

Career Options, Career Planning, and How to land a Job: Written for the Psychology Major

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Introduction

The following is a guide for finding a satisfying career in psychology. It is not exhaustive, but intended to familiarize you with what is available to psychology majors. A little “gratuitous advice” is also thrown in. The APA format has definitely not been followed; rather references are placed right before or after the topic. The reason is that this brochure is meant to be a quick and user-friendly guide. As such, mostly web sites are referenced and these are placed within the body of the text so they can be easily copied and pasted into a search engine rather than wading through a long list of references.

Flexibility

The world is changing faster than at any time in history and specific skill sets useful yesterday are often obsolete today. Today’s grad must be prepared to learn new skills throughout their career and even be prepared to change jobs or careers several times. Labor statistics show that on average, 1.2 percent of the workforce changed their jobs each month in 2004 and that the average worker will have 6 to 8 career changes in their lifetime.

(<http://www.bls.gov/>).

The key to success is “flexibility” and the ability to adapt to the changing world. But how does one achieve flexibility?

Achieving Flexibility

If you are reading this brochure you have already taken the first step to achieving success in today’s world: you have gone to college and are pursuing a liberal arts education. First of all, let’s get to an important fact: college grads make more money. In 1999, 25- to 34-year-olds who dropped out of

high school earned an average yearly income of less than \$18,000. High school graduates earned an average of about \$25,000. College graduates with a bachelor's or higher degree earned an average of \$40,000. (<http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/Miscellaneous007.htm>). That's good, but the real point is, a college liberal arts education provides you with the skills to adapt to today's changing world and can make you more marketable. Mark Fasold, senior vice president and chief financial officer at L. L. Bean has listed five marketable strengths achieved by a college graduate in the liberal arts:

- 1) Improved thinking and reasoning skills; 2) a much broader view of the world leading to a multitude of opinions, attitudes and beliefs; 3) an ability to see life in a more coherent and understandable context; 4) an accelerated hunger for learning, acquiring new knowledge and becoming creative in thought; and finally, 5) a willingness to change, to be a better citizen, person, and contributing member of society.

<http://www.collegenews.org/x1910.xml>.

Believe it or not, it is for good reason that UMW makes you take all of those general education courses! You are becoming a well- rounded and flexible person, and employers know that.

Your second step to achieving flexibility and success in the job market is that you are, or are thinking of, majoring in psychology, (see, Hayes, N. (1996), The distinctive skills of a psychology graduate. European Psychologist, 1, 130-134). But you thought that the psychology major didn't teach you specific skills – well let's examine that idea. It is true that after graduating with a B. A. in psychology you cannot go out and be a practicing psychologist in the State of Virginia. You must have a State license for this (<http://www.nursing.virginia.edu/centers/srmhrc/shortages/lic-psychology.asp>) and you should have an advanced degree such as a Master's in Social Work. However, you will acquire many valuable and marketable skills throughout your psychology major. These skills are both general and specific. You will learn to become a skilled writer and achieve an extraordinary proficiency at word processing. Writing is one of those general skills that you will use and be judged by in your future job - much more than

you think. You will surprise yourself at how much you've learned in statistical and quantitative analysis and you can boast of your proficiency in using SPSS, which, by the way, is used by many government and private organizations you may one day work for. You will learn how to read and create graphs using a variety of programs such as EXCEL. After graduation you may not again design and carry out an empirical research project; nevertheless the process teaches you to read journal articles, think logically and apply the scientific method. These are all general skills that can be applied in many different careers. Most majors will have experience in making oral presentations of various projects. Think how often you will be speaking to others in any job you take – starting with the formidable “job interview” which we will cover later. The better you speak, the better impression you'll make and the better you can communicate your ideas to others. Of course, let's not leave out the important fact that psychology really does teach you about people and the principles of human behavior. While you may not quite have the training, yet, to be a professional psychologist, your understanding of people and their behavior is more extensive than you think. Finally, the psychology major at Mary Washington emphasizes a “team” approach in many of our classes. The skill of working with others is one that is valued by anyone looking to hire an employee. This is just a short list of skills you are acquiring as a psychology major. Take some time and sit down and make your own list of all of the things you are learning that do have application to the world. Be aware that your knowledge is directly applicable to a job and makes you the flexible person so valued today.

Career Options for Psychology Majors

Options for B. A. Degrees

Let's face it, most of you will not choose to obtain an advanced degree in psychology (<http://www.apa.org>), so what careers are available, (http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_50.asp)? Before answering that important question, here are some suggestions to help you in selecting a career option.

Use your time as an undergraduate psychology major to find out what you do NOT want to do. This may sound strange, but it can save you lots of grief and years stuck doing something you despise. Eliminating things can often

be quick and easy. The first rule is, if you think you might like something - try it out. If you think you might want to work with children: work with them and see. Do volunteer work or take a summer job that involves working closely with children. Internships can be very helpful; sign up for an internship involving children (the department of psychology has an extensive offering available for you:

<http://psyc.umwchandler.net/outsidelearning.php?display=internships>).

Hopefully, you will have a rewarding experience, but you may find that it isn't for you after all – and this is important. It may take a while to find what you really like, but you'll know right away what you don't like. (Read an assessment on finding the right career for you by Steve Jobs founder of Apple Computer: <http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>).

Use the campus resources such as the Career Center (<http://www.umw.edu/hr/employment/default.php>) and talk to your professors about careers. Believe it or not, a professor just might have a useful tip for you so don't be shy about visiting us.

Go on-line and check out the endless sites on the topic of career options for psychology majors¹. The URLs' ending in .com usually require a password and a fee. Some sites provide accounts of experiences of recent graduates, and although the "Five O'clock Club" is not being endorsed, the following site offers some useful advice (<http://www.fiveoclockclub.com/articles/1997/04-97-RecentGrads.html>). The tips mentioned can be helpful and reassuring since they address concerns shared by everyone.

Finally, as much as your schedule will allow, take a wide variety of courses and professors. Don't be put off by course titles or unknown professors, you just might find to your surprise that a course you knew nothing about ends up changing the direction of your career path!

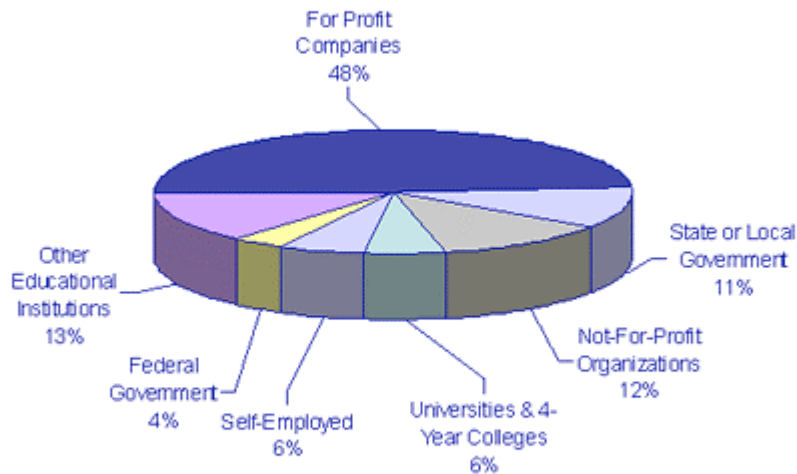
You don't need to be told that employers do not advertise "B. A. Psychology major wanted." But that's ok; you will see that there is a vast

¹ ***Caveat: Always keep in mind when going on the Internet, the sites you find there are almost always unedited, meaning that you have to read them carefully – the information within any site may or may not contain a word of truth. Some sites charge you for their services; before giving any credit card or other information, carefully check out the site. There are no free lunches; if any offer seems too good to be true, then guess what – it is, so forget it. Don't get scammed!***

array of career possibilities available for you. What follows is a general outline intended to help familiarize you with career options. You will find a gold mine of material from web sites developed by three of the major organizations in psychology: The American Psychological Association (APA) <http://www.apa.org>; American Psychological Society (APS) <http://www.psychologicalscience.org>; Psi Chi – The National Honors Society in Psychology (Mary Washington has a chapter) <http://www.psichi.org> . Spend some time at these sites; it will be well worth it.

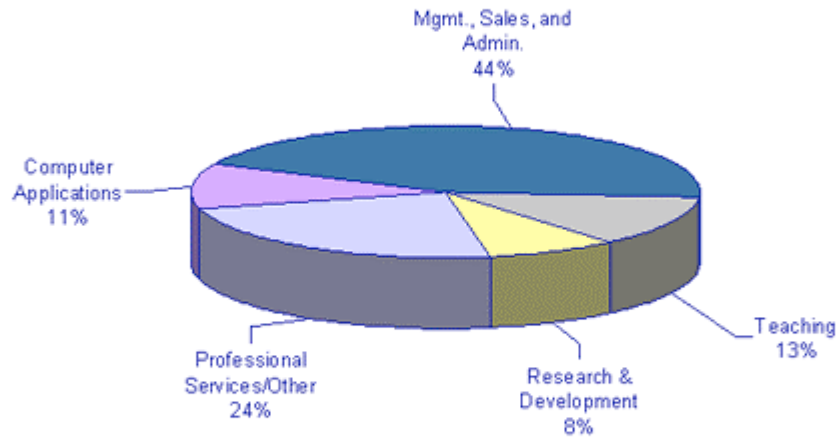
The following charts show where most B. A. psychology majors obtain jobs and find careers.

Work Settings for Baccalaureate Degree Recipients in Psychology: 1999



Source: 1999 SESTAT, National Science Foundation.

Primary and Secondary Work Activities of Baccalaureate Degree Recipients in Psychology: 1999



Source: 1999 SESTAT. National Science Foundation. Compiled by APA Research Office.

You can see that most psychology grads do not end up in jobs that are directly related to psychology. Of the 75,000 four-year degrees in psychology awarded in 2000, only about 5% ended up in jobs defined as directly related to psychology. <http://www.apa.org/students/brochure/brochurenew.pdf>.

In general, you will find the follow web sites helpful in looking for career opportunities with a B. A. in psychology. Web sites come and go, so some listed sites may already be down. Also, always check to see when the site was last updated.

- **Business.com**
- http://www.business.com/directory/healthcare/mental_health/psychology/employment/
- **Career Exploration Links**
www.uhs.berkeley.edu/Students/CareerLibrary/links/occup.cfm
- **CareerPlanit - Career Profiles Search**
www.careerplanit.com/resource/profile.asp

- **Encyclopedia of Psychology: Careers**
www.psychology.org/links/Career
- **Occupational Outlook Handbook**
<http://www.bls.gov/oco/>
- **Princeton Psychology Department**
<http://www.princeton.edu/~psych/>
- **What Color is Your Parachute?**
<http://www.jobhuntersbible.com/>

Lest you are still wondering what fields hire psychology majors, the University of Texas web site (<http://www.utexas.edu/student/careercenter/careers/psych.pdf>) provides an extremely useful list of possibilities gleaned from their recent graduates in psychology; this list is worth looking at. With 75,000 graduates in psychology each year, they are everywhere! Go to any college or university web site and look at their career opportunities page and you will see hundreds of listings just like the one above.

Is it hard to get these jobs with only a B. A. in psychology? Well, the news is encouraging. The results of a recent survey (2000) by the National Science Foundation (NSF) (<http://www.uta.edu/psychology/Dept/careers.htm>) found that only 3.4% of psychology majors were unemployed because they were unable to find suitable work. This figure compares quite favorably with the percentage of individuals taking degrees in any of the other sciences *or engineering*, where a 3.8% unemployment rate is about average. (Also see, Murray, B. (1999, September). Students' future is rosier than they think. *APA Monitor*, 52).

What follows is a further break down of career options. The various occupations and careers listed are by no means exhaustive of what is available under each category. Go on-line and search out options for yourself; it is amazing what is out there to be discovered.

Public Sector

In general, jobs in the public sector are those publicly funded and affiliated with community and social services. These jobs include working in group homes, halfway houses, community mental health centers, hospitals, public welfare agencies, nursing homes, facilities for the developmentally delayed,

and agencies servicing specific populations (for example, autistic people). This field is expected to be highly impacted by the huge population of “baby boomers” needing geriatric services in the near future. A related field is work with prison populations and with police and parole forces. Becoming a parole officer is an example. Jobs working for the State and Federal government would fall under public sector employment.

Jobs in the public sector are in high demand. They can be very rewarding and personally satisfying. The downside is that they don’t pay well, usually averaging \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year, (Williams, S., Wicherski, M. & Kohout, J. (2000) Salaries in psychology 1999: Report of the 1999 salary survey. Washington DC: American Psychology Association). Also, the working conditions can vary and you will usually find yourself under the direction of others, which can be frustrating.

A natural career for the psychology major who enjoys the challenge of children is teaching school. Most states require the future teacher to obtain a teaching certification, usually obtained in the course of pursuing the B. A. degree, and major in something other than “education.” Clearly, psychology with its coursework in human development and learning is a wonderful preparation. Though still rare, teachers in secondary schools can teach courses in psychology. Teaching is a wonderful vocation with excellent job opportunities and a good salary. Virginia is experiencing a teacher shortage and job opportunities are excellent here, (<http://www.virginia.edu/topnews/releases2000/edgrads-feb-22-2000.html>). Keep in mind that the salary is on a nine-month base and varies greatly from State to State ranging from \$27,000 to \$37,000 for entry level public school teachers with an average entry-level salary of \$30,496, (<http://www.aft.org/salary/2003/download/2003Table2.pdf>).

Private Sector

The private sector is where most psychology majors end up, lured by excellent opportunities and greater salary potential. Of the psychology majors without advanced degrees, most end up in private business and a majority end up in management. (http://money.cnn.com/2000/12/08/career/q_degreespsychology/). In management, the psychology major can use their “communication skills” to full advantage. Psychology majors excel as managers because everything they learned comes into play. Of course, the salary can be outstanding as well. A related field is that of human resources. With their understanding of

psychological testing, psychology majors enter this field with an advantage. The field of marketing and consumer behavior is tailor made for the psychology graduate. Another site recommended as a good resource in general for career possibilities is <http://www.tiu.edu/psychology/careers.htm>.

Another field open to psychology majors is that of health care. <http://library.thinkquest.org/15569/> There are many web sites to visit to get information. Some jobs require extra training such as becoming an x-ray technician, doing laboratory work, or nursing, but others such as personnel or human resources do not. The future is good in this field and the pay can be excellent, (http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/health_news/yourdoctor/2004vol1_workforce.cfm).

Other careers may require considerably more preparation such as law but you can certainly enter law school with a B. A. in psychology (<http://www.cas.okstate.edu/services/campus/law/majors.html>). Even dental or medical schools look favorably on students who have majored in the social sciences <http://www.knox.edu/x3286.xml> which is somewhat of a departure from the past. Such schools are looking for the well-rounded student not just biology or chemistry majors. Obviously, you'll want to check the web sites of law or medical schools and find out exactly what you need to apply. Also, these schools require that you take standard examinations such as MCATS or LSATS.

By this time can you see that your possibilities for a career are limited only by your imagination and willingness to search and find what you want.

Options Requiring an Advanced Degree

Some psychology students pursue advanced degrees because there are careers that require schooling beyond the B. A. in psychology, (<http://www.sci.csuhayward.edu/psychology/advanced.html>). To learn more about applying to graduate school in psychology, ask your advisor or department chair to see the brochure the psychology department has developed for you. Careers requiring advanced degrees fall mainly into one of the four categories listed below and directly utilize the training received in graduate school.

Helping Professions

The purpose of the helping professions is to try and solve human behavioral problems; you function as a counselor or a therapist – a practitioner in psychology. Many of the career options listed above under Public Sector are open to graduates with advanced degrees. With an advanced degree, you have more control and more responsibility as well as a higher salary. Too numerous to mention are State and community clinics, hospitals, and institutions that are publicly funded and that need graduates with advanced degrees in psychology. It can be said generally, that those with advanced degrees perform “therapy or counseling” in one form or another as well as supervise staff. The type of therapy will vary depending upon the training you received in school. It should be mentioned here that if your goal is to stay exclusively in the helping profession, it may not be necessary to obtain a Ph.D. or even a PsyD; the M. A. is sufficient. Individuals with an M. A. in psychology (alternatively you can obtain a “Master’s in Social Work”) have a background in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders and emotional issues. An M. A. degree is essentially a counseling degree with an emphasis on clinical experience and psychotherapy. The Ph.D. is only necessary if you also plan to teach in an academic setting and/or publish research findings. The PsyD is in somewhat of a grey area. The PsyD (see, <http://www.m-a-h.net/hip/discern.htm>) is a professional degree that prepares psychologists to be clinical practitioners and interpreters of research. A PsyD is similar to a PhD program in that students are trained in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of the full range of psychological disorders. However, a PsyD program has an intense emphasis on fieldwork and clinical experience rather than research. The PsyD degree trains psychologists to understand and apply research in their practice and clinical work. The PsyD works in a variety of clinical settings, but very rarely in academic or university settings. In most cases, the PsyD training requires no formal thesis or thesis defense.

Many clinics, hospitals, and private practices in which you might work are “for profit”, meaning that they are not publicly funded but charge a fee for service. Salaries in such settings will be higher but jobs may be more competitive. Salaries, in general for graduates with advanced degrees in the helping field range widely depending on the setting, (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos056.htm#earnings>). The median annual salary including clinical, counseling, and school psychologists in 2002 was \$51,170. The middle 50% earned between \$38,560 and \$66,970.

Research and Academic

Psychologists with advanced degrees often opt for careers as professors and researchers. Their goal is not direct application of psychology to solve human problems but teaching at the university or college level and they often engage in psychological research. A Ph.D. is necessary for such a career. The Ph.D. is an academic degree (not to be confused with a medical degree (MD)). To add to the confusion, some Ph.D. graduates are trained as practitioners and enter helping careers as defined above. Such graduates have usually had additional training and served an internship. The academic or research career can be very rewarding but requires considerable schooling, so be sure this is what you want before jumping into such a program. Academic salaries are surprisingly low compared to those for practitioners (though here again, salary is on a nine-month bases). This will vary considerably depending on the school and the location. As with primary school teaching, higher education can be extremely fulfilling and most contracts are on a nine-month basis leaving time in the summer for travel or research and writing.

The Mixed Option

There is an option, sometimes termed the “Boulder model,” where the graduate becomes a scientist-practitioner; working in both academia and the helping profession (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=2604282&dopt=Abstract). A person should have the Ph.D. before considering such a career. There are several such people in our department and you may want to talk to them if this option interests you.

Other Advanced Degree Options

Finally, industry hires advanced degree graduates to work in what is termed “industrial/organizational” psychology. Generally, Industrial and organizational psychology (or I/O psychology) is the study of the behavior of people in the workplace. Industrial and organizational psychology attempts to apply psychological results and methods to aid workers and organizations. It is also known as occupational psychology and work psychology, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial/Organizational_Psychology). Industrial and organizational psychologists use psychological testing to measure the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics of people for a variety of employment-related purposes, such as selection for hiring or

promotion, training and development, or measuring employee satisfaction. It is a fairly diverse field incorporating aspects of fields such as clinical psychology, social psychology, and psychometrics as well as broader social studies such as organizational theory, law, and gender issues. Earning potential, because you are usually working in industry, is excellent. The median salary is \$66,880 but this is not just entry level, (<http://www.umsl.edu/services/govdocs/ooh20022003/ocos056.htm>).

Your graduate school will have much more extensive resources for jobs than can be presented here, so be sure to check them out. Once again, the above is just an outline of the possibilities there for you.

Planning For Your Career(s)

Steps to Help You

It is never too early to get started planning for your future career. But one word of caution: DON'T PANIC! You have time to decide what you want to do. Don't be rushed into something just because you or others think "it's time." However, below is a general guide that you can consider as a "time line" beginning around your freshman or sophomore year and continuing through your senior year.

Step One: Getting Started

If you decide to major in psychology, be sure to declare early in order to be assigned an advisor within the department. You may request for someone in particular. Utilize this person, make appointments with them and get as much information as you can about planning your major and pointing towards a career. Take a variety of courses to see what areas of psychology you might like to pursue and also take a variety of professors. It goes without saying, that you should budget you time carefully and get good grades.

Step Two

Begin building your resume; write down a summary of the highlights of your education and work experience. Do volunteer work and obtain summer employment in areas that seem like prospects for a future career. Get involved in campus organizations such as the newspaper or various clubs. If inclined, look into student government options. It is never too early to get on line and see what's "out there" and what people have to say about careers.

Step Three

About the end of your junior year or early in your senior year begin to consider graduate school options if this interests you. If you are going to go to graduate school in psychology it is never too early to begin studying for the all important GREs and begin to think about lining up professors who can serve as references and who would be willing to write a positive letter for you. Consider seriously the option of signing up for a 491 research team and/or an internship. This way, the sponsoring professor can write a good and thorough letter on your behalf for either a job or graduate school.

Step Four

Finally, get to know your professors and let them get to know you. Very often you will need to have one or several of your professors to write letters on your behalf and/or serve as references. Professors are happy to provide references but the quality of such references depends greatly on how well they know you. To simply take a class from a professor, even if you do well, doesn't really provide much information about you. The more they know about you, your potential, your interests, etc., the better the quality of your reference and the better your chances of landing a job.

Now, begin your job search in earnest utilizing the tips above.

Landing the Job You Want

How to Write a Resume

A prerequisite to applying for just about any job is sending in a resume. It is beyond the scope of this brochure to tell you specifically how to write one but the following sources are a good start:

http://www.career.virginia.edu/students/resources/handouts/writing_resumes.pdf.

<http://www.how-to-write-a-resume.org/>

The same references cited above also provide you some excellent guidance on writing a cover letter to accompany your resume. Take time to study what they tell you; remember, this is your first impression to a potential employer. There is even software that practically writes the darn resume for you,

<http://www.totalresume.com/?AdID=GOO&KeyID=All>

Where and How to Job Search

There are some important do's and don'ts for an effective job search. The following web site is highly recommended to help you conduct an effective job search,

http://www.career.virginia.edu/students/resources/handouts/three_steps.pdf.

Of course, don't limit yourself to just this site.

How to Prepare for the Dreaded Interview

Here are some sites to get you started preparing for that important job interview. <http://www.collegegrad.com/intv/> , http://flfl.essortment.com/howtoprepare_rhdt.htm , <http://www2.lib.udel.edu/subj/bsec/resguide/jobintv.htm>. These are but a few of the literally hundreds of sites that can provide help.

Why Was I Turned Down?

“In every life a little rain must fall” – but why did I get turned down? You're a psychology major and you know that analysis of a problem is a good idea. Nothing can be fixed until analysis shows what the problem is. So, analyze why you might have gotten turned down. Though general, check out <http://danenet.wicip.org/jets/jet-5694-p.html>, and take a look at <http://www.brainbox.com.au/brainbox/home.nsf/0/0198A603F20E590FCA256FF800448F33?opendocument>. Practice makes perfect and it really is a good idea to practice with a colleague or friend willing to help you review your interview techniques.

Concluding Remarks

Your reading of this brochure should have convinced you that there are plenty of opportunities that await you with a degree in psychology, whether you have a B. A. or an advanced degree. But, now the ball is in your court, so much depends on you from here on.

Let's review some steps you should take to find the career you will be happy with: find out what you DON'T want to do and this includes things like where you want to live and what kind of salary you'll settle for; talk to everyone you can about possible careers including your professors, friends, career counselors, etc.; get experience in the areas that seem interesting to you before you jump into an intensive job search or even commit to graduate school; live on the web, a treasure trove of resources and ideas (but don't believe everything you read – it's not edited remember) and go ahead and try some of the "head hunter" sites mentioned above such as <http://www.monster.com/>.

Finally, don't give up; job hunting can be frustrating and, honestly, a little demeaning at times. But persistence pays off. Believe in yourself. You are smart and have a lot of skills and, in time, you will land that job you want. Good luck.