

Pragmatic Suggestions for Improving Psychology's Perceived Relevance for Non-majors: Comment on Dutke et al., 2019

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In an effort to improve psychology's public image and perceived relevance for students pursuing other professions, the EFPA Board of Education Affairs (Dutke et al., 2019) recommends that psychology curricula for non-psychology majors emphasize how psychological concepts are directly applicable to the needs and work processes of the specific professions that students are pursuing. In the United States of America, we have heard similar concerns expressed in the past (e.g., Benjamin, 1986) and present (e.g., Ferguson, 2015; Lilienfeld, 2012) not only from non-majors but also directed towards those who major in psychology. A recent candidate for U.S. President suggested college students should consider majors other than psychology with better employment prospects (Diluna, 2015), and members of the State University System of Florida Board of Governors wondered publicly if there were too many psychology majors (Halonen, 2011). Landrum (2018) argues that, compared to students who pursue highly specialized degree programs such as nursing or architecture, psychology baccalaureates who enter the workforce immediately after graduation often perceive less alignment between their major and their jobs. Although psychology is one of the most popular undergraduate majors in the U.S., with 1.2 to 1.6 million students registering for introductory psychology each year (Gurung et al., 2016), we believe that educators of psychology have not adequately showcased the utility of the discipline not only for non-majors but also for psychology baccalaureates who directly

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enter the workforce (Halonen, 2013). In the U.S., we now refer to this group as “workforce psychology graduates.”

In an ideal world where resources are not constrained, the model proposed by Dutke et al. (2019) would probably enhance public understanding of the discipline of psychology. However, our collective experiences at institutions in the U.S. lead us to suggest that there would be opposition to the implementation of the proposed model. We expect that few departments of psychology would have the available funding, staffing, or personnel with the necessary interdisciplinary expertise to develop curricula tailored to specific content in more than a handful of non-psychology programs offered by their institutions. In addition, we are not aware of evidence indicating that this model would be the optimal way to persuade students pursuing non-psychology degrees of the value of psychology to their professional lives.

Many universities in the United States offer courses for non-majors, such as sections of introductory psychology and upper-level courses in psychology available to majors and non-majors. However, Gurung et al. (2016) argued that there appears to be no evidence for the necessity of offering separate sections of introductory psychology for majors and non-majors. A task force of the American Psychological Association (2014) recommended that psychology departments offer one introductory course with “the goal of providing nonmajors as well as majors an appreciation for the reach of psychological science into nearly every facet of human life” (p. 9). An author of this report, Cacioppo (2013) argued that the introductory psychology course should emphasize psychology as a hub science that has relevance to students’ personal and professional lives and to global problems such as social injustice, pollution, poverty, and climate change. We suggest that redesigning the introductory course in this way may be a more economically sensitive practice than tailoring courses to each discipline. Students enrolled in introductory psychology may benefit from having crisply defined outcomes that apply to their general professional development and to psychology’s role in addressing societal issues common to many disciplines.

One strategy that may address some of Dutke et al.’s (2019) concerns is to offer upper-level psychology courses for both psychology majors and non-majors that include active learning pedagogies, such as problem-based learning (e.g., Wiggins, Chiriac, Abbad, Pauli, & Worrell, 2016) designed to foster skills in psychological literacy applicable to professional contexts. For example, Zelechowski, Riggs Romaine, and Wolbransky (2017) offered sections of a course in psychology and law, some of which incorporated three experiential learning activities (e.g. participating in a mock jury selection, evaluating competence of a juvenile to stand trial, and providing mock expert testimony); students enrolled in the sections with experiential learning performed better on examination questions pertaining to those topics and expressed greater satisfaction with the course. If psychology educators focus on fostering psychological literacy and demonstrating to their students how psychology explains and resolves both professional and societal problems, then the positive impact on psychology’s reputation may follow.

Note. The views expressed here are those only of the authors and do not represent any organization, including the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division Two of the American Psychological Association).

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