

Maximizing Undergraduate Opportunities

THE VALUE OF RESEARCH AND OTHER EXPERIENCES

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If you are a regular reader of Eye on Psi Chi, odds are that you already know that you need to get involved outside the classroom to obtain the full range of skills and abilities you need to be successful in psychology. These experiences are invaluable to you whether you are going to graduate school or not. This article directly addresses such opportunities as research and teaching assistantships, field experiences and internships, and getting involved in organizations such as Psi Chi and your local psychology club.

THESE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES give you an opportunity to increase your skills in applying the psychological principles you are learning in the classroom. Also, reading about research results and being involved in collecting data and actually doing research are different. By being involved, you give your psychology faculty more opportunities to get to know you and become familiar with your professional abilities and potential, perhaps leading to strong letters of recommendation. Whether you're looking for a job with your bachelor's degree or looking for admission into graduate school, you need to be competitive. If you can take advantage of some of the opportunities presented in this article, you'll be well on your way to achieving a competitive edge. Remember, each year over 70,000 students in the United States receive their bachelor's degree in psychology—what will you do to stand out from the crowd and gain the competitive edge?

Perhaps the best source for opportunities in your department is to consult with the faculty and fellow students in your department. Since your department is

going to be the source of most of the opportunities, start there. Some students in psychology are shy or reluctant to approach faculty about the opportunities available; while you may be uncomfortable in approaching faculty members, the reality is that you must conquer this fear in order to reap the benefits of your undergraduate education. Course work is important, and good grades are very important, but you'll need to be more than a good "book student" in order to be successful in psychology. I would strongly suggest that you consider serving as a research assistant for at least one member of your psychology department.

Research Assistantships

What is a research assistantship? It is an opportunity for undergraduate students to assist a faculty member (or members) in a program of research. When you serve as a research assistant (RA), you'll actually be involved in *doing* research rather than reading about it in a textbook or journal article. Typically you receive academic credit for serving as a research assistant; in limited cases, faculty may be

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able to offer you wages for serving as an RA. There are a number of advantages to serving as a research assistant:

- Acquisition of skills and knowledge not easily gained in the classroom
- Opportunity to work one-on-one with a faculty member
- Opportunity to contribute to the advancements of the science of psychology
- Exposure to general research techniques helpful for pursuing later graduate work
- Opportunity to practice written and oral communication skills by preparing for and attending professional conferences and preparing and submitting manuscripts for publication
- Cultivation of a mentoring relationship with a faculty member that will be helpful for acquiring letters of recommendation

What does a research assistant do? This is best answered by asking the faculty member directly. Although the answers will vary, the following list describes some of the general tasks and duties that you may be asked to perform:

- Administer study sessions with research participants (this procedure is called data collection, or "running subjects").
- Score and/or code the collected data, and enter them into a spreadsheet (e.g., Excel) or statistical analysis program (e.g., SPSS).
- Conduct literature searches using

resources like *PsycINFO* and Social Sciences Citation Index; search your local library database for books and periodicals; make copies of articles available; order unavailable resources through interlibrary loan.

Work with the faculty member to develop new research ideas. Often these ideas are developed from research just completed, the need that arises from a particular situation, or reviews of the existing literature.

Attend lab meetings with other undergraduate research assistants, discuss research ideas, collaborate on projects. Use word processing, spreadsheet, scheduling, and statistical analysis programs to perform research-related tasks.

- Work on project outcomes so they can be submitted for presentations at local or regional conferences, prepare abstracts. If accepted, work on poster or oral presentations of the research materials for presentation at professional conferences.

Collaborate with faculty members to submit work to an appropriate journal to share the results with the scientific community.

Your commitment to serve as a research assistant is substantial—you will be given some responsibility to see that the research gets done. It is a serious commitment that should not be taken lightly. By watching you complete tasks and by observing you take on more and more responsibility, your faculty mentor will have plenty of good things to write about in those letters of recommendation. If you don't take the commitment seriously, if you make repeated mistakes on important tasks, then the recommendations the faculty member can make will be weakened. (*Important tip:* You know how students talk about the faculty, right? Well, faculty talk about students. You may sour the pool of faculty from which to draw if you do an incredibly poor job for one faculty member—we talk too!)

So I've convinced you that becoming a research assistant is a good idea. How do you get involved as a research assistant? Here are some suggestions:

Look at the listing of departmental faculty and explore their research interests. If you *really* want to impress a faculty member, do a *PsycINFO* search on them (i.e., an author search), find out what they have published, and read one or two of those articles. Then mention that you've

done this while meeting with the faculty member. They will be impressed—trust me.

- Then, make appointments with faculty members, preferably during their posted office hours, to discuss research possibilities. (*Another important tip:* Faculty are quirky. They may want you to e-mail them first, they may want a separate appointment to talk about research, or they may only want to talk about research during their office hours. Try to figure out the quirks ahead of time by talking to other students.)
- When you meet with the faculty members, be yourself. Let them know that you are willing to work hard on their program of research. Ask them about the specific requirements that they expect from their research assistants. You'll want to know about the duration of the project, what your responsibilities will be, grading practices, weekly time commitment, etc. Also, what length of commitment is the faculty member looking for? Some may want RA help only for a semester, some will ask for a one-year commitment, and some may want longer. Some may want you to have completed certain courses, such as Statistical Methods, Research Methods, or Experimental Design. You might need to think and plan ahead in order to work with particular faculty members.
- Remember, you are making a commitment to the faculty member, and the faculty member is making a commitment to you. Do not take this commitment lightly.

If you have the opportunity, try to get involved as a research assistant. If you do

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not have the opportunity, try to create it. When you work with a faculty member on a research project, it is a mutually beneficial relationship. What does the faculty member get out of this relationship? He or she gets a hard-working, eager student to do some of the labor-intensive portions of any research project. Many faculty, especially those at institutions that do not have a graduate program in psychology, depend on undergraduate students to help further their own research agenda. If this research culture does not exist at your school, try to develop it. Find that student-friendly faculty member who realizes how important the research opportunity is to you, and chances are you'll find a way to collaborate on some sort of research project. What do faculty think students get from the research assistant experience? Former undergraduate student Lisa Nelsen and I surveyed faculty members in undergraduate psychology programs and asked faculty to rate the importance of 40 potential outcomes from serving as an RA (Landrum & Nelsen, in press). The top 10 most important outcomes faculty believe students reap from serving as an RA are (1) an opportunity to enhance critical thinking skills, (2) preparation for graduate school, (3) gaining an enthusiasm for the research process, (4) participation in the data collection process, (5) improving writing ability, (6) the ability to conduct literature searches, (7) developing a one-to-one relationship with a professor, (8) influencing decisions about attending graduate school or not, (9) having the ability to ask effective research questions, and (10) seeing the research process from beginning to end. Faculty value working with students in this capacity.

diversity, measuring grade inflation, student retention, learning materials, etc. He has made over 100 professional presentations at conferences and published over 25 professional articles in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals. He is the coeditor and author of two chapters in *Protecting Human Subjects: Departmental Subject Pools and Institutional Review Boards* (1999, APA Books), author of *A Guide to Teaching Introductory Psychology* (1998, Harcourt Brace), and *Introduction to Psychology: A General Guidebook* (2nd ed., 1997, Kendall-Hunt), and lead author of *The Psychology Major: Career Options and Strategies for Success* (2000, Prentice Hall).

He is a member of the American Psychological Association, the Midwestern Psychological Association, the American Society for Training and Development, the Idaho Academy of Science, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and is a Fellow of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division Two). He recently completed his two-year term as national president of the Council of Teachers of Undergraduate Psychology.

Teaching Assistantships

It is important to realize that there are other opportunities that may be available to you as an undergraduate that will help you maximize your skills and abilities and help you achieve that competitive edge. What about being a teaching assistant? Serving as a teaching assistant is typically much less involved and time-consuming than being a research assistant. Usually, a teaching assistant helps a faculty member for one semester (or term) in the administration of a specific course, such as Introduction to Psychology or Statistical Methods. You might have a number of different responsibilities as a teaching assistant, depending on the instructor, the course, the history of the institution in utilizing teaching assistants, etc. Below is a list of some of the tasks you might be asked to do:

- Attend class and take notes so that students have a resource available to get notes when they miss class.
- Hold office hours during which you may conduct tutoring sessions, review notes with students, review class assignments before they are due, and answer class-related questions.
- Help to proctor exams, help to grade exams and/or term papers, and help to enter these scores in the instructor's grade book.
- Hold general review sessions prior to tests where groups of students can receive supplemental instruction regarding course-related topics.
- Help the instructor in the general administration and completion of the course to provide the best experience possible for enrolled students.

The teaching assistantship is an excellent way to build a mentoring relationship with a faculty member. Almost certainly during the course of the semester, a situation will occur where you can step in and provide some real assistance to a faculty member teaching a course. These are the types of events that faculty members will be thankful for and may write about in a letter of recommendation. Also, many of our students tell us that sitting in on the general psychology course is a great study strategy when they prepare for the GRE Advanced Test in Psychology. There are significant benefits for those who serve as a teaching assistant. If you are faced with a choice of serving as a research assistant or as a teaching assistant, try to do both. You'll be busy, but you'll gain valuable skills, abilities, and knowledge for your future.

Field Experiences and Internships

Field experiences and internships are opportunities to learn about and apply psychological principles outside the classroom and in the field. These placements are in agencies that relate to some aspect of human behavior—hence, you can imagine that many places are possible internship sites. They also differ from teaching and research assistantships in that a nonfaculty member at the placement site typically supervises field experiences. A faculty member usually serves as the campus coordinator of the field experience or internship program. In some instances, if an internship opportunity is not available to meet your needs, you may be able to arrange your own specialized internship.

What are the benefits of participating in an internship? The following list was compiled from Jessen (1988), Mount Saint Vincent University (1998), and the University of Michigan at Dearborn (1998):

- Practical, on-the-job experience
- Development of professional and personal confidence, responsibility, and maturity
- Understanding of the realities of the work world
- Acquisition of human relations skills
- Opportunity to examine a career choice closely and make professional contacts
- Opportunity to test the ideas learned in the classroom out in the field
- Opportunity to make contacts with potential employers
- Enhancement of classroom experiences
- Learning what careers not to pursue
- Development of skills that are difficult to learn and practice in the classroom
- College credit
- Possible earnings to help offset college expenses

How do you find out about field experiences and internships? There is probably a key faculty member in your department who makes sure that internship sites are suitable, establishes the policies and procedures for working with agencies, ensures that grades are submitted on time, handles inquiries from internship supervisors, etc. Find that person. Most departments have some well-established connections with agencies in and around your community; if you want to do something where the relationship is not established, you may have to do more of the groundwork yourself. This latter approach gives you the chance to show

some initiative and really demonstrate to your internship site your willingness to work hard and persevere at the task.

What will you do as an intern? Ideally, you'll get a realistic glimpse of the types of tasks necessary for success in a particular office or agency. Where appropriate, you will have the opportunity to acquire new skills and hone those that you already have. Internships are not designed to provide agencies with extra office staff or gophers, although you may occasionally be asked to help pitch in when agencies are under time and budget constraints. Although you might not be running a group therapy session, you might sit in on such a session and help facilitate that session under the supervision of appropriately trained and licensed personnel. In addition to these tasks, there may be group supervisory sessions if your site has multiple interns, and your on-campus faculty internship coordinator may ask that you keep a weekly journal of your intern experiences (Jessen, 1988).

Although most students have an invigorating internship experience, we have known some students who come back from an internship with the conclusion "I definitely do not want to do that for my entire career." This decision is a very valuable outcome of the internship process. Although it is unfortunate that the student didn't enjoy the internship process, it is better to have an unsatisfying 16-week internship experience than to go to a graduate program to get a degree to enter a job that leads to misery.

Organizational Involvement

The opportunities discussed in this chapter (research assistant, teaching assistant, field experience, and internship) all focus on skill and ability development. Organizational involvement also provides the chance to enhance knowledge about the discipline and to find opportunities to network within it. On a regional or national level you can become involved in organizations designed for students, and/or join organizations (as a student affiliate) designed for psychology professionals.

The best-known organization explicitly designed for psychology students is Psi Chi, the National Honor Society in Psychology (www.psichi.org). Psi Chi has grown into an impressive organization benefiting students on many levels. Involvement in your local chapter can lead to opportunities to develop leadership skills, and Psi Chi members are often the most involved and well-connected psychology students around. On the regional and national levels, Psi Chi has various

offerings. At major regional and national conferences held each year, Psi Chi has an important presence in promoting the scholarly achievements of undergraduate psychology students. Psi Chi has a long tradition of providing student-friendly programming at these conferences. Yes, this author was a Psi Chi member as an undergraduate and also chapter president (sounds like the Hair Club for Men!). There may also be a psychology club on campus. 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 can be active and involved as members of the local psychology club. On campuses where both groups exist, they often coordinate activities and opportunities for the benefit of all students interested in psychology.

One last recommendation is that you get involved in activities in your own

department! Often during the academic year your department may sponsor guest speakers, or faculty members may participate in some sort of colloquium series. As a student, you want your faculty to be supportive of your efforts; you also need to be supportive of the faculty.

Attending such presentations also gives you a chance to hear about faculty research, which might interest you and lead to an opportunity to serve as a research assistant. Perhaps hearing about research being conducted at a local homeless shelter might inspire you to think about an internship opportunity. Attending these departmental events shows your commitment to psychology and your general interest in the happenings of the department. Taking advantage of the opportunities highlighted in this article should lead to a more well-rounded education and give you the skills, abilities, and knowledge to make

you more marketable with your bachelor's degree and better qualified as a candidate for graduate school. It's up to you to seize the opportunity—now go make it happen! ☺

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE—

Psi Chi and September 11

◀ 4 families and individuals cope with the suffering associated with the war on terrorism.

Regarding research scholarship, below I've highlighted some possible research questions Psi Chi members might ask. Keep in mind that you do not need access to terrorists or terrorist organizations to conduct research on processes relevant to terrorist ideology, terrorist behavior, or the impact of terrorist attacks or threats. At my institution, for instance, for research purposes we generally do not have access to clinical populations, such as persons who are depressed or who have an eating disorder. However, our students are able to investigate relevant processes in nonclinical samples of students. It is therefore possible to study a normal range of dysphoric mood or dieting behavior in samples of normal college students. The same principle applies as you think of research questions that might be relevant to the terrorist attacks. Here are a few examples:

- Are there ways to reduce ethnic and religious stereotyping in the wake of the September 11th events?
- What factors lead a person to behave altruistically or selflessly, as we saw during the events surrounding and following the attacks?
 - What aspects of the situation put some students at risk for developing anxiety symptoms related to the terrorist attacks?

- What personal characteristics put some students at risk for developing these symptoms?
- Have the September 11th attacks affected student performance in the classroom?
- Is it possible to develop PTSD or have related symptoms by simply watching television accounts of the events?
- In a climate of justifiable anger and the desire to retaliate, what personal or situational factors make it more likely for someone to practice forgiveness?
- What personal or situational factors make people more or less likely to contribute to charitable causes?

- Does the construct of patriotism predict behaviors, such as giving blood or donating to charities?

At this point, you might be asking yourself if it seems adequate or appropriate to approach the September 11th tragedy with a purely empirical attitude and a list of research questions. Aren't there very real issues of human suffering that require a more immediate response to help alleviate this pain? The answer is most certainly a resounding "yes!" Like many of you, I have been moved by the spirit of compassion that we have seen in countless acts of selflessness or care for others in need.

As one way to respond with compassion, my Psi Chi chapter joined with others around the country by raising money to contribute to a charitable organization. Our chapter contributed to the United Way of New York City September 11th Fund (the toll-free number is 1-800-710-8002), a suggestion offered by Dr. Vincent Prohaska, the faculty advisor at Lehman College, CUNY, and the recipient of the 2001 Denmark National Faculty Advisor Award. At Dr. Prohaska's suggestion, Psi Chi identified contributing to this fund as one of this year's possible service projects. Your chapter may have found other ways to respond to these events.

If your chapter has not yet taken on a service project for the year, I encourage you to do so. Combining an empirical attitude with care and compassion seems like a powerful response to events like those of September 11, 2001. ☺

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features
Psi Chi chapter
accounts of
service projects and
fundraisers for
September 11th
relief efforts.*