Conference Report: *From Vision to Impact: Propagating the Recommendations from the American Psychological Association's Introductory Psychology Initiative (APA-IPI)*

Executive Summary

The 2023 virtual workshop *From Vision to Impact: Propagating the Recommendations from the American Psychological Association's Introductory Psychology Initiative (APA-IPI)* used theory, research, and educator experience to inform a plan to support psychology educators in designing and delivering a high-quality introductory psychology (IP) course.

In the summer of 2023, 47 educators with diverse personal and professional identities convened to share their experiences incorporating some or all of the APA-IPI recommendations into their courses. In small breakout and larger all-participant discussions, they shared examples of how they adopted the recommendations, discussed factors that facilitated and hindered their adoption, and identified some of the specific resources and supports they felt were needed to help maintain or expand adoptions.

Before and after the conference the project planning team, workshop leaders, and consultants worked together to integrate theory, research, and conference findings into a draft propagation plan. The plan was designed to address the need for: (1) centralized, accessible, well-vetted instructional resources and (2) virtual communities of practice to support implementation.

In this report, we provide the background that informed the project goals, objectives, and plan. We also describe the conference and share the main findings that emerged. Finally, we provide some plans for future directions. We hope this conference report will be of interest to those committed to improving the quality of introductory, gateway courses like IP as well as educators, teaching and learning scholars, and disciplinary society representatives designing plans to promote the dissemination, implementation, and propagation of STEM education innovations.

Project Team

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Introduction

The Introductory Psychology Course: Opportunities and Challenges

Introductory psychology (IP) is a tremendously popular STEM course, with an estimated annual enrollment of 1.2 to 1.6 million students (Gurung et al., 2016). As a required course for virtually all psychology majors (Stoloff et al., 2010), a high quality, engaging IP course has the potential to attract talented and diverse students into the discipline and strengthen the psychology workforce. Given psychology's role as a hub science (Boyack et al., 2005), the IP course also has tremendous potential as a means of funneling students into other STEM disciplines. A well-designed IP course also has the potential to enhance student retention. Students who successfully complete a "gateway course" like introductory psychology are 1.72 times more likely to enroll for spring semester than students who do not (Flanders, 2015).

Beyond functioning as a gateway into psychology or other STEM fields, IP is also part of the core general education curriculum at many institutions of higher education (Richmond et al., 2021). IP is the second most popular course taught at the college level; with a slightly lower enrollment rate than English composition (Adelman, 2004). Thus, the course is well-positioned to provide a broad population of students with knowledge and skills that can enhance their academic and personal development (Chew et al., 2022). For the 79% of college students who do not pursue a STEM major (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), a high-quality IP course can cultivate scientific literacy and elevate students' understanding of science as an essential tool that can be used to address complex societal challenges [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), 2021] and provide them with the skills needed to effectively navigate through confusing, inaccurate, and evolving sources of information about complex issues and make informed decisions (Howell & Brossard, 2021).

Although IP has the potential to be transformative, like other gateway courses, it can be extremely challenging to teach. High enrollments can make it difficult to create a rich and interactive learning experience (Hard & Gross, 2016). The breadth of content can challenge instructors who may have deep knowledge in a highly specialized domain within the field (Hard & Gross, 2016; Richmond et al., 2021). Taken together these factors can lead instructors to rely more heavily on lecturing than active learning strategies. Although lecture-based teaching is often assumed to be an efficient method of teaching a large amount of content to a big audience, there is limited evidence that this approach is impactful (Stains et al., 2018). Moreover, a comprehensive review of the literature found that students in STEM classes with traditional lecturing were 1.5 times more likely to fail than were students in classes with active learning (Freeman et al., 2014).

IP courses also frequently fail to adequately cover content related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The lack of adequate representation in IP textbooks is a long-standing problem (Gay, 1998; Hogben & Waterman, 1997) that has shown limited improvement over time (Griggs & Jackson, 2013). Perpetuating an ethnocentric perspective in psychology education by elevating the work and viewpoints of White, Western European psychologists, and omitting the contributions of psychologists of color, maintains the structural racism that contributes to ethnic inequities in educational attainment and causes harm (APA, 2021).

Recommendations Aimed at Improving the Introductory Psychology Course

Educators within APA have long recognized the potential benefits and impact of enhancing and innovating the psychology curriculum (e.g., APA *Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology*, 2007; *Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A Blueprint for the Future of the Discipline* (Halpern, 2010; *APA Principles for Quality Undergraduate Education in Psychology, 2011).* However, an explicit focus on the IP course is relatively recent. Although participants in the 2008 *APA National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology* referenced the IP course, suggesting that it should cover the content determined to be core of the major (Dunn et al., 2010), they did not provide specific

recommendations for addressing the challenges to this course noted earlier. More recently, APA's Board of Educational Affairs (BEA) appointed three specific working groups to develop recommendations for strengthening and improving the teaching of IP. The *BEA Working Group on Strengthening the Common Core of the Introductory Psychology Course* and the *BEA Working Group on Assessing Introductory Psychology* proposed a set of key recommendations detailing how innovations in course design, content, assessment, and instructor training could enhance the quality and impact of IP (Gurung et al., 2016). The *Introductory Psychology Initiative Working Group* (IPI, 2020) built on that foundational work to develop specific recommendations in four key areas summarized below.

Course models and design

The IPI emphasized the importance of faculty adopting backward course design, choosing evidence-based instructional methods, encouraging students to use effective learning strategies that are rooted in the learning sciences, and promoting an inclusive learning environment that welcomes and supports students with diverse backgrounds and interests by providing equal access to course materials, support and resources, diverse representation in course content, and a sense of community.

Student learning outcomes

To specifically address the ways in which the "tyranny of content," (Peterson et al., 2020) can challenge faculty, inhibit the use of evidence-based instructional methods, and prevent students from gaining a "big picture" view of the field, the IPI provided two key recommendations. First, they encouraged instructors conceptualize psychology content using a "pillar" model (Gurung et al., 2016). Like an ancient Greek structure, the base of the building represents the foundational principles of scientific inquiry. Each pillar of the structure signifies the content of psychology divided into overarching domains (biological, cognitive, developmental, social and personality, and mental and physical health). The IPI recommendations emphasize that instructors do not need to cover all material in each pillar. Instead, instructors are encouraged to include at least two topics from each pillar to provide students with an introductory sense of the representation of material within the discipline (Halonen et al., 2022).

The IPI also recommended that instructors of introductory psychology emphasize integrative themes that cut across all the content within the discipline of psychology with the goal of helping students to identify the "big ideas" or "cross-cutting themes" in the field. The IPI proposed seven key integrative themes, including three that specifically relate to EDI and efforts to dismantle racism (*Psychological, biological, social, and cultural factors influence behavior and mental processes, Psychology values diversity, promotes equity, and fosters inclusion in pursuit of a more just society*, and *Our perceptions and biases filter our experiences of the world through an imperfect personal lens*).

Student success and transformation

The IPI recommendations emphasize the specific skills that instructors should aim to help students cultivate in the context of an introductory psychology course. As noted earlier, they explicitly highlight the importance of teaching students to improve their study skills, enhance their health and well-being, and foster cultural competency through the application of psychology theory and research.

Teacher training and development

Finally, the IPI provided several system-level recommendations focused on how to facilitate and maintain the implementation of the educational innovations associated with their work. They emphasized the importance of formal training and support for all introductory psychology instructors supplemented by sustained, collaborative networks and communities of practice.

Implementation of Educational Innovations

To date, there has been considerable enthusiasm among educators who have learned about the APA-IPI through books (e.g., *Transforming introductory psychology: Expert advice on teacher training, course design, and student success;* Gurung & Neufeld, 2021), scholarly publications (Altman et al., 2021; Beers & Hard, 202; Halonen et al., 2021) and presentations at local and national conferences including the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology, Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) Annual

Conference on Teaching, Teaching Introductory Psychology Northwest, the Psychology One Conference, and several regional psychology teaching conferences. These efforts are best described as dissemination, as the goal has been on increasing awareness of the recommendations among potential adopters and encouraging them to engage in innovation (Stanford et al., 2016). Although these “passive” dissemination strategies are among the most used by STEM educators hoping to promote adoption of educational innovations (e.g., McMartin et al. 2012; Stanford et al., 2017; Tront et al. 2011;), simply increasing potential users’ awareness of educational innovations does not necessarily yield high adoption rates (e.g., Borrego et al., 2013). A conceptually driven, empirically informed plan that considers users’ needs and experience across institutional contexts is likely needed to encourage broad adoption of these proposed educational innovations.

Henderson and colleagues (2015) developed the *Designing Educational Innovations for Sustained Adoption Guide (DEISA)* to serve as a model for developing such a plan. One overarching principle in this framework is that innovators need to engage with potential adopters frequently throughout the project to understand potential adoptees and their instructional systems when designing the innovation. They suggest that developers of educational innovations engage in ongoing refinement of their “product” based on trial data and user feedback. The DEISA Model also encourages innovators to align the complexity and depth of the implementation plan with the amount of change in pedagogy and content that is required to adopt the innovation.

Project Goals and Objectives

To (1) to generate the knowledge needed to develop a conceptually informed, evidence-based implementation and propagation plan to enhance the quality of a STEM gateway course (introductory psychology), and (2) to inform future efforts to create sustainable improvement in STEM education, the project planning committee held three meetings and a conference.

The specific objectives of the conference were to convene a group of APA-IPI developers and early adopters to:

(1) Apply the Designing Educational Innovations for Sustained Adoption Model (Henderson et al., 2015) to the APA IPI Working Group recommendations to see if the "product" could be operationally defined using the two-dimensional system proposed by Henderson and colleagues (2011, individual or environments/structures x prescribed or emergent change).

(2) Distinguish the factors that have facilitated from those that have hindered the propagation efforts of APA-IPI early adopters.

(3) Discover solutions that have helped early adopters overcome challenges.

(4) Identify the resources and supports adopters need to implement the recommendations with fidelity.

Project Overview

The Project Planning committee met four times over the course of the year and engaged in work between meetings. During the first two meetings, the Project Planning committee, in collaboration with the Implementation and Propagation Planning Subcommittee, Dr. Henderson, and project staff discussed how to best apply the Designing Educational Innovations for Sustained Adoption Model (Henderson et al., 2015) to the APA IPI Working Group recommendations. They also planned the *Virtual Conference for Early Adopters of APA’s Introductory Psychology Initiative (IPI) Recommendations in Higher Education* which was held on 6/20/23. After the conference, the study team reviewed the artifacts provided by participants and notes from the conference to identify important themes. In collaboration with Implementation and Propagation Planning Subcommittee and Dr. Henderson, the project team reflected

on the knowledge gained, assessed the extent to which the essential elements of a propagation plan were aligned with users' needs, and discussed potential modifications to the plan.

Conference Description

Recruitment

A call for conference participants was broadly circulated in the service of recruiting educators from community colleges, 4-year institutions, graduate institutions, and minority-serving institutions who have attempted to incorporate the IPI recommendations partially or fully into at least one course. We invited participants who completed the summer 2022 APA IPI Course Design Institute and distributed the call to listservs frequently used by instructors of introductory psychology including those of the APA Board of Educational Affairs, the APA Community of Associate and Baccalaureate Educators, the Education and Training Committee chairs of the APA Divisions, the Regional Psychological Association Officers, and the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. An e-blast was also sent to all APA Community College Teacher Affiliates as well as teachers of introductory psychology and/or chairs of the psychology departments at minority serving institutions (Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-serving Institutions and Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions). Graduate student teachers were recruited through e-blasts to members of APAGS and the Graduate Student Teachers Association. The call also appeared in various APA publications including the Psychology Teacher Network newsletter.

Participants

Forty-seven educators participated in the Virtual Conference for Early Adopters of APA's Introductory Psychology Initiative (IPI). Participants' average age was 48, with a range from 28 to 70. The majority identified as White (77%), 6.4% identified as Black or African American, 6.4% as Hispanic/Latinx, 4.3% as Asian, and 2.1% as biracial. A little over 1/3 of the participants reported a different ability status than "able-bodied". Slightly less than 2/3 of participants were in a tenured or tenure-track position (60%). On average participants had about 16.7 years of experience teaching psychology courses.

Conference Program

In preparation for the conference, participants completed a short course reflection worksheet that asked them to provide examples of teaching strategies and assessments that they used to achieve each of the recommended student learning outcomes for IPI. Participants also shared their working syllabus and an example of an assessment or assignment used in their class.

The conference program was organized around four questions:

1) What are the specific elements of the APA-IPI recommendations that participants have tried to adopt in their courses?
2) What experiences and/or resources facilitated adoption?
3) What are some challenges to adoption/implementation?
4) What additional products, resources, or supports did the participants identify as necessary to maintain or expand their implementation of the IPI recommendations?

Participants were placed in small breakout groups (6-8 members) with educators from similar institutional contexts to discuss each question. Breakout groups were facilitated by members of the Project Planning Committee and Implementation and Propagation Subcommittee. Each group also had an assigned notetaker who was not part of the discussion. After each breakout, all participants came together to share emerging themes.

Main Findings

Adoption

(1) The majority of participants covered content from all of the pillars in their courses. Most used evidence-based teaching strategies designed to promote active learning and encourage peer interaction. It was common for educators to include the APA-IPI student learning outcomes as course goals on their syllabi.

Facilitators of Adoption

(2) Participants identified several factors that facilitated their adoption of the APA-IPI recommendations. Notably, access to resources, workshops, book circles, and conference presentations were all identified as helpful. Some participants highlighted how backward course design helped to clarify where new assessments were needed. Institutional support to attend conferences and redesign the course, accessibility to a center for teaching and learning, and academic freedom were also highlighted as facilitators.

Barriers to Adoption

(3) The largest barriers that educators faced in implementing the recommendations included insufficient professional development/preparatory time, resistance from administrators and/or colleagues, and difficulties finding and incorporating high-quality resources into their courses. Changes in student motivation and mental health post-Covid were also noted as challenges. Instructors shared that they were often able to integrate a few recommendations into their courses, but it was challenging to incorporate the full set of recommendations. Balancing the APA-IPI SLOs with local institutional requirements was also difficult for some.

(4) Participants shared methods they used to overcome some implementation challenges. For example, participants shared strategies they used to build consensus in their programs and departments for adopting the recommendations. Many participants described assessments that they developed and offered to share them with other educators. Participants also provided each other with suggestions for teaching conferences worth attending and pointed to existing resource repositories they found to be useful.

Needs

(5a) Both participant self-report and analyses of participants' syllabi highlighted the need for **centralized, accessible, well-vetted instructional resources to support specific recommendations**. Some of the most common needs included:

1. Assessments of students' ability to draw logical and objective conclusions about behavior and mental processes from empirical evidence.
2. Assessments of students' ability to examine how psychological science can be used to counter unsubstantiated statements, opinions, and beliefs.
3. Assessments of students' ability to apply psychological principles to personal growth and aspects of everyday life.
4. Assessments of students' ability to provide examples of psychology's integrative themes.
5. Assessments of students' ability to evaluate, design, or conduct research.
6. Instructional content that more fully represents the diversity of humans.
7. Research articles that introductory students can read and understand.
8. Instructional methods aimed at promoting feelings of belongingness.
9. Some participants felt that a "drop and play" class shell would be helpful.

(5b). Participants also expressed a strong need for **virtual communities of practice to support implementation.** They also felt it would be helpful to provide opportunities for new adopters to consult with experts. This was particularly salient for those working in institutional contexts that do not support ongoing professional development.

Conclusion

In considering the early adopter feedback, and through applying the DEISA model to the APA-IPI recommendations, the working group came to recognize that considerable support might be needed to support propagation, particularly for subsets of educators working in certain institutional contexts. Adopting the APA-IPI recommendations will require many educators to both change the content/structure of their course and adopt new pedagogy. Specifically, adoption may require identifying new course objectives, using backward course design to ensure that assessments are aligned with objectives, developing new assessments, infusing diversity and representation into content, integrating active learning strategies and methods that promote student feelings of belongingness, which can be time intensive changes. Contingent faculty and educators at 2-year institutions with high teaching loads and little to no professional development support may find implementation challenging.

Also, because introductory psychology is often considered a service or general education course with many sections being offered each semester, at some institutions, high levels of cooperation among educators and/or between administration and educators will be required to facilitate propagation.

Informed by the model, the working group developed a preliminary propagation plan that included developing and sharing instructional resources, offering workshops and/or workshop series, and communities of practice. In 2024, the working group will add reviewed instructional material to the APA-IPI webpage and pilot a community of practice. Future efforts to support educators will be informed by these pilot projects.

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