How Lucky You Are to Be a Psychology Major

Elizabeth Yost Hammer, PhD • Psi Chi National President • Loyola University New Orleans

This fall, I started teaching our History and Systems course with another faculty member in my department. This is the senior "capstone" course for our psychology majors. By definition, a capstone course should allow a student to integrate knowledge and skills associated with the sequence of courses in the major, and thus sum up all the courses taken in the major. It's the last psychology course most majors take, and my colleagues and I were struggling to make it more "capstone" in nature.

This effort led me to reflect on the required curriculum for psychology majors at my university. As I did so, I realized that the courses in the psychology major teach much more than academic content and analytical skills. These courses provide useful information that majors can use to enrich their lives, understand the behaviors of those around them, and make educated and sound decisions. After going through this process, I have become convinced that students are lucky to be psychology majors!

Consider the offerings and requirements of your psychology major. Many students take Lifespan Development, a course that I believe should be required for any parent. In this course you learn about cognitive development of children and adolescents, issues of aging, and practical matters surrounding death. Information in this course will help you relate to the abilities and limitations of your children. It will help you understand your parents at their developmental stages, and will help you anticipate and deal with issues that you will face across your own lifespan.

When you leave this class, you will have information to make you a better parent and maybe even a better son or daughter.

As a student of Social Psychology (my personal favorite, being a social psychologist myself, you learn about group dynamics, interpersonal relationships, helping behavior, aggression, prejudice, and so on. By studying social psychology, you become educated about your own behavior in social interaction and, as a result, can use this information to make your social world a better place. When you leave this class, you will have information to help you increase your persuasiveness, reduce your prejudice, and recognize the factors in attraction.

In Abnormal Psychology and clinically related courses, the myths of mental illness are dispelled. By taking these courses you gain an understanding of the many different factors that lead one to develop a psychological disorder, allowing you to understand more fully (and more compassionately) how someone can become depressed, psychotic, etc. These courses can help you to develop healthier responses to challenges you may face personally.

When you leave this class, you will have information on the kinds of attitudes, behaviors, and styles of thinking that are associated with better psychological health.

In the research methods and statistics courses, you are taught the foundation of our field, the scientific method. Through critiquing previous research, you develop analytical thinking skills; through writing solid literature reviews you exercise the ability to synthesize information. Through designing and conducting research projects, you demonstrate problem-solving and time management skills, and an understanding of the methods of your discipline.

You will leave this class with critical thinking skills that can influence how you think about and process information from the media, politicians, and even other researchers for years to come.

One of the most important things you can take from Physiological Psychology is the understanding (and awe) that everything you do is made possible by, and is dependent upon, the functioning of your nervous system, and that it is active all the time. You gain an understanding of the complexity of behavior, particularly with regard to the many parts of the brain and the corresponding neurotransmitters that are involved. Further, you learn how delicate our physiological balance is, and that any modification of one part of this complex system can have extensive and multiple ramifications. For example, the introduction of any drug alters neural transmission in many parts of the nervous system. When you leave this class, you will have information to understand the biological basis of your own behavior.

In Sensation and Perception, you get a realization that visual perception is more than just what the eye's physiological makeup makes us see. We bring to the process our past experiences, biases, and expectations, and we end up "constructing our visual world." This perception is sometimes very different from what the environmental stimulus or the physiology of the eye may dictate. Of course, the same construction applies to all of the senses. When you leave this class, you have a better understanding of yourself and the world around you.

Author note: I would like to express my appreciation to my colleagues in the Psychology Department at Loyola University who gave me their thoughts about the courses in their areas of expertise: Dr. Mukul Bhatia (Sensation and Perception), Dr. Mary Brazier (Learning), Dr. John Comber (Thinking and Measurement), Dr. Joe Elliott (Abnormal Psychology), Dr. Kim Ernst (Sports and Exercise), Dr. Janet Matthews (Pharmacology), and Dr. Kevin Zucker (Physiological Psychology).

www.pisci.org
Winter 2003 • Eye on Psi Chi
will be aware of perceptual biases and be able to recognize them in yourself or others.

In the Learning course, you discov- er that the most adaptive trait of man—i.e., the ability to change—is based on complex processes. It gives you the ability to change behavior as a result of a change in the environment. In this course you are exposed to the power of reinforcement and punishment in the prediction and control of behavior. Although we humans do not like to think of the "prediction and control" of our own behavior, learning studies show that our behavior is predictable and controllable to a large degree. When you leave this class, you will have information that can help you in many ways, from improving your study habits to helping you train your dog.

For your entire life you have been tested and measured, and those tests don't stop at graduation. As such, they play an important role. The use of high stakes testing in public schools, issues regarding affirmative action, and the misuse of tests in graduate admission and financial aid decisions make concepts of reliability, validity, and standard error of measurement more relevant and important to understand. By taking this course you will learn about the best testing programs only account for a small part of the variance in how well students do in school. When you leave this class, you will have information that allows you to become a critical consumer of the testing that is done on you and to your family members.

A course that has enjoyed recent popularity is the Psychology of Sport and Exercise. In this course students can develop an understanding of the psychological factors that affect participation, involvement, and performance in sport and exercise. While there are no promises that this course will help you maintain your exercise program, when you leave this class you will have been exposed to research that could be useful in becoming a better athlete, coach, or spectator.

In recognition of the remarkable leader

Daniel P. Buckert • Psi Chi Director of Publishing • Associate Editor, Eye on Psi Chi

Eye on Psi Chi  Winter 2003 www.psidc.org

been reported in numerous historical articles and Psi Chi publications. Following in the footsteps of such a significant figure in Psi Chi history was a daunting task, but Kay has risen to the challenge in a remarkable way, leading Psi Chi to an unparalleled period of growth and prosperity. Although Kay's term of service represents less than one sixth of Psi Chi's history since its founding in 1929, under her leadership the total membership in the honor society has doubled, the number of chapters has increased from approximately 700 to over 1,000, and Psi Chi's net assets have more than tripled. In recognition of Kay's outstanding leadership, her peers in the Association of College Honor Societies elected her as its current president. Space does not permit me to list Kay's many other achievements, but needless to say, we are fortunate to have such a gifted and esthetic leader.

It will be great to have Kay back with us again as we begin 2003. I hope that her sabatical has provided for her a well-earned break, but I suspect that she has been extremely busy (as always), preparing for the midterm Psi Chi National Council meeting, the annual meeting of the Association of College Honor Societies, the Psi Chi National Convention, and the upcoming 75th anniversary of Psi Chi in the year 2004. From all of us in Psi Chi: Welcome back, Kay, and thank you for your wonderful leadership and service.