

The “Major” Decision: Academic Niche Seeking and the Psychology Student

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At some point in their academic careers, all psychology students must attempt to solve the riddle, “What can I do with a major in psychology?” For many, the answer remains enigmatic throughout their undergraduate education. Semesters are simply too short, and the psychological sciences too broad, to allow consideration of all the possible areas of study that are considered “psychology,” not to mention the careers that emerge from these areas. Instructors’ preferences, prejudices, expertise, and ignorance, as well as students’ individual interests often leave first and second year students with incomplete images of psychology. To make the matter even more difficult, the increasing costs of education often limit time-frames in which students must complete their degrees. Therefore, introductory courses have a strong influence over whether students will pursue a particular field.

For students who decide to study psychology, career options and academic tracking issues often remain unclear. For example, most schools offer neither a “Pre-Psych” track of the same degree that Pre-Law and Pre-Med tracks are offered, or an applied training opportunity for those not planning to go on to do graduate work. Consequently, a degree in psychology is often a theoretical/preparatory or pre-professional degree, and does not meet the needs of all students who are interested in psychology and the social sciences.

Here I will propose a model that should help simplify the process of niche seeking for the psychology student.¹ The model I am proposing is an active one. It does not rely on the instructor simply imparting information to students. Rather, the instructor acts as a mediator, helping students learn which questions to pose, and offering students a framework within which to act. The goals of this model are to help students: 1) More completely conceptualize the fields of psychology and the social sciences, as well as the relationships between all areas of academic study, and 2) Determine what questions to ask themselves and others, and what actions to take in planning their academic and professional careers.

Helping students find their niche in psychology is a multi-level process. Advising can and should be done on a group basis. For example, one lecture period each semester can be devoted to a particular topic (graduate school, employment opportunities) depending on the level of the students in the course. At the introductory level, the first thing the instructor

can do is help students to understand the myriad applications of psychology, and discover the connections between psychology and seemingly disparate fields such as education, anthropology, and even biology and physics. Figure 1 (on page 8) represents the connectedness of academic fields that do not always appear related at first glance.² To help students recognize the connections between different fields of study, have them think of some ways that psychology can be used in other fields, and ways that other fields can be used in psychology. Present articles from the *APA Monitor* or other publications that highlight the connections between psychology and other academic and professional pursuits.

In addition to deciding what to study, students need to know how to study it successfully. Figure 2 (on page 9) is a mnemonic (PSYCH) which outlines several points that students should keep in mind for maximizing their college experience. This mnemonic reinforces the self-directed aspects of studying psychology (or any other field). As with this entire model, instructors should draw on their personal experiences and perspectives when elaborating on these points.

Advising also involves one-on-one consultations with students. Advisors need to help students ask themselves the appropriate questions and search for the most thorough answers. If a student seeks to major in psychology, the first thing the advisor can do is to ask simply, “Why?”. You may be answered with a blank face, or told, “I want to work with people,” or the student may have thorough career plans including distinct areas of research or practice interest. Prodding students to clarify their interests over time will help insure that they focus their study in an area that will best suit their interests.

As an advisor, you can help students form opinions (not pejorative judgments) about different career paths. For students interested in becoming therapists, this means helping them discern between pursuing a Master or Doctoral degree, and choosing a particular field (i.e., social work, psychiatry, etc.). In this respect, it is important that advisors and instructors be willing to advise beyond the “bounds” of psychology, while at the same time being aware of the limitations of their knowledge base. You may have a strong allegiance to psychology, and have found it to be a very inspiring field. However, it may not be the right field for your student³. Beware of “advising” students of what

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degree they want and do not want, (e.g., “You don’t want an MSW,” or “You should definitely go for a Ph.D.”). Provide students with your own perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of particular fields and degrees. Yet, keep in mind that there is a distinct decision making process that students need to go through to be sure that they will be most satisfied with their selected focus. Encourage students to consult with faculty in other fields besides psychology if their interests lie beyond the bounds of your department. If your school is small or lacks the programs in which your students are interested, suggest they talk with professionals in the community.

While this model emphasizes process-oriented guidance over advice-giving. A certain amount of frankness is necessary. Help your students choose extracurricular activities that are appropriate to their employment or graduate education goals. For example, for students who plan to apply to clinical Ph.D. programs, they should probably be encouraged to work on academic research with faculty, rather than working for the local crisis hot-line, a principle that often seems counterintuitive to students.

The default model of student advising in academia emphasizes one-on-one advising. However, I am concerned that many students are “lost” before they take advantage of this resource. Thus, a greater emphasis needs to be put on reaching more students early in their academic careers. Lessening the burden of choosing a field of study will allow students to channel more effort and time into perfecting their skills in their chosen field(s).

NOTES

¹ I use the term psychology student loosely, meaning any student enrolled in a psychology course. Psychology seems to be the default social science that students take when interested in human behavior.

² The fields represented here were picked somewhat arbitrarily. Your own graphic could include different fields.

³ Although the model presented here emphasizes the connectedness between disciplines, when it comes time for a student to choose a particular academic and professional trajectory, it is helpful to make distinctions. What degree will best meet the student’s needs, goals and interests?

FIGURE 1

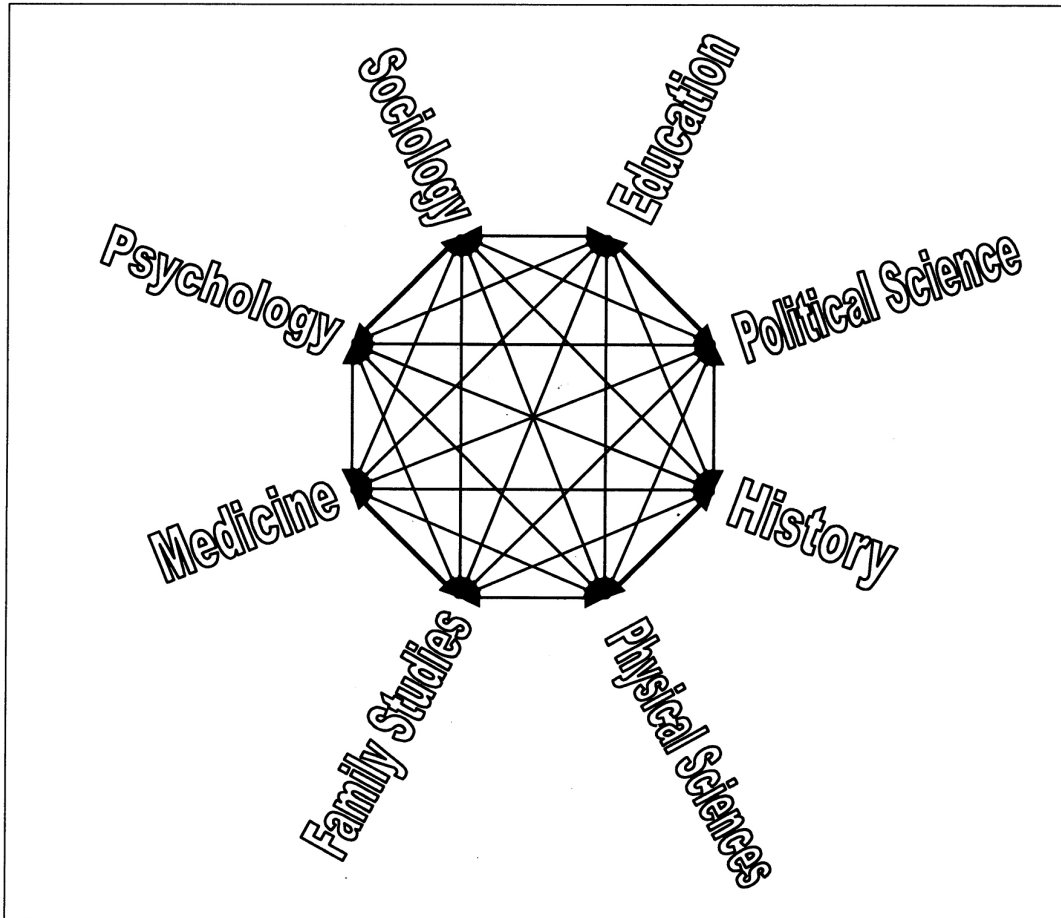


FIGURE 2

PICK A STARTING POINT —

You might not know exactly what career you want to have, or even what you want to study while in college. However, don't wait for a revelation to begin a search for a major. Pick a few areas that interest you and take classes in them.

SEEK ADVICE & ASSISTANCE —

Talk to professors. They can help you decide which major is best suited to your interests and career goals. Talk with other students who have majors that interest you. Ask about their career goals and why they like the subject(s) they are studying. Get "inside info" about professors, courses, and student organizations in these departments.

YEARN TO LEARN —

Learn all you can about career opportunities and sub-areas within different disciplines. Once you choose a subject that interests you, learn all you can within that area (names, theories, etc.). You may have to do much of this on your own time, but it will be worth it!

CONSIDER ALTERNATIVES —

Consider the different disciplines in which you can study the subjects that interest you. What degree(s) do you need to be able to do what you want? For example, some ways to get into a therapeutic career are Clinical Psych Ph.D. or Psy.D, Masters of Social Work, or Masters in Counseling.

HAVE FUN! —

Try to major in a subject that you find interesting. Find something that you would study even if it didn't lead to a degree or career. College study can be time consuming and intellectually rigorous. Being passionate about your area of study will help insure an enjoyable and successful college career.