Occupational Characteristics of Psychology Baccalaureate Graduates

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Occupational Characteristics of Psychology Baccalaureate Graduates

Summary Report

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Objectives

Although the field of psychology is classically associated with a career path in mental health services, career options for graduates with a baccalaureate degree in psychology are far broader. Yet, we do not have a good understanding of the occupational spectrum for psychology graduates or of the skills necessary to excel in those positions. The goal of the present study was to identify the characteristics of occupations held by alumni with a baccalaureate degree in psychology. Understanding these occupational characteristics is useful for career advising and for developing job-relevant skills in the psychology major.

Survey Method

We emailed an electronic survey link to 716 alumni who graduated between 2010-2019 with a B.A. in psychology from the University of Northern Iowa. 102 people responded to the survey, yielding a response rate of 14%. As shown in the chart below, 76 (75%) of the respondents had additional education after graduating from UNI. We believe this sample over-represents graduates who were particularly engaged in their UNI education or are more engaged with the discipline of psychology.

Survey respondents reported the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) code for their current job from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Information Network (O*NET). Additional survey questions asked about educational attainment and occupational outcomes like job satisfaction. Ratings of occupational skills and work activities provided by subject matter experts were downloaded from O*NET and matched to the SOC code provided by survey respondents.
Occupational Categories

Psychology graduates have positions in a variety of occupational groups. Graduates with a B.A. only are employed in a greater variety of occupations than those with additional education. The most common occupations for B.A. graduates are in Management and Business and Finance. When combined with Office and Administrative Support, 62.5% of graduates without additional education work in business-related occupations. By a large margin, the most common occupational category for graduates with additional education is Community and Social Service.
Skills

O*NET Skills are rated on a scale from (1) Not Important to (5) Extremely Important by Department of Labor occupational analysts. These expert ratings were matched to the occupations reported by psychology alumni. O*NET contains ratings on 35 individual skills that are grouped into the seven categories shown in the chart.

Five skill categories exceeded a rating of 3 (i.e., Important): Complex Problem Solving, Basic Process (e.g., critical thinking), Social (e.g., coordination), Basic Content (e.g., reading), and Systems (e.g., judgment and decision making). Technical skills, mostly related to the operation of machinery, were of very low importance. With the exception of Resource Management and Technical skills, alumni with additional education were in occupations where skills generally were rated as significantly more important compared to alumni with a B.A. only.
Two of the O*NET skill categories, Basic Content and Basic Process, consist of 10 individual skills that are essential for learning and knowledge acquisition. These skills are commonly acquired and enhanced by higher education. These expert ratings, provided by occupational analysts, were matched to the occupations reported by psychology alumni.

Eight of the basic skills exceeded a rating of 3 (i.e., Important), with Active Listening, Speaking, and Reading Comprehension exceeding a rating of 4 (i.e., Very Important). Notably, two skills that were relatively less important, Mathematics and Science, are emphasized in the structure of the psychology curriculum. Again, alumni with additional education were in occupations requiring basic skills, with the exception of Mathematics, that were rated as significantly more important compared to alumni with a B.A. only.
Work Activities

O*NET Work Activities are rated on a scale from (1) Not Important to (5) Extremely Important by Department of Labor occupational analysts, occupational experts, or job incumbents. These expert ratings were matched to the occupations reported by psychology alumni. O*NET contains ratings on 41 individual work activities that are grouped into the 9 categories shown in the chart below.

Four work activities exceeded a rating of 3 (i.e., Important): Receiving Information (e.g., monitoring to assess problems), Reasoning (e.g., making decisions), Communicating, and Information Processing (e.g., evaluating information). The activities related to working with equipment, Performing Technical Activities and Performing Manual Activities, were less important. Alumni with additional education were in occupations where Communicating, Coordinating, and Reasoning were rated as significantly more important work activities compared to alumni with a B.A. only.
**Work Outcomes**

We also surveyed alumni about their job satisfaction, work engagement, and relevance of the psychology degree to their occupation. All survey items were rated on a scale from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. Overall, average ratings exceeded 4 (i.e., Agree) for all three outcomes. Alumni with additional education reported significantly higher job satisfaction and degree relevance compared to alumni with a B.A. only. Degree relevance was strongly correlated with job satisfaction ($r = .46, p < .001$) and moderately correlated with work engagement ($r = .21, p < .05$).

We asked respondents if there was anything else they wanted to say about the relationship between their occupation and education. We received 33 comments, and with one exception, all highlighted the relevance of psychology to the work that they do. This comment is representative and amusing:

*I don't understand the sentiment that psychology is a "useless" degree field or too general. Psychology is the study of the human mind. Literally every job involves at least one human and, hypothetically, at least one brain.*

### Conclusions

This unique study allowed us to comprehensively understand the occupations held by psychology B.A. graduates from the University of Northern Iowa. The findings will allow us to more accurately describe career options to students and effectively prepare them for their future jobs. The department will use data generated from this project in planning, career advising, and learning opportunity development for our students.