careers Courses

Although departments need to design courses to meet the particular needs of their majors, I believe that there are two crucial things any careers course should teach students. First, careers 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. Second, 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 course of action involves elective 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).

Course Outcomes

Thus, a case can be made for offering careers courses. Is there any evidence that they produce useful outcomes in students? 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. Dodson, Chastain, and Landrum (1996) described and evaluated a three-credit, upper-division, pass-fail elective course that emphasized 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. Kennedy and Lloyd (1998) reported that a "Careers in Psychology" course for sophomores helped students clarify their career plans.

More recently, Dillinger and Landrum (2002) reported a pre-test-post-test study of student outcomes in a 1-hour, freshman-level, pass-fail "Introduction to the Psychology Major" course. Students reported increased knowledge about a number of course objectives, including knowing what is required to apply to graduate school and being familiar with bachelor's level jobs for psychology majors. Dillinger and Landrum also reported that some students seemed to question their choice of major. Still, it should be noted that although there was a significant drop between pre- and post-test scores on "commitment to the major" items, all of the post-test scores were still 4.0 and higher (on a 5-point scale).

In addition, although it is not a well-controlled survey, I can report some relevant information from the students at the end of my Fall 2002 Careers in Psychology course (1-credit, pass-fail). Of the 17 students in the class, 71% felt that the course should be required, 29% felt that it should be an elective, and none felt that it should no longer be offered. Students could also provide open-ended comments to this question. I found one response to be particularly insightful: "The course covers information that students don't know they don't know." (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>>.)

Why Require a Careers Course?

As the above studies demonstrate, careers courses can be an effective vehicle for transmitting useful information to students. But should they be required? In my view, there are two key reasons for requiring a careers course. The first is that departments can have control over the content of such courses, thereby ensuring that majors will receive vital information and strategies that will help them succeed upon graduation. Of course, other delivery systems (hand-outs, Web site, majors' handbooks, etc.) can also provide this information. In fact, one might argue that these other vehicles may be more efficient ways to deliver information than courses because they require fewer faculty and departmental resources. Of course, another effective, but less efficient, option would be to offer a careers course on an elective basis. However, all of these options have a major drawback: There is no guarantee that students will utilize these advising resources. In fact, I would speculate that the students who most need this information are probably the least likely to avail themselves of it.

Thus, the primary reason for requiring a careers course is that departments can ensure that all of their majors have access to important information. I also believe that students are most likely to assimilate this information when they actively engage the material, and I would argue that active engagement is most likely to occur in the classroom setting.

Some Problems with Requiring a Careers Course

Faculty can have legitimate disagreements about the extent to which a careers course is an "academic" offering. The crux of this issue hinges on the course content. One way to provide careers courses that may not contain sufficient academic content is to offer them on a pass-fail basis and to set the number of credit hours lower than for a full-credit course.

Another problem with requiring a careers course is having enough qualified faculty to teach the course. Thus, faculty without much knowledge in the areas to be taught may need to attend tutorials offered by knowledgeable faculty members and may need to do reading on their own. Alternatively, the course could be taught only by the few faculty who are knowledgeable about course material. In any case, faculty need to receive credit for teaching such courses if they are not 3- or 4-credit courses. At Georgia Southern (and I suspect at some other institutions), faculty typically receive no credit for teaching 1-credit courses; they are just tacked on to one's regular teaching load. Obviously, this is a disincentive for teaching such courses. On the other hand, 3- or 4-credit courses count toward one's teaching load. So, for example, if the careers course were a 3-credit course, one could teach it and 2 other courses for a 3-course teaching load versus if careers were a 1-credit course, one would teach 3 3-credit courses and the careers course on top of that. To deal with this problem at Georgia Southern, we are experimenting with offering a large section of the careers course and having it count as a 3-credit course.

As noted above, some studies have reported that some students who take a careers course may decide not to major in psychology. Personally, I don't see this as a problem. For one thing, I am more concerned with students finding the "right" major than I am about a department having enough majors. Happily, psychology is currently one of the most popular majors in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), so most departments need not be concerned about losing a few majors. Dillinger and Landrum (2002) make the point that students who remain in the major after having completed a careers course are likely to be more committed to it because their commitment is grounded in realistic knowledge of both opportunities and limitations.

In conclusion, I believe that a good case can be made for requiring a "careers" course for psychology majors. As with any course, departments need to develop expected outcomes for such courses, assess them on a regular basis, and make adjustments as necessary. This practice will ensure that such courses are accomplishing the objectives of the department.

The Rationale for "Truth in Advertising" for Psychology Majors

R. Eric Landrum
Boise State University

My colleague and friend Marky Lloyd has done a wonderful job in outlining the strong case for requiring a Careers in Psychology course, and I concur. In reading her article, I have no mistakes to correct, no arguments to make, and no bones to pick. (You would think at this point I would just shut up, right?) I would like to add, however, my \$0.02 worth as someone who developed such a course five years ago and has taught it continuously since that time. I am highly interested in topics related to student success, and this area constitutes much of my research program.

Why Such a Course?

Marky has presented a strong case for offering the course, with numerous benefits for both faculty and students. However, while we at Boise State hoped for those benefits, that perspective does not tell the whole story as to why we implemented the course.

It was about the mid-1990s that our faculty noticed a disturbing trend in our majors—dissatisfaction with the choice in majoring in psychology. It seemed many students did not understand the discipline until their junior or senior year; but for some, once they understood, they felt trapped in the major because now they knew about it, didn't like it, but didn't want to switch majors and delay graduation. It was also then that students began to understand that to "be" a psychologist would involve going to graduate school, and then they became even more disgruntled. So we were left with a number of disgruntled juniors and seniors, far enough into the major to understand it, but so far in that it made it difficult to change if they discovered they didn't want to continue their undergraduate studies in psychology.

Truth in Advertising

To address this situation, I designed a 1-credit, freshman-level pass-fail course titled "Introduction to the Psychology Major." It is a required class for anyone wishing a bachelor's degree in psychology—including transfer students. The basic premise was that in requiring a 100-level course of every single student, there would be a common base of information for everyone. Thus, from the beginning of a student's career in psychology at Boise State, there is truth in advertising about careers in psychology. The course addresses options for employment (all degree levels), advising and planning, building credentials (e.g., research assistant, teaching assistant, internships), and strategies for success in the classroom (e.g. study skills, library skills, APA format). Faculty praise the course because they know that students have been exposed to basic topics prior to arriving in their courses—a strong benefit for a required class. Students generally like the course because (a) the assignments all focus on their future and their success, (b) it is a 1-credit course, and relatively low-key, and (c) it is pass-fail.

I highly recommend developing such a course to anyone, whether it is required or an elective. For a copy of my syllabus and other materials that might be helpful, please feel free to contact me at elandru@boisestate.edu.

Determining Career-Course Level and Why the Course Should be Required

Lauren F. V. Scharff

Stephen F. Austin State University

Marky Lloyd's essay on career courses is very timely for our department and our university. This past year, the faculty in our department agreed to add a Careers in Psychology course to our curriculum. This coming year we will determine the course description and have it added to our curriculum for the following year. Although our discussion is nowhere near complete, we did grapple with the level at which the course should be offered (freshman) and whether it should be required (in time, yes, for majors as a prerequisite for sophomore and higher classes).

As Marky mentioned, career courses should inform students both about the skills and knowledge that career employers would desire, and the same for graduate programs. In the past, our department has occasionally offered a "How to Get into Graduate School" seminar. Although some forward-thinking students took the course as sophomores or even freshmen, most students were juniors and seniors. Especially for the seniors, the information was too late to be as effective as we would like. Further, this course did not help students who were not planning on going to graduate school.

So, when do we most effectively get career and graduate school information to students? Offering the course as a lower-level course has the benefits of informing students when they still have time to adjust their academic and extracurricular goals to maximize their later success. It also may help students choose the most appropriate direction (graduate school or not, or even a different major) before they commit to a particular track of courses.

A final benefit is that it might help undecided majors (a benefit to the university in addition to the department). Advising brochures and general career information on the Internet can certainly help undecided majors. Introductory courses in a major may also give a taste of what a career in psychology might involve. However, these approaches often are generally haphazard or fairly superficial. A career course can give students the bulk of the information (which would be difficult to disseminate efficiently through individualized advising in larger departments), and then advising can take the next step of personalizing the information as a student's academic career advances.

Another major issue is whether a career course should be required. I agree with Marky that such a course would more actively engage students (e.g., compared to a brochure), and that if it is not required. Many students (possibly those most in need) may not take it. However, as she also pointed out, requiring such a course will impact faculty course loads and departmental resources in budget-crunch times. An additional point is that it may affect the departmental curriculum. A major requires a certain number of hours, and at least on our campus, departments may not be able to tack on another 1-3 hour requirement. Thus, some other content course may need to be sacrificed for the career course, especially if the career course is a 3-hour credit.

There are additional issues, such as how big should such courses be and still be effective, and training of instructors (as Marky mentions). Obviously, there will be many discussions (some heated, I'm sure) among the faculty. However, I do believe that the benefit of such courses is worth the effort it will take to integrate them into the curriculum.

The Timing of a Careers Course in Psychology

Erin B. Rasmussen
College of Charleston

Marky Lloyd makes some compelling points for the inclusion of a careers course in the psychology curricula. I have participated in departments where a careers course is, and is not required, and observed differences in student behavior. In the department with a required careers course, I noticed that students of all academic abilities spoke informatively, intelligently, and frequently about their post-graduate options and they seemed generally confident about their plans. When they graduated, they had products in hand like curriculum vitae, resumes, and letters of intent for prospective employers or graduate schools, all of which were required assignments in the careers course. By comparison, students in the department without the careers course serendipitously discovered career-related information too late in their college careers to be competitive for jobs or graduate school. They were shocked to learn of the preparation required for applying to graduate school, how competitive it is to gain acceptance into graduate programs, and the importance of extra-curricular experience (e.g., research). Incidentally, some of these students were industrious, so their seemingly late approach does not speak to their ability or motivation, but more to their naïveté. These students also seemed discouraged to hear of the few career options available to psychology graduates with only a bachelor's degree. The question of "Why didn't anyone tell me this earlier?" occurs predictably, despite an active psychology club and advising system.

These experiences are anecdotal, but they overlap remarkably with Marky's position. Students need career information to be competitive, but they also need it delivered in a timely fashion—early enough to be useful to decision-making, but late enough that graduation and career preparation are within their time horizons.

A careers course offered early in students' college careers allows them to structure their academic activities to those best suited for their chosen occupations. For example, a student wishing to go to graduate school may join a faculty member's research team early, and develop unique skills and experience that will increase his or her chances of getting into graduate school. Offering the careers course too early, however, may not be beneficial, since most students are not even sure what "doing psychology" means until they have taken several psychology courses. Indeed, the view of what psychologists do broadens with every psychology course taken. Hence, it makes sense to require the course later in the curriculum. Offering a careers course during the senior year, however, has disadvantages that place students in a non-competitive position in that they learn the information too late.

Offering the course during the first semester of the junior year might be a compromising strategy. Not only will students have a reasonable understanding of what psychology is about (since they have presumably taken a number of psychology courses), but they will receive information in enough time that they can tailor the remainder of their curricular and extra-curricular activities to match their post-graduate goals. Graduation is likely in the time horizon of the junior, so the information obtained in a careers class is more likely to be meaningful and less likely to be forgotten.

A Reply to Landrum, Scharff, and Rasmussen

Margaret A. Lloyd

Georgia State University

I want to thank my colleagues, Eric Landrum, Lauren Scharff, and Erin Rasmussen for their thoughtful responses to my essay. Because none of them offered points of disagreement, my reply will take the form of pulling our key points together.

All four of us agree that the careers course is a useful vehicle for delivering useful information to students and that it should be required of psychology majors. (Of course, some departments may not have the resources to do this, especially given today's tight budgets.)

We also agree that the course needs to be offered early enough to give students ample time for academic and career/graduate school decision making and planning. Although we differ on the optimal timing for taking the course (freshman, sophomore, first term of the junior year), all of us believe that the course should be taken relatively early in the academic sequence. Taking such a course in the freshman year gives students the most time to make use of the knowledge they have gained. On the other hand, sophomores and juniors are more mature than freshmen, they have had more exposure to the discipline, and they realize that they will be graduating relatively soon.

Landrum makes an excellent point—namely, that careers courses can serve as vehicles for “truth in advertising” about career options in psychology. Students armed with realistic and useful information about the major and career options are likely to be happier, higher performing, and better able to position themselves for desired careers or graduate school upon graduation than students lacking such information. Scharff helpfully observes that a careers course can be a relatively efficient and effective vehicle for disseminating key information to all majors; then individual advisors can personalize the information for students as they advance in the program. Rasmussen aptly reminds us about the important question of the optimal timing of the course (see above).

Other important considerations in designing such a course include: objectives, credit and grading, optimal class size, course scheduling, readings, and exercises. For more information on these topics, you can read an earlier E-xcellence in Teaching essay of mine that was posted in September 2000. This essay may be accessed¹ by pointing your browser to <http://list.kennesaw.edu/cgi-bin/web-admin?A2=ind0009&L=psychteacher&F=&S=&X=7439D04A3A6B0721B7&Y=buskiwf@auburn.edu&P=4292>

To conclude, today’s students need departmental assistance to become competitive candidates for jobs or graduate school. One effective and efficient way departments can provide this support is to develop a required careers course for their majors.

References

- Carney, C. G., & Wells, C. F. (1999). *Working well, living well: Discover the career within you*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Dillinger, R. J., & Landrum, R. E. (2002). An information course for the beginning psychology major. *Teaching of Psychology, 29*, 230-232.
- Dodson, J. P., Chastain, G. C., & Landrum, R. E. (1996). Psychology seminar: Careers and graduate study in psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 23*, 238-240.
- Kennedy, J. H., & Lloyd, M. A. (1998, August). *Effectiveness of a Careers in Psychology course for majors*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco.
- Landrum, R. E., Shoemaker, C. S., & Davis, S. F. (2003). Important topics in an Introduction to the Psychology Major course. *Teaching of Psychology, 30*, 48-51.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2002, February). Digest of education statistics, 2001 (Table 255). Retrieved May 7, 2003, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/digest2001/>

¹ [Editors' Note: This essay is available at the Kennesaw Listserv site for PsychTeacher subscribers at the address given. Alternatively, it may be accessed online at <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/eit2000/eit00-06.html>]

Ware, M. E. (1988). Teaching and evaluating a career development course for psychology majors. In P. J. Woods (Ed.), *Is psychology the major for them? A guide to undergraduate advising* (pp. 64-74). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.