

Majoring in Psychology

According to Emeritus Professor Julian Hochberg of Columbia University, psychology is “one of the most popular majors in the country, with good reason.” Professor Hochberg points out that psychology is related to many other fields. It is a science, depending on and informing physics, physiology, biochemistry, and so on. It is related to the humanities because it depends on different philosophies, learns from and guides human interaction, and tells us how to deal with one another. It influences many other professions, from standards like ophthalmology and audiology to new fields like virtual reality. It helps decision makers make plans for the military, schools, and hospitals.

As a science, psychology studies the behavior and mental processes of both humans and animals. From these studies, psychologists hope to better understand, predict, and possibly change not only behavior, but also mental processes (for instance, help someone learn to overcome the fear of math tests).

In addition, psychology has many subdivisions and specializations, making it a more complex field than many realize. Areas of specialization include behavioral neuroscience, cognitive, clinical, educational, social, developmental, organizational, psychometrics, and statistics.

This chapter starts by looking at some general things to consider when choosing a major. You want to make sure that psychology, for instance, is a good fit for your skills, abilities, and interests. The chapter

then covers what to expect if you do decide on a major in psychology. What courses will you take? What subjects will you study? What options will you have in selecting classes? Finally, the chapter will explore the job outlook for psychology majors.

Choosing a Major

You know what you like, what you are good at, and what interests you. While you may need to do some soul-searching and even seek outside advice, you are in the best position to make the decision of the best major for you. To help you make this decision, consider what issues are important to you, what resources can provide additional information, and what pitfalls to avoid. Let's start by debunking some myths about picking a major.

THE MYTHS OF CHOOSING A MAJOR

Look at the following statements and see how many you agree with:

- ◆ Everyone but you knows exactly what major—and career—they want.
- ◆ Your major determines (and limits) your career choices.
- ◆ You'll just “know” (via a magical sign or omen or dream) what your major should be.
- ◆ You should consider the advice of everyone when deciding on a major.
- ◆ You are limited to one major.

All of the preceding statements aren't true. To start, most students don't know what they want to major in; they struggle with this decision as much as you do. Even if they have declared a major, they may be unsure about their choice. Second, your major and your career are not the same thing. Take a look at the list of famous people and what they studied in school (see next page).

As for waiting for the magic sign, it's better to take practical steps (covered next). And while it's okay to solicit the help of others, everyone

Famous People and What They Studied in School

Celebrity	Career	Major
Allen Greenspan	Federal Reserve Board Chairman	Music
Arnold Schwarzenegger	Governor of California and actor	Economics
David Duchovny	Actor	English
Gene Simmons	Singer in band KISS	Education
Hugh Hefner	Founder of <i>Playboy</i> magazine	Psychology
Isaiah Thomas	Basketball coach and former player	Criminal Justice
Janet Reno	Former U.S. Attorney General	Chemistry
Jay Leno	Late-night talk show host	Philosophy
Jodie Foster	Actress	English
John Cleese	Comedian and Monty Python founder	Law
Kurt Vonnegut	Author	Anthropology
Lisa Kudrow	Actress	Biology
Michael Jordan	Professional basketball player	Geography
Mick Jagger	Singer in band The Rolling Stones	Economics
Paul Newman	Actor	English
Robin Williams	Actor	Sociology
Steve Martin	Actor and author	Philosophy
Thurgood Marshall	Supreme Court Justice	Dentistry
Tiger Woods	Professional golfer	Economics
Walter Peyton	Professional football player	Special Education

* Sources for this list include www.Indiana.edu, www.Marietta.edu, and Encarta.msn.com.

will have an opinion, but only *you* know what's best for you. Finally, you aren't limited to one area of study. Often students have multiple interests, and colleges offer many ways to incorporate your interests into other fields, the most common being minoring in another subject, choosing to get a double-major, or even adapting your own special "major" (offered by some schools).

Also, if you find yourself in the wrong major, you can switch majors. Keep in mind that the farther along you are in your college coursework and the type of major you switch to will affect how many credits will transfer toward the new major. (For information on switching majors, check with your academic adviser.) You want to make sure that you are switching for a good reason, that you have now selected a major that *is* a good fit for you, and that you understand how switching affects your current coursework and standings.

Now that you know some of the real “truth” about picking a major, let’s look at some of the resources you can use to help you decide on your major.

HOW TO DECIDE

When determining what major you should pursue, consider these guidelines:

1. Look at your interests. What do you like to do? What are your hobbies? How do you like to spend your time? What extracurricular activities did you participate in? What have you enjoyed most? What were your favorite subjects in school? What recurring skills have played a role in your success? When you fantasize about your ideal career, what are you doing?
2. Consider your abilities. Think about your natural talents. What do others say you are good at? Consider how your abilities align with your interests. If you have great talent in an area, but zero interest, choosing a major based on your abilities isn’t going to make you happy. Likewise, if you have great interest in a topic, but zero ability, your choice of a major will be limited.
3. Reflect on your values. What do you value? Financial success? Spirituality? Helping others? Saving the environment? If your career and study choices are in conflict with your values, you will have problems. On the other hand, if you choose a major (and then career) that are in alignment with what you value, you will improve your chances of happiness.
4. Think about what it takes to make it in this major and whether you have what it takes. Do you have the skills? Motivation? Ability? Does the major require an advanced degree? Internships? Will you

be able to complete any “extra” requirements? Think not only about the academic challenges, but also about the financial costs and requirements.

5. Look at the career opportunities in this field; this topic is covered in detail in Chapter 6. You might check out the research section of your library for publications, such as the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. This resource explains the requirements, salaries, and typical tasks of a number of jobs. You can also find links to this resource online at Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov).
6. Honestly assess your reasons for picking a major. If you choose a major because it's a good way to meet girls, bad idea. If you choose a major simply because you've heard it's “easy,” not a good reason. If you choose a major because you think it has great money potential, wrong answer. If you choose to become an engineering major because your dad was an engineering major, are you choosing based on your preference or your dad's? If you are pressured by your family or peers, you'll end up unhappy. If you just need to pick something, you'll likely make a bad choice. If you choose a major because a job market is currently hot, wrong reason again. What is the right reason(s) then? You should pick your major based on your interests and abilities.

Steven Rothberg, president of Minneapolis-based CollegeRecruiter.com, recommends that students not focus on compensation or employment rate when picking a major. Instead he says, “If they focus on what they're good at, what they like to do, and what's important to them, there's an excellent chance that they will end up in a job upon graduation that will make them happy.”

RESOURCES

While you don't want to allow someone else to make your decisions for you, you do have several resources to narrow or confirm your choice. These additional resources include:

- ◆ Talking to school counselors (both at your high school and at prospective colleges).

- ◆ Using Internet resources such as interest and personality testing (covered in the appendix).
- ◆ Checking your potential college for resources. Some colleges provide aptitude testing to help students decide on a major. Indiana University/Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), for instance, publishes a booklet “Step Ahead to Your Future: A guide to choosing majors & careers” (IUPUI, University College Advising Center and Career Center). This step-by-step guide asks students to focus on themselves and indicate areas of interest. From this self-assessment, students determine their interest themes, skill preferences, and personality type. Armed with this information, they can then target specific majors (and careers) that match their assessment. Finally, they are asked to explore and determine a realistic picture of the careers and majors they have targeted of areas of interest.
- ◆ Taking advantage of the workshops and online information offered by some schools.
- ◆ Trying the online personality or character testing some schools offer to provide guidance on choosing a major.
- ◆ Taking advantage of internships or volunteer opportunities in your field.
- ◆ Talking to people who currently work in your field of interest.
- ◆ If you are already in college, taking classes in the potential major. While you don’t want to spend too many credit hours exploring majors, you can pick a few classes. You can also ask to sit in on classes (rather than formally enroll). As another option, review the syllabus and course materials for a class. Talk to professors who teach a class you might be interested in.

A Closer Look at a Psychology Major

Now that you know generally how to evaluate your choice of a major, let’s take a closer look at what you can expect from this major. First,

what type person is generally suited for this major? Second, what are the requirements for this major? What courses will you be taking? What skills will you develop? What are the challenges?

A QUICK SURVEY: IS PSYCHOLOGY RIGHT FOR YOU?

IUPUI provides a quick survey of questions to help you determine whether psychology might be a good major for you. The survey asks these questions:

- ◆ Are you social, investigative, or enterprising?
- ◆ Do you enjoy collecting and interpreting scientific data?
- ◆ Do you like learning about human (or animal) behavior?
- ◆ Would you like to interview, test, and/or observe people or animals?
- ◆ Do you like to listen to people?
- ◆ Do you enjoy helping people sort through personal problems?

If you answer yes to most of these questions, your personality is probably suited for a psychology major. If you answered no to most of them, you may want to consider other options or check your motivation for choosing psychology as a major.

WHAT CLASSES WILL I BE TAKING?

In general, as a psychology major, you can expect to take courses in experimental research, personality theory, social psychology, and statistics (for research processing), as well as courses on specific development or psychology issues such as sex, marriage, abnormal psychology, or teenage psychology.

Most undergraduate psychology departments require students to begin with an *introductory course*, designed to provide an overview of psychology's history and development, major theorists and their ideas, and the general methodology used. You'll take a selection of lecture courses (where you listen, read, and learn) and laboratory courses (where you get more hands-on experience).

Lecture courses offer a variety of options, allowing you to sample the breadth and depth of the field. If you already have an area of interest, you may opt for related courses of increasing intensity, such as those connected to child psychology, abnormal behavior, or the learning process. If you haven't chosen a focus area, you can use these courses to explore your options, sticking mostly to basic-level courses in several different subspecialties.

Laboratory courses are also required, giving you some hands-on experience and the opportunity to see for yourself the phenomena you've been hearing about from lecturers and reading about in your textbooks. In the lab, you may conduct experiments with people—including young children—or animals. In the process, you not only learn how your subjects learn or react to stimuli, but you also become familiar with ethical issues (especially concerning experiments with kids), the scientific method, and how to write proper lab reports. To ensure that you get a varied experience, some colleges classify lab courses into different groups, such as perception and cognition courses versus psychobiology and neuroscience courses, or courses involving human subjects versus those using animals, and so forth.

One class you might not think of as related to psychology is statistics. A *statistics* class can help you understand the results of the experiments you conduct and read about. You will learn how to set up statistical models for your research and “crunch the numbers,” using one of today's efficient software packages. (Statistics also pops up in other majors such as marketing.)

Some colleges also require psychology majors to take a course in *research methodology*. This course shows you how to structure experiments to get the most reliable and relevant results, as well as how to deal with the ethical concerns mentioned earlier.

Finally, senior and sometimes junior psychology majors take various *seminar*, *thesis*, and *discussion courses*, which can be very specialized and can give you the chance to discuss your own research, work closely with your professors who are doing ongoing studies, and even get some supervised experience on or off campus. For example, many universities have a clinic—or a cooperative relationship with a nearby institution—and can arrange for psychology students to work part-time with clients

or patients. These classes tend to be small, and often meet in a conference room rather than an auditorium, so that everyone present can meet face to face and participate equally.

Colleges may additionally require psychology majors to take related *courses in other academic departments*, allowing you to further explore a specific area of interest. For example:

- ◆ If you're interested in child psychology, you might take an education course.
- ◆ If you're interested in business psychology, you might take a business course or an advertising course.
- ◆ If you're interested in the psychology of women, you might take a women's studies class.
- ◆ If you're interested in working with a minority population, you might take a history course or a cultural studies course.
- ◆ If you're interested in treating people with brain injuries or conditions such as Alzheimer's disease, you might opt for classes in biology, chemistry, or pharmacology.
- ◆ If you're interested in how surroundings affect psychological well being, you might take an environmental course.
- ◆ If you're interested in alternative treatments used in other cultures, you might take an anthropology or sociology course.

A QUICK SUMMARY

The table on the next two pages lists some of the typical requirements for psychology majors. The requirements at your college may vary slightly.

GENERAL SKILLS

In addition to taking classes and learning specifically about psychology, this major also teaches and enhances other life skills. (And it's these same skills that prepare you for a variety of jobs within and outside of the psychology field.) For instance, Grinnell College in its overview of

Typical Requirements for Psychology Majors			
Requirement	Purpose of Requirement	When the Requirement Is Fulfilled	Typical Choices
Introductory course	To provide an overview of the field; a prerequisite for all other psychology courses	Usually freshman year	None (although different sections with different instructors and meeting times may be available)
Lecture courses	To gain a broader and more in-depth understanding of various disciplines within psychology	Throughout the college years	Child development, psychology of aging, learning process, human sexuality, abnormal psychology, industrial psychology, school psychology, counseling psychology, and so on
Laboratory courses	To practice experimental research, observe phenomena, and so on	Varies by school	Psychology of learning, cognitive psychology, perception, behavioral neuroscience, personality, social psychology, developmental psychology, and so on
Statistics course	To learn how to measure and interpret experimental results	Varies by school; sophomore year or later, after declaring major	Some schools offer one basic undergraduate course; others offer a choice of courses based on the statistical models used in different types of research

Research methodology course	To learn about the different types of experiments, how to design research for accuracy and reliability, and ethical issues	Varies by school; sophomore year or later, after declaring major	Some schools offer one basic undergraduate course; others offer a choice of courses based on different types of research experiments
Seminar, thesis, and discussion courses	To study a topic intensively, participate in advanced research, receive guidance and support for thesis, and so on	Mostly senior year, with some courses for juniors	Psychology and women, cultural psychology, infant behavior, human neuropsychology, neuropharmacology, animal cognition, motivation, psychology and law, stereotyping and prejudice, game theory, language perception, environmental psychology, supervised fieldwork and individual projects, and so on
Courses in other academic departments	To gain interdisciplinary understanding	Throughout the college years	Anthropology, art, biology, chemistry, dance, education, environmental studies, music, religion, sociology, women's studies, and so on

psychology talks about the school's focus on critical reading, critical thinking, sensible interpretation of data, oral and written presentation, and computer skills (www.web.grinnell.edu). All of these are transferable and valuable skills useful in a variety of fields.

The following abilities and skills are needed to succeed in psychology:

- ◆ Think critically
- ◆ Be analytical
- ◆ Draw from a wide variety of experiences
- ◆ Have a genuine interest or passion about psychology

George Mason University's psychology department (www.gmu.edu/departments/psychology) suggests the following two skill sets are required for psychology majors:

- ◆ Statistical, quantitative, and inferential-thinking skills
- ◆ Personal growth and knowledge of one's self and others

CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge to psychology students is realizing what psychology is and what it is not. Many psychology majors, for instance, are surprised at the emphasis on math, statistics, research, and other science-based skills. They expect the major to emphasize pop psychology topics such as personality testing.

Another challenge is choosing a direction among the many different paths. Possible areas or paths for a typical job as counselor or psychologist are listed on the next page.

Students who start out in psychology may not understand how difficult it is to become a psychologist or counselor (most require advanced degrees and certification). They are not prepared for the amount of schooling, training, and supervised work involved in becoming a psychologist or counselor.

Also, they may not realize that they are qualified for lots of jobs, within and outside of the area of psychology. The most successful psychology major will look at the opportunities early in his or her academic

<i>Specialty</i>	<i>Description</i>
Clinical	Treats mental and emotional problems
Community	Studies how people function at home, at school, and in the community
Counseling	Helps people cope
Developmental	Studies age-related changes and issues
Educational	Studies how people learn
Environmental	Looks at interaction between people and the physical environment
Experimental	Studies specific behavior problems
Industrial/Organizational	Studies the relationship to work
Neuropsychology/Psychobiology	Studies the nervous system
Psychometrics and Quantitative	Conducts research (college, government agencies, and so on)
Rehabilitation	Studies recovery from trauma (stroke, debilitating accident, and so on)
School	Studies the emotional, intellectual, progress development of students
Social	Studies attitudes and opinions and how they are formed
Family	Studies marital and family issues
Health	Studies smoking, weight gain, stress, and other medical issues
Psychology of Aging	Studies issues relating to aging
Psychology of Law Forensic Psychology	Looks at issues involving law enforcement
Psychology of Gender	Studies gender development as well as issues of abuse

career and then make sure he or she attains the right skills and knowledge to succeed. That's the main purpose of this book: to make you aware of the various things you can do with a degree in psychology and to help you make the most of your academic career to prepare you for graduate school (possibly) or the work world.

The Job Outlook

Of course, students want to know what jobs are and will be available for their major. (That's the topic of this book!) The job possibilities are discussed in more detail in later chapters, but the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov) lists these significant points:

- ◆ Many psychologists are self-employed (one out of four, nearly four times the average for other professionals).
- ◆ Advanced degrees are critical to find work in psychology. Most specialists require a doctoral degree; psychologists in other situations (schools, for instance) require a master's degree.
- ◆ While you can find a job in psychology with just a bachelor's degree, it may be difficult because many jobs require advanced degrees. Also, the competition for jobs that don't require additional education or certification is intense.
- ◆ In 2002, psychologists held about 139,000 jobs. Employment opportunities for psychologists are expected to grow "faster than average." This is because these services are more and more in demand in schools, hospitals, social service agencies, mental health centers, and substance abuse treatment clinics.

Despite these statistics, many opportunities are available to you with a psychology major—whether you choose to go on to graduate school or immediately begin looking for a position after completing your four-year degree. This book provides you with information on both of these options. Pursuing a graduate degree is covered in Chapter 4, and career opportunities are discussed in detail in Chapters 5 and 6. After reviewing this information, you should have a good idea of how you might use a psychology degree.