

Belmont University Psychology Department

PsychSource #5

The Bachelor's Degree in Psychology: Employment Opportunities and Strategies

A simple response to the question, "What can I do with a major in psychology?" might be, "just about anything that involves working with people." Another approach would be to list all of the occupations that psychology majors have successfully pursued. Neither approach, however, helps YOU to make career decisions. The purpose of this handout in the Psychology advisement Series is not only to provide you with some information about potential employment opportunities after completing our psychology degree, but also to make some suggestions about how to handle occupational decisions and successfully land that first job.

Let's start with some important facts. The undergraduate major in psychology is a liberal arts degree, not a professional degree. By itself it does not make you a psychologist, professional counselor or social worker. These occupations require specific training, often at the graduate level and are regulated by state law. If such occupations interest you, be prepared to continue your education in graduate school (see PSYCHSOURCE #3

- CHOOSING A CAREER SPECIALTY: GRADUATE STUDY IN PSYCHOLOGY AND TYPE OF ADVANCED DEGREE and PSYCHSOURCE #4 - APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL: SOME STRATEGIES AND A TIME LINE).

While some occupations in psychology require graduate training, there are numerous interesting and rewarding career opportunities available to individuals with only a bachelors degree in psychology. Your selection of an appropriate occupation, however, requires some personal self analysis and research. Ultimately, successful employment depends on your efforts to learn about prospective occupations, to acquire appropriate skills and knowledge for such occupations, and to learn how to conduct a well-planned job search.

Making Decisions About Your Career

An occupational choice can be one of the most difficult decisions one makes, with consequences for one's life satisfaction and life style. Unfortunately many people approach this decision in a haphazard and informal manner. They do not systematically explore potential occupations or adequately prepare themselves to successfully obtain the sought after job. In fact, many students simply do not worry about careers until their senior year, when they discover that they lack courses or failed to develop necessary skills for occupations that interest them. An excellent resource for learning about various occupations is the Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) which is published every two years by the US. Department of Labor Statistics. This book is a comprehensive guide to occupations. It includes job descriptions, education and training requirements, advancement possibilities, salaries, and employment opportunities for 250 occupations. Go to the index at the back of the book; and look up the page references for the occupations you are

interested in pursuing. Note the titles of related jobs listed at the end of each occupational description, find these job titles in the index, and then read about them. Reading the OOH can give you lots of information about a wide range of jobs in a short time with relatively little expenditure of effort. You may also want to do some research on starting salaries for occupations that interest you. CAPS has survey data on salaries organized by type of degree and occupation which is updated quarterly.

Developing Skills and Knowledge

Part of knowing and marketing yourself involves a clear understanding of the specific skills valued by employers and obtained through completing the bachelor's degree in psychology. Numerous studies have documented the skills and qualities employers look for in prospective employees. Some of these characteristics are summarized below. Psychology courses that emphasize specific skills or types of knowledge are indicated in parentheses. It is important that you develop and communicate your proficiency in these skills to be successful on the job market.

General Qualities Rated Highly by Employers

Satisfactory grades Communication and interpersonal skills Personality/presentation of self
Previous employment Enthusiasm Flexibility Leadership Problem solving abilities High
energy level Maturity

Skills Learned by Psychology Majors That Employers Seek

Ability to write proposals and reports (PSY 2600; all 4000-level PSY) Ability to identify and solve problems based upon a knowledge of research methodology and understanding of human behavior (PSY 2400, 2600) Conducting interviews Doing statistical analysis (MTH 1150, PSY 2400, PSY 2600) Knowing how to design and conduct research projects (PSY 2400, 2600)

Knowledge Learned by Psychology Majors That Employers Seek

How attitudes and opinions are formed and changed (PSY 3300)
Principles and techniques of personnel selection (PSY 3350)
How people think; solve problems and process information (PSY 4500) Structure and dynamics of small groups (PSY 3620) Principles of human learning and memory (PSY 4350, 4500) Basic business practices and terminology (PSY 3350)

As you can see, many of the skills listed above are important components of the psychology curriculum. In fact, the required methodology sequence of PSY 2400, and 2600 emphasizes skill development in all of these areas. When it comes to content areas in psychology, however, it is

important to carefully select courses that best match your potential career.

Another important, yet often overlooked, aspect of skill and knowledge development is your selection of elective courses and a minor. For example, approximately 55% of graduates with a bachelors degree in psychology are employed in business settings. Therefore, it would be wise to consider taking some business courses. Courses offered by other departments can be essential in obtaining job skills and knowledge for your future occupation as well. These courses can be used as electives or applied to a minor. Once you have narrowed down your potential employment settings, you should meet with your advisor to discuss the best selection of courses to help you obtain your career objective.

Potential employers also value some practical experience. There are several options to obtain this experience. One strategy is to seek part-time or full-time jobs related to your desired employment setting. Another possibility is to enroll in the Psychology Practicum course. The Practicum combines an individual's on-site practical experience with classroom meetings where the Practicum experience is discussed with the supervising faculty member and other students enrolled in the Practicum. Students considered for the course must have their own car or access to one, be psychology majors or minors, and have completed at least 64 semester hours (with at least 15 hours completed in residence at Belmont). In addition, prospective students must fill out a course application at least one month prior to the early registration period, must complete an interview, be approved by department faculty, and must obtain two letters of recommendation from doctoral level psychology professors.

Finally, you may want to consider volunteer activities that can provide practical experience in social service settings (e.g., hotlines, the Big Brother/Sister program, hospitals). Active involvement in leadership positions in student organizations can also provide you with practical experience in developing, organizing and running service programs.

The Job Search

By the beginning of your senior year, you should have decided on a career path and obtained the basic skills and knowledge necessary for an entry position in that field. Unfortunately our future employer will not seek you out. You will have to aggressively seek out and convince them that you are the employee that they should hire. To accomplish this: 1) identify position openings and make contacts, 2) develop an effective resume, and 3) learn to interview successfully. Some strategies for each of these are discussed below.

There are several other strategies for identifying potential job openings. First, ask people you know to identify individuals with whom you might talk to about your career interests. Friends, family, past or present employers and people with whom you have done volunteer work are all excellent resources for contacts. Another strategy is to use the yellow pages of the phone book to identify companies, agencies or organizations that may employ people in your career interest area. Call these companies or agencies and ask to speak to a person who holds the type of position that you are seeking. When you contact someone, explain that you are a student at

Belmont nearing graduation and that you are interested in obtaining a job in their profession. Ask if they would be available to meet with you for an "information interview" to discuss their worst that can happen is that they will say "no." Be prepared to offer them several potential meeting times. Don't try to conduct the interview on the phone at that moment. The person may be busy and only able to give you cursory information. Be sure that you go to the interview with a list of well thought out questions. Toward the end of the interview, ask if they can suggest other people to talk to about the profession. This helps expand your contacts.

Successful career planning requires careful and objective self-assessment, a realistic understanding of your aptitudes and skills, an awareness of responsibilities associated with potential employment settings, careful selection of experiences designed to develop marketable skills and knowledge, and an action plan for conducting a successful job search. The following sections are designed to give you some guidance in each of these areas.

Self-Assessment

First, know thyself!--Your interests or preferences, values, aptitudes, and abilities.

Learning About Occupations

Recent surveys of employers and bachelor level graduates in psychology indicate that the jobs obtained by graduates with a bachelors degree are most often in business and social service settings, such as:

Business: personnel administrator, loan officer, retail sales management, occupational analyst, industrial relations specialist, claims specialist, marketing representative.

Social Services: group home attendant, case worker, probation officer, admissions counselor occupational therapist, substance abuse counselor, youth counselor, employment counselor, social service aide, public health administrator, parole officer, social-urban planner, community relations officer, supervisor.

Finally, another source of job openings is the daily newspaper. Every day numerous jobs are listed under headings such as administrative assistant customer service, sales, daycare, and management-- all of which are potential career options with your psychology degree. Read the job descriptions in advertisements very carefully or you may miss a good potential opportunity. For example there was a recent advertisement for a "resident manager" in the newspaper. Although you may have quickly skipped over this, the advertisement was seeking a resident manager for a girl's group home, a job relevant for career interests in social services.

Developing an Effective Resume

Your resume is a critical element of an effective job search. It may be the only initial contact you have with a potential employer. In other situations your resume is the only record the employer has after the interview. An effective resume is neat, easily read and provides a concise summary of your professional goals, education and experience. You may even want to develop

more than one resume for different occupations. Begin working on your resume during the summer prior to graduation. This allows plenty of time to get feedback on your resume and to revise it as necessary.

The Job Interview

Your interview with a prospective employer is your opportunity to impress them with your potential as a future employee. Although few initial interviews result in an immediate job offer, the first interview places an important role in identifying candidates that the company may look at more closely. Therefore it is critical that you make a strong, favorable first impression. The most important personal qualities that employers look for are good communication skills, clearly defined professional goals, and personality. Take the interview very seriously and prepare for each one in advance. Be knowledgeable about the employer with whom you are interviewing. This will enable you to ask specific questions about the company that will generate a favorable impression. Finally, follow up the interview with a thank you note. This reinforces the favorable impression you made during the interview and reminds the interviewer about who you were.

Psychology Major Handbook for Students Majoring in Psychology at James Madison University, and PSYC SERIES from Kennesaw State University, Marietta, Georgia.