

Preface

College was fun, but we're glad it's over. Aside from the usual reasons—we don't miss the campus meal plans—we graduated during an easier period for psych majors. There are so many more psychology majors now. Psychology consistently ranks among the most popular majors, so legions of students graduate with a psych degree each year. In the U.S., around 115,000 people received an undergraduate degree in psychology in 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). It's hard to get precise figures, but there are probably more than 400,000 people currently majoring in psychology. It boggles the mind.

But here's a hard fact: There are not enough grad-school spots and attractive careers for everyone. To get more out of psychology, and to prepare yourself for life after college, you need to get experience in research; join clubs and professional organizations; build your writing, speaking, and thinking skills; and experience the broader world of psychology by attending and presenting at scholarly conferences. Traditional classes in the typical psychology curriculum won't require you to do these things—you will need to get out of the classroom and do them yourself. We wrote this book to help get you started.

This book is an expanded and revised version of the first edition, which was called *What Psychology Majors Could (and Should) Be Doing: An Informal Guide to Research Experience and Professional Skills*. The first edition had the same theme—to be competitive, students should get outside the classroom—but it focused primarily on research experience. As we used the book with our students, we realized that a broader focus was called for, one that keeps research experience as the linchpin of professional development but includes many more topics that were on our students' minds. This edition has six new

chapters (Chapters 1, 3, 11, 12, 13, and 14). All of the other chapters have been heavily revised or combined. We now offer advice on thinking about options after college, from the world of work (Chapter 13) to graduate school (Chapter 14), and for writing the CVs (Chapter 11) and personal statements (Chapter 12) that you'll need when you apply for jobs, fellowships, and grad-school spots. In addition, we provide a more expansive overview of the kinds of research experience students might get (Chapter 1) and describe how students can use their outside-the-classroom mentality to flourish inside the classroom (Chapter 3).

The book's cover isn't big enough to fit all the names of the people who helped. Linda Malnasi McCarter, Emily Ayubi, Beth Hatch, and the valiant crew in the Books department at the American Psychological Association were a class act. (We think the original idea for this book was in fact Linda's, but no one is sure anymore.) Our friends at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, which has a psychology department with a vibrant tradition in undergraduate research, offered many good comments and suggestions.

Finally, we have used this book for years in our classes and research labs. We're grateful to the many students who offered feedback on older versions of these chapters, made suggestions for new material, and pointed out the worst of the jokes. And we'd love to hear your thoughts about what you did or didn't find useful and what we might add or expand in the future: just e-mail us at p_silvia@uncg.edu.

Introduction

Most psychology majors will admit that psychology was not what they thought it would be. Confess—before college, you probably thought that psychology had to do with analyzing your dreams, exploring your early childhood, or uncovering deep facets of personality that ought to stay covered. Many students are surprised when they encounter college-level psychology. Real psychology is broad and deep, scientific and statistical. It's more technical and nerdy than Intro Psych students expect. Instead of Jungian archetypes, we have Piagetian stages. Instead of the analysis of dreams, we have the analysis of variance.

The most surprising feature of real psychology is its emphasis on research. Your professors are always talking about “research this” and “research that.” You take courses on statistics and research methods where you face time-honored topics such as main effects versus interactions and within-person designs versus between-person designs. Your

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friends wish you would stop saying “behavior” and “cognitive” all the time. Once you find yourself answering a question with, “That’s a good question—there’s probably research on that,” then you’ll know that psychology has seeped into your bones.

Research and You—Yes, You, Sitting in the Back

Who does all this research? Your stereotypes of psychology researchers might not be far off, particularly if you imagine graduate students working in windowless labs. But undergraduates form the biggest group working in the trenches of research. In the past 25 years, psychology has seen a transformation of undergraduate research; undergrads are more involved than ever before. There was a time, for example, when courses like Statistics and Research Methods were optional. But essentially every psychology department now requires students to take these courses, and most departments have created extra opportunities for hands-on research experience. In the past, it was uncommon to see undergraduates attend scientific conferences, let alone present research at them. Undergraduates now make up the biggest block of attendees at many conferences.

Why are undergrads so involved, and why are departments encouraging undergrad research experience? And why does this book focus on it? First, research experience is the best way to get a hands-on view of how psychology works. In the typical college experience, students experience research indirectly: They hear about it in their classes and read about it in their textbooks, but they don’t do it. Passive, detached learning is fine—many people enjoy sitting through lectures and reading \$130 textbooks—but you’ll get more out of psychology if you get involved.

Second, research experience is how you build *professional skills*, the practical abilities needed to succeed in the world of work. You need these skills. As hard as college is, the postcollege world—known as the *real world*—is far worse. You’ll face a world where most people aren’t in their early 20s; you’ll meet people who don’t read books; you’ll understand what people mean when they complain about *The Man* and *The System*. Your years in college are your only chance to build the skills necessary for success in this dreadful real world. For example, most of the jobs you’ll want will involve some form of high-stakes public speaking or professional writing: You’ll be speaking and writing to your clients, potential clients, managers, and bosses, all of whom will judge your competence on the basis of how well you do. But the typical

student fears public speaking and writes poorly. Are you prepared? Can you compete against the students who have training in speaking and writing?

And third, learning research and professional skills is a way to take the initiative for your learning, to go beyond the minimum. Here's what the typical undergraduate experience of psychology looks like: Students go to class most of the time, do most of the reading, and get respectable grades. Going to class, doing the reading, and studying are the bare minimum that you could do. If you attend every class and get excellent grades, then you are excelling at the bare minimum. You are doing what tens of thousands of psychology majors are doing. (If you sleep through your 2:00 p.m. classes, this is grim news—you're doing less than the minimum.)

Grad schools and employers want people who did more than simply show up to the classroom on time: They want people who took some responsibility for their professional development, who chose to learn more than they had to. You don't want to be the job applicant who gets asked, "What did you do in college? It looks like you just took classes."

Why Should I Get Involved in Research?

All undergraduates in psychology would get a lot out of research experience. Research and professional skills are equally important to the "I'm going to grad school" students and the "I want to get a job" students. Here's why.

GOING TO GRAD SCHOOL?

Grad school is hard, but it will teach you to appreciate life's nerdier pleasures: a good cup of coffee, an interesting research paper, or an evening spent reading statistics books. You have a lot to look forward to, but first you must get in—grad school is as competitive as you've heard it is. What are you doing to stand out? What will your professors have to talk about when they write letters of recommendation? How do you know that you'll like grad school? Do you know which area of psychology you want to study? You won't need to think too hard to generate answers to these questions if you get involved in research.

Most applicants to graduate programs have some research experience, and many applicants have a lot. You'll be competing against students who have written an honors thesis, worked in a research lab for several years, and presented posters at conferences. These students are

your competition. If you have no research experience, you have nearly no chance. Strong research skills can compensate for other weaknesses, such as so-so Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores or an imperfect GPA, and they show grad schools that you like research enough to pursue training in it.

Beyond making you more competitive, research experience will show you whether you enjoy research. Graduate school in psychology is mostly research. Grad students who dislike research are like dentists who dislike gums and morticians who dislike bodies: They're out there, but their lives must be hard. Working in research for a few semesters and attending a couple of conferences will help you decide. Students usually become more excited about research and graduate training after they get involved, but some students learn that grad school isn't for them and can then focus their efforts on other career paths (see Chapter 13).

NOT GOING TO GRAD SCHOOL?

Most psychology undergrads don't go to grad school, and that's a relief. Grad school isn't for everyone, and you can do more than you think with an undergraduate psychology degree. But we have a surprising secret to share: If you don't plan to go to grad school, you need research experience more than the grad-school-bound students need it. For them, nearly any research experience will suffice: They merely must show that they tried it, liked it, and performed well enough to get a letter of recommendation from their research supervisor. And they have their many years of graduate school to learn and polish their professional skills. But you, the career bound, have only your remaining semesters in college to build the skills you'll need for success in the job market and the professional world.

Why is research experience necessary for you? The competition among people with a bachelor's degree in psychology is fierce and relentless. We live in central North Carolina—it's an educated place, with more than 10 colleges and universities within a 60-minute drive. How many people do you think graduate with a psychology degree each year? How many then look for a job in the area? Most of them, certainly. Are there enough great jobs for all of them? How about where you live? How many colleges and universities are in the region, and how many people graduate with a psychology degree from your school? Those people are the competition: You'll see them at career fairs and in employers' waiting rooms, nicely dressed and waiting for their job interview.

Psychology is one of the nation's most popular majors: Nearly 115,000 people got an undergraduate degree in psychology in 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). That's a lot of people looking for jobs. What are you doing to compete? What makes you a stronger candidate in the eyes of employers? Employers aren't impressed by the fact that you went to class and got good grades. They already expect that of you

and have plenty of applicants who excelled at the bare minimum. They want to hire people who went beyond the minimum, who acquired skills, showed initiative, and interacted with professionals.

Research experience will give you two advantages. First, the mere act of showing initiative will demonstrate to employers that you won't be a bare-minimum employee. Employers would rather hire someone with solid grades who chose to get involved over someone who merely got great grades. Second, research experience will help you develop useful, attractive skills. Employers aren't hiring people to read textbooks and take tests. They want people who have experience with public speaking, statistical reasoning, writing, working in teams, and learning new things.

What We'll Talk About

This book is a practical guide for students who want to get more out of their years as a psychology major. Your time in college is short, and it's never too early to start building useful knowledge, skills, and relationships that will prepare you for grad school or for the world of work. No one regrets being too involved in hands-on, practical experience, so let's get started.

The first couple of chapters show you how to get involved in research and how to get a lot out of it. Research experience is the cornerstone for professional development because most of the other useful activities you can do—reading scientific articles, attending conferences, and joining professional clubs and societies—grow out of being involved in research. Chapter 1 takes a broad look at the terrain of psychological research. Psychology is an unusually broad field, so you have more opportunities than you might think for getting involved. Chapter 2 describes how to get started in research regardless of whether your department has four or 40 professors doing research, including how to find research opportunities and what to expect from research experience.

The next few chapters tackle the core skills that you'll need to reach the next level in your professional growth. Chapter 3 shows how to take your outside-the-classroom mindset back into the classroom. The science of learning offers good strategies for mastering complex material and staying motivated. In Chapter 4, we focus on statistics, a side of psychology that students typically aren't enthusiastic about but that you'll need to master. Chapter 5 describes how to find, read, and understand the research articles that are psychology's primary sources. And Chapter 6 shows you how to write one of these articles. Writing an honors thesis, research paper, or research proposal for the first time is hard; we'll pass along some practical advice on how to do it well.

The book then turns to getting involved in psychology's broader scholarly community. Once your feet are wet in the murky waters of science, you can get more involved in psychology as a lifestyle. Chapter 7 shows you hidden opportunities for learning outside the classroom, such as campus groups and national organizations that allow you to meet like-minded psychology majors. Going to conferences is one of the best things you can do as a psychology major. Psychologists present their research to each other at conferences. Undergraduates are welcome to attend, network, and present research, and you ought to do it. But conferences often strike students as foreign: Most don't know what to expect before they attend their first one. Chapter 8 thus gives a crash course on conference norms, rules, and etiquette. You may need to present a poster at a conference, so Chapter 9 provides some tips on how to make a good poster and how to present it. Perhaps you need to give a research talk; Chapter 10 provides some tips on designing a good slide show, managing public-speaking anxiety, and impressing your audience.

The final group of chapters looks at life after college. In Chapter 11, we show you how to write a CV, a sort of scholarly resume that documents your skills and accomplishments. Chapter 12 turns to writing a personal statement, something students usually find excruciating. In Chapter 13, we take a candid look at the world of work. We review employment trends and salary statistics, all of which point to the need for psychology majors to build skills now that will make them stand out in the overcrowded psychology job market. Chapter 13 then offers some ways of thinking about what work you'll find fulfilling and describes some resources for exploring your options. Chapter 14 considers the world of graduate school. We demystify grad school: what it is, how to apply, and why so many psych majors eventually choose to pursue graduate training. Even if your mind is made up about your path after college, we encourage you to read both chapters. Students often change their minds, and it helps to know all your options early. And the Epilogue wraps up the book and sends you on your way into the world of psychological science.