

PREPARING PSYCHOLOGY UNDERGRADUATES FOR THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

The American Psychological Association (APA) separates student learning outcomes into two categories: foundational and baccalaureate. Foundational outcomes are generally built into the lower level course curriculum of the major and typically include an introductory course as well as a methods course (American Psychological Association, 2013). Baccalaureate indicators include specific expectations that a student who does not plan to continue their education needs in order to perform in the field at the completion of the bachelor's degree (APA, 2013). In 2014, when a programmatic review was conducted on the undergraduate psychology program, a need for change was identified to ensure the program aligned to guidelines set forth by the APA for undergraduate programs. The guidelines help to confirm that students are prepared for a career in the field or graduate school. For this reason, changes to the curriculum included the addition of a foundational course focusing on research, Introduction to Psychological Research and Ethics. To ensure relevancy, a Cognitive Neuroscience course was added to the program. Finally, baccalaureate courses are to incorporate "expectations for performance at the completion of the major" for students who plan to further their education and for those who do not (APA, 2013, p. 4). For this reason, a Professional Capstone Project course was added to the program. With instructor guidance, the capstone course provides students the opportunity to explore and solidify choices post-graduation. This course has been successful; therefore, it has been used as a model to create capstone courses in other disciplines in the college (Freeman, 2012). However, improvements can still be made to ensure that students are prepared to transition to life post-graduation.

Keywords: professional capstone, undergraduate, psychology, career preparation

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The question, "What can I do with a major in psychology?" has been one that has been presented by undergraduate students for decades (Hogan, 1991). Though the work environments and job titles vary widely, graduates from a Bachelor of Science in Psychology program often enter careers in human relations, training and development,

education, health care, and government in addition to more commonly thought of careers as social workers, vocational counselors, researchers, psychological technicians, and social service providers (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2014). Students who major in psychology are in demand for various jobs in non-traditional career settings, including public health, with aging population, with the Department of Defense, the Department of

Veteran Affairs, or Homeland Security, in business settings, or in the justice system (DeAngeliz, 2008). Such demand across varied fields makes a degree in psychology a choice degree for new graduates entering the workforce. Unlike some degrees, the options that are available to psychology students are vast; however, students are often unaware of their options (Ciarocco, 2018). Additionally, they do not know where to begin to start exploring options available to them. The process can be so overwhelming that students put off exploring options until they near graduation or after they graduate. At that point, their support system, who was comprised of university faculty, staff, classmates, and friends, becomes much smaller or completely disappears.

Capstone courses help to solidify the paths that students choose to follow after graduation (Roscoe & Strapp, 2009; Freeman, 2012; Ciarocco, 2018). Choices are influenced by options they are exposed to during their undergraduate career. Capstone courses provide the chance to share various opportunities with students. In addition, they provide faculty with time to mentor students as they prepare for, apply to, and transition from college to career or graduate school.

In 1990, colleges began to consistently implement career courses into programs for psychology majors. Career courses mainly focused on preparing and assisting students to apply to graduate school. At the time, many students, who graduated with a degree in psychology, planned to go to graduate school (Burkist, 1999; Neimeyer, Lee, Saferstein & Pickett, 2004). Today, the number of students who pursue a bachelor's degree in psychology, but do not wish to attend graduate school is increasing. Lin, Christidis, & Stamm (2017) reported that 57% of psychology majors did not pursue graduate degrees. Therefore, the APA has placed a greater emphasis on the development of employable skills in undergraduate programs (APA, 2013).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although statistics from 2008 indicated that less than 5-8% of all psychology majors were actually working in the field of psychology after graduation, they do qualify for entry-level positions in diverse fields (APA, 2011). APA advocates for professional development, specifically

employable skills development, within psychology undergraduate programs (Ciarocco & Strohmetz, 2018). However, Ciarocco (2018) reported that only "37% of undergraduate programs offer formal career preparation through curriculum" (p. 32). Specific skills developed in psychology courses make students ideal candidates for numerous entry-level positions. By aligning the Bachelor of Science in Psychology program with the APA guidelines, psychology faculty are confident that students are receiving robust program content and that students are competitive candidates for the workforce or graduate school admission. However, they are often unable to articulate how skills they have developed apply to various work settings (Ciarocco, 2018).

The purpose of the undergraduate psychology curriculum review was "to establish and communicate clear expectations for student learning, align curricula with the expectations, assess student attainment, and use assessment to make necessary changes to promote effective student learning" (APA, 2013, p. 6). The outcome of the review was the addition of several courses, including a Professional Capstone course, to meet the APA guidelines set forth and prepare students for careers in the field or graduate studies. Formal instruction, guest speakers, and time for independent work in a supportive learning setting are methods used in this course to allow students to gain the information necessary to transition successfully from college to a career or graduate school.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Early in 2013, a decision was made to align the Bachelor of Science in Psychology program to the APA guidelines. Small differences existed between the psychology program offered and the guidelines for undergraduate students proposed by APA. To propose and support changes to the psychology undergraduate program, critical reflection was utilized. Bloomfield (1995) suggested four critical lens which should be incorporated into the reflective process. The four critical lenses include autobiography, students' eyes, colleagues' experiences, and theoretical literature. Considering the suggested guidelines presented by APA, the programmatic review data, and reflecting upon personal experience, the psychology department collaborated with the ultimate goal of revising the

program so that it aligned to APA guidelines for undergraduate programs.

Our program review is a formalized approach for reflection that involves the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as support from current research. Using course evaluations completed by students and faculty, discussing personal experiences and observations from the classes taught, and reviewing the current research relating to undergraduate psychology programs, we were able to propose changes that would lead to course and program improvements and an increase in student preparedness to transition from college to career.

The results from the programmatic review helped to make positive changes to the psychology program. The outcome allowed changes to be made to align the program to a national standard. This led to the removal of some existing outcomes demanded of students and the addition of others. Faculty in the psychology department collaborated and made adjustments to the domains and competencies that were used to develop the curriculum for the program. Each domain included a variety of competencies that were derived from the APA guidelines. Courses were retired, developed, or revised to include APA guidelines and to ensure relevance. Through thorough curriculum review and revision, a standardized curriculum was created that helped to address accountability concerns surrounding the quality of education. Regardless of the modality, the curriculum offered to students enrolled in this program is the same.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As a result of the programmatic review, one class that was added was a Professional Capstone course. The purpose of this class is to prepare students to apply for employment or graduate school. Freeman (2012) and Ciarocco (2018) supported the inclusion of a course that provided students the opportunity to take an active role in career exploration and opportunities that lead to deliverables that they can use as they apply for jobs or graduate school. Therefore, one of the course objectives is to create a clean writing sample free from errors that can be included in the professional portfolio (Appendix A). Students meet with the instructor on a regular basis throughout the semester to review feedback so that corrections can be made and a solid research

proposal is the final outcome. This writing sample can be confidently submitted to graduate schools or potential employers. In addition to written assignments that solidify a comprehensive research proposal, students are also expected to share their proposals in a poster presentation session at the end of the semester. The deliverables help them to feel prepared and more confident as they apply for jobs or to graduate schools.

Guest speakers from different agencies and organizations in the community and graduate school representatives were invited to come to present. In addition, Roscoe and Strapp (2009) and Ciarocco (2018) recommended partnering with campus resources to provide additional support to students. They stated that students often do not take advantage of career services on campus (Roscoe & Strapp, 2009; Ciarocco, 2018). Therefore, in the capstone course, a representative from the career services department was invited to class to present on topics including writing a resume, writing a cover letter, and preparing for interviews.

EVALUATION OF THE PROBLEM

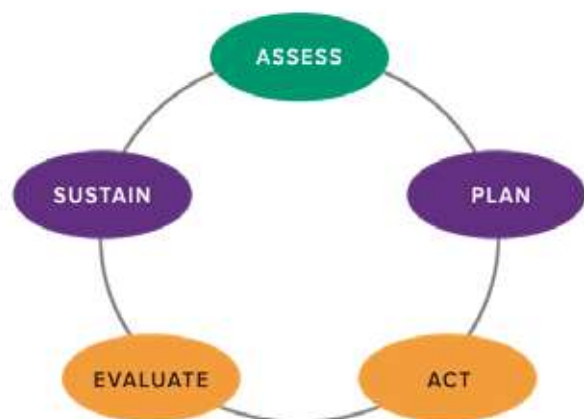
One of the issues that instructors have found with relying on a capstone class is that students are not examining their future career options or graduate school programs until late in their senior year. Typically, psychology students are enrolled in the capstone class their last semester before graduation. While the capstone works to develop and refine necessary skills for students, it is very late in their academic career to start considering their next steps beyond graduation. Students supported this concern in an end of course survey, expressing the desire to be introduced to information regarding careers and applying to graduate school earlier in their program. One student reported, "I would have benefited from having this class sooner, especially when I was applying to grad school." Additionally, another student stated, "[This] class should have been offered before last semester; applied for schools before the class."

DECISION

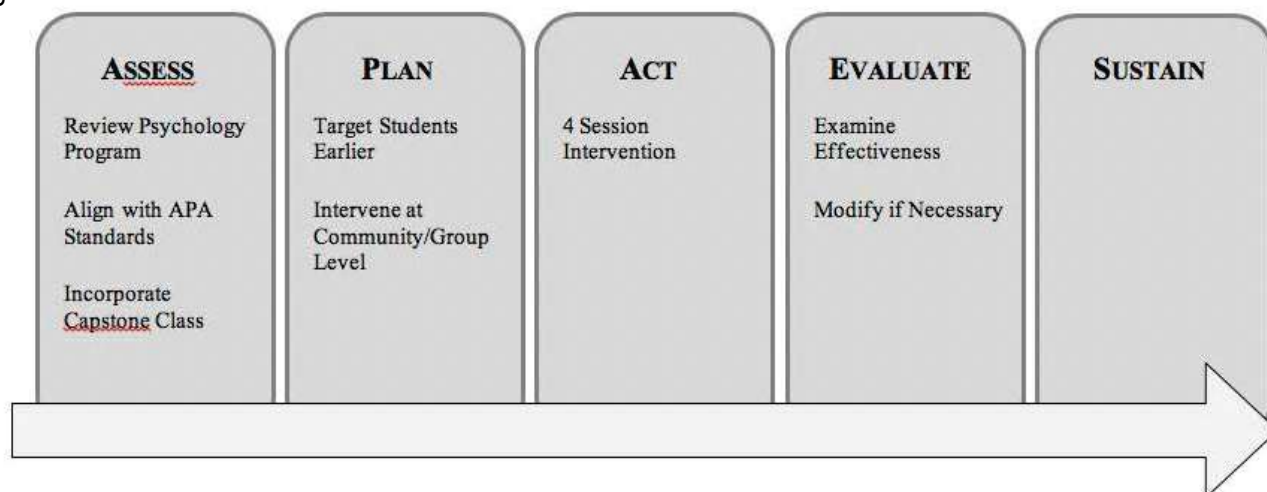
As psychology faculty, we are always considering the paths available to our students after graduation and are invested in their future success. Aligning our psychology program with APA standards and witnessing the benefits of a capstone class, we also realized that students could be better

prepared for life after their academic career if we were able to mentor them earlier. However, the sheer number of students who need mentoring has always been a challenge. Psychology is one of the largest majors on our campus, and currently there are over 1,200 psychology majors on the ground campus and only seven full-time faculty members available to mentor them.

In examining this issue, we have decided to implement a community-level, systematic approach to support students to begin thinking about and exploring post-graduation options earlier. Community psychology focuses on addressing a particular population and providing an intervention to solve a problem. Undergraduate psychology students will be defined as the community we are addressing with the specific interventions that will be implemented. If we target students at a community level, this will help to solve the faculty to student ratio problem. The Center for Community Health and Development (2018)



proposed a community model that will provide the
Figure 2



framework for our interventions (Figures 1, 2).

Figure 1

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Step 1 - Assess

After examining the psychology program and aligning it with APA standards, we are confident that students in our program are receiving an appropriate, well-rounded psychology degree that will help them to be competitive with psychology graduates from other reputable programs. One factor that we measure the success of the capstone course and the psychology program is by where graduates gain employment or entrance into graduate school. Another way success is measured is by gathering feedback from students who graduate from the program. The capstone course has been extremely successful and well received by students who are enrolled in it. Feedback from the students included positive comments regarding guest speakers who were invited to share their experiences in the field as well as possible job opportunities within their companies and organizations. Students also found value in the presentations focused on resume writing and career guidance.

Table 1

Student Feedback: The Most Beneficial Components of the Capstone Course

Guest Speakers	Resume Writing	Career Guidance
"hearing from the various guest speakers and how they got into the field"	"putting together a resume"	"talking about post college"
"guest speakers with job opportunities"	"resume knowledge—was very helpful for preparing for jobs and graduate programs"	"job guidance"
"guest speakers sharing how they got to where they were in career field"	"preparing a resume"	"looking at careers in the psychology field"
"helping with research opportunities and career opportunities outside of class"	"tips on how to write a resume"	"I really found the material on post-college helpful"
"having guest speakers share about their experience in the field"		"the help breaking down job paths"
"having guest speakers allows me to be realistic about the field/pay"		"information about the field, graduate school, and finding a job"

Further, guest speakers have hired students for externships or full-time employment. Students have been hired at a number of behavioral health centers as behavioral health technicians. They have been provided opportunities to work with local non-for-profit organizations to assist with conducting research. They have been hired by local schools to be apprentice teachers. Finally, they have been accepted to numerous graduate school programs in psychology, social work, counseling, and education. Based on this evidence, the capstone class is clearly a benefit to junior and senior students and will continue.

Step 2 - Plan

While analyzing the impact of the changes that were made to the psychology program, it became clear that students need more guidance to help them determine their next steps after graduation before their senior year. We propose a community-based mentoring program for psychology students to reach them earlier in their academic careers so that they can begin to prepare for employment or graduate school. By implementing this program in an optional workshop format, we retain the integrity of the APA aligned psychology program and do not need to alter the current curriculum. Further, the workshop format will allow for a large number of students to be mentored at one time by a few faculty members. Reaching larger groups of students at one time by using a community-based intervention model will help to ensure all psychology students received mentoring from a psychology faculty.

Step 3 – Act

In order to reach a large number of students, a community-based intervention model will be used. Community psychology “focuses on the social settings, systems, and institutions that influence groups and organizations and the individuals within them” (Moritsugu, Very, Wong & Duffy, 2010, p. 7). Focusing on psychology students and reaching them in a larger group, rather than with one-on-one mentoring, is a way to utilize the community model and impact a greater number of students. Instructors are currently planning a four-session intervention that will be offered to psychology majors in the fall semester. One session will be offered per month, and each session will focus on career exploration or graduate school preparation. The goal is to reach students earlier in their program so that they will be more aware of the opportunities that are available to them with an undergraduate degree in psychology. They will also be exposed to the different subfields of psychology which will assist in determining career paths or graduate programs. By approaching students in a group setting we will be developing a scalable mentoring program that can be implemented on an annual basis. The program will be run by faculty at the university. If after evaluation, this program is successful, we plan to disseminate the information to other departments so that they may also incorporate this type of mentoring.

Step 4 and 5 – Evaluate and Sustain

After each workshop, faculty will assess the impact of the intervention. A pre- and post- survey

will be used to determine if students gained new information after attending the workshop. This will help us to determine the effectiveness of the workshops and make modifications if necessary. The ultimate goal would be to develop a mentoring model that can be implemented year after year.

CONCLUSION

As faculty at the university level, we not only strive to teach our students psychology related content but also to mentor students so that they achieve their future career goals. We wish to equip them with the knowledge and resources to secure fulfilling and successful careers. We are confident that our program of study is robust, and the most recent revisions have aligned the program with the high standards of the APA. Our capstone class assists our students in their chosen career paths or admission into graduate school. While we appreciate the success that the alignment and capstone class have provided, we want to ensure that students are receiving more guidance. Implementing a community-based intervention model to mentor students earlier in their academic career will attempt to accomplish this goal. We posit that this model will be successful, and students will report feeling better supported and ready for their chosen paths after graduation. If this model is successful, it is one that could be replicated in other programs at the university level. There are many other liberal arts degrees including, English, communication, criminal justice, and sociology that have varied career paths; therefore, students in these majors may also benefit from mentoring programs that are built and implemented in a similar way.

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Appendix A: Professional Portfolio Requirements

Participation in this class will be comprise of in-class participation as well as the completion of a professional portfolio. The following will document the required components of your professional portfolio.

CREATE A PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO WHICH INCLUDES FOUR SECTIONS:

1. Resume
2. Research paper
3. Professional Presentation
4. Employment or Graduate School Section

THE EMPLOYMENT SECTION WILL CONTAIN THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS:

- Long-term career and life goals
- At least three job possibilities and a brief report that explains why each is appropriate for you based on your immediate and long-term career and life goals
- A professional-appearing cover letter that can be modified for specific job applications
- Completed letter of recommendation request forms from at least three appropriate people who have agreed to write you strong letters of recommendation for a job
- The results of a mock interview (using the Mock Interview Form provided) with the Career Services Office. Include a one-page report that explains how you will use the results of this experience to improve your performance on future interviews
- Completed applications for at least three jobs

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL SECTION WILL CONTAIN THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS:

- Long-term career and life goals
- Results of a search for appropriate graduate programs that yielded at least three possible programs and a brief report that explains why each of these programs is appropriate for you based on your immediate and long-term career and life goals
- A professional appearing personal statement that can be modified for specific graduate programs
- Evidence of preparation for the entrance exam your graduate/professional program requires (e.g., GRE or MCAT)
- Completed letter-of-recommendation request-forms from at least three appropriate people who have agreed to write you strong letters of recommendation for graduate school
- Completed applications for at least three graduate programs