

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 369

CG 030 454

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TITLE Undergraduate Training and Skills for Careers Outside Psychology.
PUB DATE 2000-08-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association (108th, August 4-8, 2000, Washington, DC).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Choice; *Career Planning; *College Students; Educational Objectives; *Employment Opportunities; Faculty Advisers; Higher Education; Majors (Students); Psychology; Relevance (Education); *Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

Many potential psychology majors are electing to pursue degrees in other disciplines that appear to have greater market value in the current employment environment. Providing psychology majors with the skills and knowledge necessary to compete successfully with business majors for entry-level employment opportunities in a variety of business careers can reverse the trend. As a means of preparing psychology students for careers in business, four areas need to be considered: (1) the basic skills needed by psychology majors to be successful in business careers; (2) some of the basic decisions psychology majors need to make when seeking a business career path; (3) a curriculum strategy for psychology students interested in business careers; and (4) how faculty advisors can become more involved in the business community. Advisors of psychology students need to help them explore other possible careers in personnel, staff development, and marketing research as ways of finding employment with a psychology degree. (JDM)

In H. Takooshian (Chair). Employment with a Psychology B.A. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., August 2000.

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Undergraduate Training And Skills For Careers Outside Psychology

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As a result of the tightening job market, and the misconception held by many students concerning the employment prospects for psychology majors, many potential psychology majors are electing to pursue degrees in other disciplines that appear to have a greater market value in the current employment environment. Or, as more than one student has stated after taking the author's introductory psychology course, "I really enjoy psychology, but I am going to major in something that I can get a job in after I graduate, like business." While such statements are certainly disheartening to many of us, such an enrollment trend can be reversed by providing the psychology major with the skills and knowledge necessary to compete successfully with business majors for entry-level employment opportunities in a variety of business careers.

As a means of preparing psychology students for careers in business, this paper will discuss: (1) the basic skills needed by psychology majors to be successful in business careers, (2) some of the basic decisions psychology majors needs to make when seeking a business career path, (3) a curriculum strategy for psychology students interested in business careers, and (4) how faculty advisors can become more involved in the business community.

Basic Business Skills

In order to compete successfully with business majors in such areas as management, personnel, marketing, and sales, psychology majors must possess and be able to demonstrate to business firms that they have the personal attributes necessary to step into entry-level business positions. In general, business firms consider the following four basic attributes to be vital for individuals to be successful in entry-level positions:

1. An understanding of the nature of goal-directed behavior, including the concept that sometimes goals are established by external forces beyond an individual's control.
2. An understanding of the nature and process of solving problems.
This includes how to recognize problems, situation analysis, the development of alternatives, and the ability to make decisions.
3. The ability to communicate with others, including the ability to write clearly, speak clearly, and listen effectively.
4. An understanding of human behavior, including the ability to become a leader and motivate others.

The variety of skills associated with these four basic attributes can be summarized into three categories: technical skills, conceptual skills, and human skills. Technical skills are those necessary to perform the task at hand. If a student wants to become an accountant or marketing analyst, obviously, the individual needs to possess certain skills related to fundamental accounting or basic marketing practices. Such skills can be acquired in business courses. On the other hand, if the student wants to be a personnel manager, the technical skills needed would range from interviewing techniques to testing methodology. These skills can be acquired in counseling and clinical psychology courses.

Conceptual skills have to do with an understanding of "the big picture." The individual must have an understanding of where his or her function fits within and relates to other functions in the organization. Without this understanding, the individual operates in a vacuum and can become easily disenchanted with his or her career objective. Such conceptual skills can be developed in a variety of advanced courses in psychology involving the integration of many different theoretical viewpoints.

Human skills involve an understanding of human behavior and communication processes. These skills can be acquired in such courses as sociology, psychology, speech and theater, and creative writing.

After reviewing these basic attributes, it should be very clear that many of the skills and much of the knowledge necessary to compete successfully for entry-level positions in business can be acquired in disciplines outside of the business department, most notably in psychology and the humanities. The major function of the business portion of a student's curriculum is to teach the necessary technical skills and to help clarify how the conceptual and human skills can be utilized in the work place of the student's chosen career in business. In order to provide more meaningful academic advisement, faculty advisors should make a direct effort to become familiar with courses in those disciplines outside of psychology offering the educational opportunity for psychology students to develop these basic business skills.

Student Decisions.

In addition to acquiring these basic business skills, psychology majors need to make several fundamental decisions about the type of business career they wish to pursue. Since the function of the business coursework in a student's curriculum is to provide the necessary technical skills, without certain basic decisions, it is impossible to guide students to appropriate courses.

However, there are certain courses that students can take to assist in the decision-making process. Such courses include Principles of Economics (3-6 credit hours), Introduction to Business Administration (3 credit hours), and Introduction to Accounting (6 credit hours). These courses should provide a basic conceptual understanding of business and economic systems, as well as the fundamental technical skills necessary for anyone interested in an entry-level business position.

After taking these courses, students should have enough information to at least begin to narrow their career choices. However, when advising students, asking the following questions can serve to help give them a greater sense of career direction: What particular industry are you most interested in (e.g., banking, retailing, or "high-tech" type of companies)? What size of firm do you think you would like to work for (e.g., FORTUNE 500, a medium-sized firm, or a small local firm)? What area or function in business interests you most (e.g., marketing, sales, training, research and development, management, or personnel)? What is your ultimate career objective (e.g., vice-president, upper-level manager, director, or staff supervisor)? Which of the following skills would you most (and least) like to have to depend on in your career: technical skills (e.g., production management or systems analyst), conceptual skills (marketing or strategic planner), or human skills (e.g., personnel or training)? While most students will not have complete answers to all of these questions, if you can get them to think about the issues contained in these questions, they ultimately will be able to focus their career interests.

A CAREER STRATEGY

The curriculum strategy being proposed here is, for the most part, a business minor for Arts and Science majors. Such a minor would be of value to students majoring in chemistry, biology, fine arts, music, sociology, or political science, as well as psychology.

The business minor should consist of 24 to 27 credit hours and include the courses in business administration, economics, and accounting mentioned earlier. The accounting course is taught in most universities as a two-course sequence. Students should complete the sequence by the second semester of the sophomore year. Economics can be taken in either the freshman or sophomore year. The Introduction to Business course should be taken in the freshman year, since it provides a framework for later student decision making. These course will comprise the core 12-15 hours of the minor.

Additional business coursework would depend on the specific career interests of the student. For example, a student interested in a career in marketing might supplement the core courses with such courses as Introduction to Marketing (3 credit hours), Marketing Research (3 credit hours), and a choice of Salesmanship, Advertising, Marketing Strategy, or Consumer Behavior (3 units each).

Some non-business courses which are highly recommended include an introductory course in computer programming, courses in statistics, Interpersonal Communications, Public Speaking, Social Stratification, and Demography. Finally, specific psychology courses which are highly recommended for psychology majors considering careers in business include Social Psychology, Psychology of Personality, Human Motivation, Psychology of Learning, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Perception, Experimental/Research Methods, and Cognitive Psychology.

BECOMING MORE INVOLVED IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

In order to advise successfully those psychology students electing to pursue careers in business, faculty advisors must become more involved with their local business community. Faculty members from both business and psychology departments should begin to interact more with each other. Increasing cooperation between business and psychology departments will be of mutual benefit, since, as was

noted early, both disciplines can provide educational experiences to students not available from each department separately. Psychology faculty should also become more familiar with the career services and placement office on their campus. The career services and placement office offers a multitude of services (e.g., career counseling, interviewing skills, and résumé preparation) and educational opportunities (e.g., internships and cooperative education programs with local business firms) that are not typically provided by psychology departments but yet are extremely necessary for students seeking business careers. Finally, psychology faculty members should also make it a point to visit local business firms to discuss what they view as important when considering psychology majors for entry-level positions. A list of those employers most likely to consider psychology majors for entry-level positions can probably be obtained from the career services and placement office on your campus.

While many psychology faculty members may be reluctant to venture into the business community, as a psychologist who has done so, the author would like to point out some of the important benefits he has received for his efforts. First of all, I have met many interesting and exciting individuals, as well as having made a few good friends. These visits have also produced several opportunities to conduct some research in a more "real-life" setting. Finally, a number of consulting opportunities have resulted from my visits.

A CLOSING NOTE

What we have been trying to communicate to psychology majors at our university is that there are in fact many things you can do with your psychology degree. However, students have to decide if they want to use their knowledge about psychology and be called a psychologist, which will probably require at least two additional years of post-baccalaureate education, Or, on the other

hand, they can decide to use their knowledge of psychology in the world of business and be called such things as an assistant personnel manager, a training and staff development supervisor, or a marketing research account officer. In my opinion, advisors of psychology majors have traditionally overlooked the second alternative when answering that all-too-familiar question, "What can I do with my psychology degree?"



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