
FACULTY FORUM

An Information Course for the Beginning Psychology Major

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Introduction to the Psychology Major is a course required for beginning psychology majors. Participants (N = 190) completed a pretest and posttest examining their knowledge and perceptions regarding course goals, such as PsycLIT database familiarity, career options with a bachelor's degree in psychology, curriculum requirements, and graduate school options. Statistically significant differences emerged for 18 of 21 questions. At posttest, students indicated less commitment to the psychology major. Those students who continue as psychology majors are better informed and more aware of the realities and opportunities in psychology.

Psychology is one of the most popular majors in the United States (Morgan, 1997); in 1997 to 1998, 73,972 students graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Conveying information that students need to make educated decisions about career options through faculty advising, freshman orientation, or departmental presentations can be challenging to advisors and professors (Dodson, Chastain, & Landrum, 1996). All students may benefit from a focused careers course; however, some universities achieve all of these goals without a specific course (Ware, 1986). For instance, Satterfield and Abramson (1998) described using an undergraduate psychology club as a method of communicating information about graduate school and obtaining employment.

About 70% of psychology majors do not attend graduate school, but instead enter the work force (Grocer & Kohout, 1997). Information about graduate school, career options, preparing a vita, and the benefits of research are not usually conveyed in traditional course work, which focuses only on specific content (Davis, 1988). Therefore, a comprehensive course designed specifically for psychology majors could be an effective method for communicating information to students (Dodson et al., 1996; Oles & Cooper, 1988). However, such required career courses are not usually part of the undergraduate curriculum. In fact, Landrum, Shoemaker, and Davis (2001) found that 34% of departments recently surveyed offered such a course. At our institution, however, similar "introduction to the major" type courses exist in theater, kinesiology, health sciences, communication, and education departments.

Past Research

Educators disagree as to when psychology majors should take an informational course. Kennedy and Lloyd (1998) found that a career course for sophomores helped students clarify their career plans. Conversely, a course designed specifically for juniors and seniors can be effective in informing students about career options in psychology, requirements of graduate school, the Graduate Record Examination, and how to write a résumé (Dodson et al., 1996; Ware, 1981, 1985; Ware & Beischel, 1979). Buskist (1999) described an upper level course specifically designed for preparing students for graduate study in psychology. Ware (1986) found that students are interested in learning about these topics. However, the fall or spring semester before graduation is often too late to implement relevant knowledge and skills before leaving school (Dodson et al., 1996; Murray, 1999). In response to student need, we designed this course for new psychology majors.

Although providing accurate information to psychology majors is an essential task of any department, students need encouragement to integrate their personal goals about career and life within the opportunities in psychology (Ware, 1986, 1988). Good advising, whether provided in a course or by faculty or peers, presents this task of integration as part of the advising process (Ware et al., 1993).

Course Overview

Introduction to the Psychology Major (IPM) is a required, freshman level, pass-fail course for 1 credit hour that meets once a week for 50 min. We designed the course for prospective and current majors. Transfer students must also take the course. The class provides students with strategies for success as an undergraduate student and psychology major and with information to eliminate misconceptions about career options (Murray, 1999). IPM delivers career-related information in a relaxed, low-stress atmosphere and gives students information to make an initial assessment about what they want to do following graduation and whether psychology is a "good fit" for their interests, values, and aptitudes. It also introduces American Psychological Association writing guidelines, salary figures for psychology-related jobs, ethics of psychology, and benefits of research. IPM is similar to a course proposed by Davis (1988) for upper level undergraduate and graduate students; however, IPM is specifically for beginning college students. In this research, we evaluated changes in students' knowledge and perceptions after presentation of course-related information.

Method

Participants

Students (141 women, 48 men) enrolled in IPM in Fall 1998, Spring 1999, and Fall 1999 ($N = 190$) at a university near the Pacific Northwest participated (one student did not report gender). Ages ranged from 18 to 50 years ($M = 23.74$, $SD = 6.6$). A majority (89.5%) identified themselves as White/Caucasian; the other 10.5% were Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Asian American/Pacific Islander.

Materials

An original questionnaire assessed this course's learning objectives and goals. The first question asked whether participants were psychology majors. The next 20 questions concerned the current level of knowledge and perceptions on specific topics. Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*; see Table 1). Students also provided their name, social security number, age, gender, year in school, and ethnic background. Students included their name to receive

attendance credit and to allow for matching of responses from pretest to posttest.

Procedure

Students completed the questionnaire at the first and last class meeting. On average, students completed the questionnaire in 10 to 15 min.

Results

We collapsed the data across semesters for all analyses. We conducted a chi-square analysis on IPM data examining the first question "Are you a psychology major?" between the beginning and the end of the semester. The results of the chi-square were statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 128) = 19.81$, $p < .001$. Seven students were not psychology majors at the beginning or end of the semester; 5 changed their answers from *no* to *yes*, 12 changed from *yes* to *no*, and 104 students answered *yes* at both times.

We performed a paired *t* test for pretest and posttest scores. Significant differences emerged for 17 questions (see Table 1). Of these, with the exception of four questions, all

Table 1. Pretest and Posttest Results for All Semesters for Introduction to the Psychology Major

Questions	Pretest		Posttest		t Value
	M	SD	M	SD	
I feel prepared for any type of post-BA/BS career.	3.30	1.1	3.45	0.9	-1.23
I know the information necessary to apply for graduate programs in psychology.	2.51	1.1	4.18	0.7	-15.34**
I am certain I will be able to work in a psychology-related job.	3.89	0.9	3.89	1.0	0.06
I understand the course requirements for the psychology major at this university.	4.06	0.9	4.69	0.6	-6.74**
I am familiar with the jobs a B.A./B.S.-level psychologist can earn.	3.07	0.9	4.30	0.7	-11.80**
I feel prepared to apply for graduate school	2.49	1.1	3.23	1.1	-6.18**
I understand the requirements for the psychology minor at this university.	3.45	1.1	4.48	0.8	-9.13**
I know about the opportunities in psychology that I can experience outside of the classroom.	2.96	1.0	4.30	0.7	-13.08**
I am committed to the psychology major.	4.21	0.9	3.98	1.3	2.12*
I know how to find information about psychology on the Internet.	3.40	1.1	4.23	0.8	-7.69**
I understand the importance of math and science in psychology.	3.83	0.8	4.45	0.7	-7.02**
I know how to find information about psychology using PsycLIT on CD-ROM.	2.35	1.2	4.24	0.9	-16.02**
I have a good understanding of the study skills needed for success in college.	4.36	0.7	4.48	0.7	-1.51
I am familiar with the type of careers graduates from this program have attained.	3.15	1.0	4.29	0.8	-10.62**
I understand the ethical implications of studying psychology and doing psychological research.	3.69	0.9	4.27	0.85	-5.69**
Letters of recommendation are an important part of the post-BA/BS process.	4.10	0.9	4.78	0.6	-7.57**
I understand some of the disciplines related to psychology.	3.77	0.7	4.32	0.7	-6.61**
After this course, I think I'll still be interested in majoring in psychology.	4.30	0.8	4.06	1.3	2.06*
I want a career that is psychology-related.	4.40	0.8	4.06	1.2	3.28**
Which term best reflects your current feeling toward being a psychology major?	4.50	0.6	4.22	1.1	2.95*

Note. $N = 190$. Based on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*moderately disagree*), 3 (*uncertain*), 4 (*moderately agree*), to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale used for the last question ranged from 1 (*very negative*), 2 (*somewhat negative*), 3 (*uncertain*), 4 (*somewhat positive*), to 5 (*very positive*).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

t values were negative, indicating a rise in agreement with those statements. The four questions with positive *t* values were "I am committed to the psychology major," "After this course, I think I'll still be majoring in psychology," "I want a career that is psychology-related," and "Which term best reflects your current feeling toward being a psychology major?"

Discussion

The findings indicate IPM may be a valuable course for students and support the results of Kennedy and Lloyd (1998), who found that having a psychology information course designed especially for beginning students was beneficial. IPM was effective at addressing student concerns and raising student awareness about many different dimensions of the psychology profession on many different levels.

The results of the *t* tests suggest that on most items, students indicated more knowledge and familiarity about certain objectives. On questions relating to the certainty of being a psychology major, students showed some indecision. This outcome supports the chi-square results in that some students questioned their choice of major. Although this course may raise doubt for some students, we suggest that those who do decide to continue in the field may be more committed than before because they now have more knowledge of the opportunities and limitations. We acknowledge, however, that IPM is just one of many variables critical to the lengthy process of choosing and completing a major.

Although similar to some approaches (e.g., Kennedy & Lloyd, 1998), our approach to the content of the IPM course varies from others. Many universities communicate this information late in the students' academic career (e.g., Buskist, 1999; Davis, 1988; Dodson et al., 1996); such timing may occur too late for students to make informed choices about the major. Thus, our course is a freshman-level required course. Another approach is through voluntary means, such as psychology club activities (Satterfield & Abramson, 1998). Again, the IPM approach allows us to expose every student in the major to this critical information; the club approach may work at other universities, but we have found it less effective at our university.

IPM could be an effective way for psychology departments to introduce a large amount of information to their beginning students as well as provide an opportunity to gauge opinions about the discipline. Educational resources are often limited and the complexities of adding a new course can be rigorous. As a 1 credit hour pass-fail course, IPM would not cause substantial economic hardship to a department or university. The presence of a course similar to IPM could be part of an overall intervention process of educating students about their needs as psychology majors. Other methods of informing students remain a valuable way of conveying information; however, a course such as IPM could be a complementary addition to these existing resources.

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Note

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