

Finding Your Path: Tapping Into Valuable Resources

Finding Your Path

It is normal to be uncertain about your career path and what you will do with your college education. A lot of anxiety surrounds the decision of what to do with your life as well as fear that you may not know all the options available to you or, worse, that you will make the wrong decision. The key to easing this anxiety and feeling comfortable throughout this whole decision making process is to become as informed as possible. You have already made a start by picking up this book. But you have to be even more proactive to become as informed as possible, and this chapter will provide you with some helpful suggestions to guide you along the way. These tips should help you to narrow down the subdiscipline of psychology in which you might like to specialize as well as help you to develop a list of potential careers that might suit you best.

Who Do I Need To Talk To?

Talk, talk, talk to as many people as possible! The best way to learn about how to succeed in a field is to ask other people who have already had success to share their knowledge and experiences with you. I know, you are thinking...the professors at my college are so busy, they would probably think that I am a pest if I go to their office hours or e-mail them to set up an appointment to ask them questions. Believe it or not, most professors, and people in general for that matter, love to talk about what they do! It is not a matter of flattery either. Think about it... What is your passion? Perhaps it is a hobby or sport that you have been involved with for years. Wouldn't you be happy to talk with

someone who wanted to learn all about it and showed the same enthusiasm for the activity as you? So, forget about feeling intimidated or as if you are imposing and ask a professor if you can talk with them outside of class. The worst thing that can happen is that they could say no. You can just try again with another professor, and eventually you will end up talking with someone who has the time to be helpful.

Of course, there are many other people to whom you can talk who can share a wealth of different types of information with you. This point is especially important to consider if you do not want to become an academic and want to be in private practice or in the business world. Here is a list of valuable, freely available resources that are commonly untapped by the typical undergraduate.

Graduate students/teaching assistants: These are wonderful people to whom you can talk because, unlike many of your professors, most of them are not too far off from where you are in your career right now. They have recent experience as psychology undergraduates and probably have a clear idea of what career opportunities are currently available. Although most professors may be very knowledgeable researchers and know all about their field, they are not likely to have researched the current job market available to an undergraduate student like you. Graduate students can give you tips on all sorts of things from how to study for your courses right now, what they considered doing after graduation, how to get into graduate schools, and even which professors might be the most approachable and helpful to you in your department.

Undergraduate Psychology Program Coordinator:

You may not know who this person is right now if you have never had to seek guidance from your undergraduate psychology administrative office. This person oversees the

logistics of your program. He/she works with the administration and faculty to maintain course curriculum that is appropriate, handle petitions and special course approvals, and guide undergraduate psychology majors in general. It is very likely that this person can provide guidance as to what courses you should be taking depending upon your area of interest, which courses will be available which semesters, and where previous graduates of the department have landed jobs or gotten into graduate school. One of the most important things that you may want to ask this person is which companies former students have gone to work for immediately upon graduation. You could also ask which graduate schools that alumni have attended after graduation. Most undergraduate program coordinators either maintain a database of this type of information for the sake of having statistics to use when it comes time to consult with students. If not, they are likely to know some of this information via relationships that they built with former students. Coordinators are hired not only for their administrative abilities and communication skills, but also their desire to help students. Take advantage of the resources this person has to offer you.

Professionals in the field:

Think you might be interested in becoming a clinical psychologist? How about being a management consultant in the business world? Whatever the career in which you are interested, you should definitely find professionals in that line of work and ask them all about their career. Remember, people *like* to talk about their work. You could contact them and ask them all the things you have always wondered. What was their educational path? Did they need to complete an internship before getting hired? What kind of expectations did they have of their career at various stages? What kind of outlook do they

have on the field now, as insiders? What tips do they have for somebody like you, who is just starting out on their career path?

You may be wondering where to find these professionals. The first way is to find out if the Career Services center at your college (or even a nearby college) has access to the names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of alumni who are willing to be contacted. This popular service is one that Career Services centers have been making available to students more and more these days. If this option is not available for you, you can locate the names of people in the career that you desire in various association directories, on the Internet, or via word of mouth. Maybe your classmate has a relative who has your dream job.

Tips For Making The Most Of Talking With Others:

It helps to have a list of questions prepared in advance. Having a list will allow you to make the most of your time and is especially helpful to those who might be shy and want to feel more confident when talking to others. You should have a pen and paper to jot down notes such as names of important books or web sites, etc. Most importantly, be sure to listen carefully to the advice others have to offer. Of course you should spend some time sharing a little bit of your history with the person with whom you are talking. But remember that this an opportunity to glean information from them and not a time to talk at length off topic. Last, remember never to take one person's response and consider it as the final word. As you have learned in your psychology classes, it is best to collect evidence from multiple sources and not to jump to any conclusions based on a small sample size. One professional to whom you talk may have a completely different take on the future of his/her career vs. another based on their experiences and personality. Other

objective sources (such as the Federal Bureau of Labor and Statistics' reports, discussed in Chapter XX about careers) come in handy.

What Free Library, Campus, And Online Tools Exist To Help Me?

Career Services Office

The Career Services offices on many campuses offer a variety of useful services to students. These services are usually free to students. Among these services involve presentations on different careers, on campus recruitment with companies, practice job interviewing, resume workshops, and access to career counselors. Now, not all career counselors are specialists in helping psychology majors find their career path, but they can offer very helpful general information related to the whole process of career exploration. They are also likely to have had experience with psychology majors who have been successful in the job search in the past and can share what they learned through helping those students. For information specific to careers in psychology, read Chapter XX on careers in psychology and the many references available that focus on this topic.

Visit the APA Web site

The acronym APA is an important one to know if you are thinking about majoring in psychology because it stands for the largest association of psychologists world-wide: the American Psychological Association. The APA is a scientific and professional organization based in Washington DC that serves many functions. It encourages and promotes research in psychology, maintains codes related to the education and ethics of psychologists, and increases the dissemination of psychological knowledge through meetings, publications, professional contacts, and more. It has numerous divisions that you can learn more about on their Web site: www.apa.org.

Different divisions focus on helping the undergraduate psychology students, graduate students, professional psychologists such as teachers and clinicians, and members of the general public/media wishing to learn more about the field. If you visit the Web site, you will find interesting reports on current topics related to psychology that are regularly updated. You should visit this site often and read about the different divisions of this important association, peruse the highlighted news reports, and the Press releases to get a good idea of what topics are important to psychologists today. You can even read about honor societies and affiliate organizations on the APA home page.

Learn about APS

The Association for Psychological Science (APS) is devoted to promoting psychology as a science and its recognition at the national and interational level. Its nearly membership of nearly 20, 000 includes scientists, researchers, clinicians, administrators, teachers, and students. There are special services listed for both graduate and undergraduate students on their Web site: www.psychologicalscience.org. You will also find links to many useful resources and current issues on their Web site as well as information about this group's annual conference.

Psi Chi and Psi Beta

The Psi Chi National Honor Society in Psychology has chapters at many four-year colleges and universities. The Psi Beta National Honor Society in Psychology for Community and Junior Colleges is the equivalent society at 2-year colleges. Both are excellent groups to join as membership has many benefits. Students who fulfill

membership requirements earn transcript notation of this honor each semester that they remain an active member. Joining such a group is a great way to meet others with similar interests, become involved in community service, and to learn about special chapter events such as guest speakers and field trips. Membership also includes benefits such as qualification for APA student membership status, journal subscription discounts, and more. Visit these Web sites to learn more:

Psi Chi National Honor Society in Psychology <http://www.psichi.org/>

Psi Beta National Honor Society in Psychology www.psibeta.org

Browse Journal Articles In The Library

Having taken psychology courses, you have already read the summarized results of many research articles. Textbooks generally discuss theory, cover the logic behind those theories, and provide evidence that comes from research findings. The evidence is followed by research citations (e.g., (Rezec, 2003)). These citations in the book give credit to the researcher(s) who have provided evidence for the claim discussed in the book and leads you to the original journal article that contains a full description of the research methods and the original data that support the statement.

One way for you to learn what is currently going on within any subfield of psychology is to go the library's periodical section and find scholarly journals that specialize in the area(s) of psychology that you find most interesting. Scholarly journals are journals that contain original research articles, unlike popular magazines that merely summarize findings or opinion in the field (e.g., *Psychology Today*). The articles all follow the same

format (APA format) so that they can be easily read and followed by psychologists around the world.

To find out the journals to which your library subscribes, ask your reference librarian to help you find them. Ask him/her to teach you to use a popular online psychology journal catalog such as PsycInfo. Appendix B provides a list of reputable journal articles to help you get familiarized with categorized by subdiscipline.

The journal articles found within scholarly journals are usually peer-reviewed, which means that before the paper was published, it was reviewed by other experts in the field for quality of research and content. APA format requirements dictate that the methods of all research studies be spelled out in precise detail so that other researchers can both scrutinize the study and attempt to replicate its results. Researchers rely heavily on journal articles to find out what is currently known about any topic in psychology. In fact, journal articles are much more popular than books since they allow information to be disseminated rapidly and published in a venue that is very specific and for a particular audience. For example, biopsychologists are likely to read *Nature Neuroscience* while social psychologists are more likely to keep up with *The Journal of Social Psychology*. Once you start reading journals, do not be discouraged if you don't understand some of their content. Remember, these journals are published for specialists and, as such, are going to contain jargon specific to the discipline. At this point in your education, it is not necessary to understand all the finer details, but rather to get the big picture of what the major research questions in the subdisciplines of psychology and how people go about addressing them. Do they conduct studies in animals? Do they collect behavioral data on

playgrounds? The more you read the easier it becomes to understand the finer details; don't be afraid to ask your professors about the details if you have questions.

What Is A Conference and Why Should I Attend One?

A psychology conference is a meeting of psychologists that can be regional, national, or international and varies in size depending on the topic and the number of psychologists who are interested in it. I highly recommend that you go to any psychology conference that you can attend if you are interested in the conference focus topic. It can be quite exciting and is a great networking opportunity! It will provide you with first-hand opportunities to hear the leading researchers in the field talk about their work.

These conferences tend to center around two types of events: papers and poster sessions.

Paper sessions about different topics are typically scheduled so that there are back-to-back speakers all presenting research about the same topic. It is exciting to be in a room with people who all share a passion for studying the same phenomenon, and hear first hand from the people who conduct research. Question and answer sessions that take place right after talks can get quite interesting and even heated sometimes if they lead to debate. The great thing about attending these talks is that you will often hear different viewpoints about the same psychological phenomena and be able to see how

psychologists from different camps logically argue their points in the name of science.

Poster sessions involve researchers presenting a visual summary of their research in a poster format. The posters are usually displayed dozens at a time in one big room. Poster authors usually stand next to their poster and offer one-on-one explanations of the research described in the poster and receive feedback from poster session attendees. As an attendee, you will get to interact with psychology faculty and students from other

schools and get to know them and their work. You will have your questions answered in an informal setting, and make interesting professional contacts as well. In fact, many psychologists will carry and distribute their cards at poster sessions in order to receive more information from the poster presenter via mail/e-mail- and to network.

Most conferences will also contain plenary sessions that are open to all conference attendees. These larger sessions can vary in content and style. Often, they consist of invited talks by keynote speakers who are quite prominent figures in the field. A plenary session can also include a panel discussion that brings together many experts on a popular or timely topic. Many times, large social hours follow plenary sessions and give attendees a chance to socialize and network.

You can find a list of major conferences at the Web sites listed in Appendix C (but be sure to ask around and surf the web for smaller conferences that focus specifically on a topic that interests you, too). You can sometimes even get the registration fees waived if you volunteer to help at the conference. It never hurts to ask the organizers.

My Proactive Plan

1. Who are two professors who I would like to contact to learn more about the subdiscipline or career that interest(s) me?

2. What specific questions will I ask them about the subdiscipline or career that interest(s) me?

3. Who are two graduate students on campus who I could contact to learn more about the subdiscipline or career that interest(s) me?

4. What specific questions will I ask them?

5. What is the name of my school's undergraduate psychology program coordinator?

6. What are this person's working hours and when can I make an appointment with him/her?

7. What specific questions will I ask him/her?

8. Does my campus have a Career Services Center (or similar office) that I can call or visit to obtain contact information for alumni that currently work in fields that interest me? If so, what is the phone number of this center so that I can call and confirm/obtain this information over the phone or via an appointment? If not, what nearby schools might offer such a service?

9. Listed are at least three parts of the APA Web site that provided helpful information to me and what type of information that was:

10. Looking at the list of journals in Appendix B, these three titles interest me:

11. Looking at the list of general conference in Appendix C, these two conferences in my area this year that might be of interest to me, and here are the dates they are held:

12. What is my timeline for following up on the important information above?

ACTION ITEM

EXPECTED COMPLETION DATE

Contacting professors _____

Contacting graduate students _____

Contacting a Career Services Office _____

Contacting professional alumni _____

Meeting with my psychology undergraduate coordinator _____

Further pursuing information related to the APA Web site _____

Visiting the library/librarian _____

Obtaining and reading articles _____

Seeking out which conferences I might attend _____

Inquiring about registration fees for the conference _____