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Fostering Student Professional Development



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Students receiving an undergraduate education in psychology are prepared for many future endeavors, but do not receive training sufficient to qualify for licensure as a psychologist. Some pursue graduate education, but many students use their bachelor's degree to seek good jobs. This chapter highlights the strategies that students can use while an undergraduate that will promote professional development and provide a competitive edge in whatever career path they pursue. Professional development includes activities such as research assistantships, teaching assistantships, internships, a senior thesis, and organizational involvement.

The Role of Grades

There is no doubt that grades intertwine with the teaching and learning process – grades are a necessary component. The use of grades began in America at Yale University in 1783, using the descriptive terms Optime, Second Optime, Inferiores, and Pejores (Milton, Pollio, & Eison, 1986). These descriptions were used for a 4-point grading scale just after 1800, and in 1813 the first grade-point averages (GPA) were calculated.

Whereas grades can be useful in assessing student learning, high grades should not be the sole objective for students. “Grades, rather than learning, become the primary objective of many students; the appearance of achievement becomes more important than the achievement itself” (Pollio & Beck, 2000, p. 84). I have told students many times that if I were an employer or a member of a graduate admissions committee, I would rather see an applicant with a 3.5 GPA who had been a research assistant, completed an internship, and served as a Psi Chi officer compared to someone with a 4.0 GPA who had done nothing outside the classroom. Grades, along with Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores and letters of recommendation, remain the “big three”

primary selection factors for graduate admissions (Keith-Spiegel, 1991; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). Good grades are necessary, but not sufficient for student success.

Competition of Post-Baccalaureate Opportunities

Every year since 1995, over 70,000 students have graduated with their psychology bachelor's degree in the United States – in 2001–2 (the latest year available) there were 73,534 psychology graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Competition in the workforce is usually fierce for the best jobs, and in difficult economic times, competition for any job can sometimes be fierce. Chen (2004) noted that, on average, college graduates will have 8 different jobs during their lifetimes; over this span, they will be required to work in 3 different professions or occupations. With so many new psychology graduates each year, students need a competitive edge.

Graduate education continues to be a popular option, and the competitiveness for some graduate degrees and specialty areas is high. Landrum (2004) presented data made available from the American Psychological Association (APA) (2003) that highlighted both the popularity and competitiveness of graduate school admissions. Based on these data, for example, clinical Ph.D. programs received 18,392 applications during 2001–2. From this pool, only 10.5 percent of these applicants were accepted. Clinical Psy.D. programs had 4,982 applications and 40.8 percent were accepted, and for master's degree clinical programs, 4,218 applications and 49.4 percent were accepted. Clinical psychology remains the most popular degree for Ph.D. and Psy.D. applications, and clinical is second only to counseling psychology in master's degree applications. By the way, students interested in the clinical Ph.D. usually have to do better than the 3.5 GPA alluded to earlier – because of competitiveness, GPA cutoffs as high as 3.8 or 3.9 are not uncommon.

Professional Development Opportunities for Students

Many different professional development opportunities exist for students outside of the standard curriculum and the classroom. What are these professional development opportunities, and how can we maximize student benefits?

Research Assistant (RA)

Research assistantships provide students with opportunities to assist faculty in a research program. There are many advantages to serving as an RA, such as (a) acquiring skills and knowledge not easily gained in the classroom, (b) contributing to the advancement of psychology, (c) using general research techniques helpful for pursuing later graduate work, (d) practicing written and oral communication skills by preparing for and attending

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professional conferences and preparing and submitting manuscripts for publication, and (e) cultivating a mentoring relationship with a faculty member that will be helpful for acquiring strong letters of recommendation.

Davis (1995) highlighted the advantages for faculty members in their research collaboration with students: (a) witnessing student professional growth and development, (b) keeping current in the literature, (c) keeping analytic skills fine-tuned and active through the design and completion of research, (d) generating meaningful empirical data, (e) maintaining and expanding professional networks through attending conventions, especially for students, and (f) enhancing effectiveness as a teacher through active involvement in research.

Although the RA–faculty collaboration is often a positive experience, problems can arise. Slattery and Park (2002) described strategies to help faculty avoid problems in research collaboration: meet students regularly, mentor student researchers in whatever way possible, train students carefully for tasks given to them, and choose student researchers carefully. Research collaboration is a serious commitment by both student and faculty – you should carefully nurture this relationship and monitor progress toward research and learning goals.

Teaching Assistant (TA)

Serving as a TA is usually much less involved and time-consuming than being an RA. Usually, a TA helps a faculty member for one semester in the administration of a specific course, such as Introduction to Psychology. Responsibilities of teaching assistants differ depending on the instructor and course – these duties might include attending class, holding office hours, and assisting the faculty member in grading. The teaching assistantship is an excellent way for students to build a mentoring relationship with a faculty member, and it is a fairly low-risk activity. Sometimes working with an instructor as a TA can lead to other opportunities such as a research assistantship.

Internship

The internship experience provides a realistic job tryout. Students learn about the type of environment they would work in and the type of economic support they might receive. Although many students have a positive internship experience, some students come back from an internship with the conclusion, “I do not want to do that for a career.” That is valuable information! Although it is unfortunate that the student did not have a more positive experience, it is better to have an unsatisfying 16-week internship experience than pursue a career that leads to miserable employment.

Internships have many benefits – I have culled descriptions of these benefits from various sources (Jessen, 1988; Mount Saint Vincent University, 1998; University of Michigan at Dearborn, 1998): (a) practical, on-the-job experience; (b) development of professional and personal confidence, responsibility, and maturity; (c) understanding the realities of the work world and the acquisition of human-relations skills; (d) the opportunity

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to examine a career choice closely and make professional contacts; (e) the chance to test the ideas learned in the classroom out in the field; and (f) learning what careers not to pursue. Internships can be a strong complement to classroom learning, and provide a chance for students to explore potential career avenues.

Senior Thesis

At many colleges and universities, undergraduates have the opportunity to complete a senior thesis project (sometimes it is required). What is the difference between an RA position and a senior thesis? Generally speaking, as RAs, students assist in faculty research. Students might make some suggestions and put their own "spin" on the research, but the research program essentially belongs to the faculty member. For a senior thesis project, students are the principle investigators, and own the research; the faculty member serves as advisor. Often, in a senior thesis project the student gets to test his or her own research ideas. With careful planning and the proper supervision, students can make this project into something that will help them stand out from the crowd, perhaps leading to a conference presentation (or publication or both), and help build rapport with a faculty member.

Psi Chi

Psi Chi, the National Honor Society in Psychology (www.psichi.org), was founded in 1929 for the purpose of encouraging, stimulating, and maintaining excellence in scholarship in psychology students, and for the advancement of psychology. Psi Chi membership is conferred on students who have met minimum qualifications at institutions where there is a chapter (not all students can be members). Involvement in your local chapter can lead to opportunities to develop leadership skills. At major regional and national conferences held each year, Psi Chi has an important presence in promoting the scholarly achievements of students. Psi Chi has a long tradition of providing student-friendly programming at these conferences. Even if your institution does not have a Psi Chi chapter, there may be a psychology club available (or think about helping students start one). Usually, these clubs are open to anyone with an interest in psychology, and members do not have to be psychology majors. Often, students who are unable to join Psi Chi (e.g., low GPA) can be active and involved as members of a local psychology club. Becoming active in student organizations such as Psi Chi can help students to network and make connections that lead to additional professional development opportunities, such as working with faculty members.

Conclusion

With over 70,000 new psychology graduates each year, competition for the best jobs in the workforce, as well as the competition for graduate-school admissions, is powerful.

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For long-term success, students must be more than good “book” students earning high grades; these students need to develop a well-rounded set of skills and abilities that provides the best chances of success. Faculty members can promote student professional development by providing meaningful outside-of-class activities such as those highlighted in this chapter. There are clear benefits to the faculty member in working with students in a variety of areas. Thus, both faculty and students benefit when teaching and learning continue outside the classroom.

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Handbook of the Teaching of Psychology

Edited by

William Buskist and Stephen F. Davis



 **Blackwell**
Publishing

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William Buskist and Stephen F. Davis

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Handbook of the teaching of psychology / edited by William Buskist and Stephen F. Davis.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-3204-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-3204-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-3801-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-3801-7 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Psychology—Study and teaching. I.
Buskist, William. II. Davis, Stephen F.

BF77.H268 2005
150'.71'1—dc22

2005014828

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10.5/12.5pt Adobe Garamond
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Great Britain
by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

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policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary
chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board
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