

THE POST-BACCALAUREATE PERCEPTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGY ALUMNI

R. ERIC LANDRUM

P. ELISON-BOWERS

Boise State University

Faculty members from 7 Departments of Psychology distributed a link to an online survey to their psychology alumni in order to ascertain alumni opinions about college courses, impact of student clubs, value of the undergraduate degree, beliefs about the department, and measures of global satisfaction. These variables were examined in conjunction with the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Alumni who continued their education beyond a bachelor's degree in psychology responded differently at times as compared to baccalaureates. These results are discussed in the context of how departments can learn from alumni to improve services to current students.

At the undergraduate level, majoring in psychology continues to be a popular choice. For exam, in the last 14 years, over 1 million undergraduate students received their bachelor's degrees in psychology (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2007). Furthermore, data available from the National Center for Education Statistics (Snyder, et al., 2007) reveal that in 2004-2005 there were 85,614 bachelor's degrees awarded in psychology. Alumni can be a valuable source of information, ranging from providing feedback about departmental quality to career preparation and satisfaction to answering the question 'would you major in psychology again?' The goal of our study is, from a multi-institution perspective, to begin to address how specific undergraduate experiences in and out of the classroom as well as demographic variables impact career satisfaction.

Alumni ratings can be useful for answering a variety of questions. For example, Wise, Hengstler, and Braskamp (1981) used alumni ratings across many departments as an indicator of depart-

mental quality. Ogletree (1998) reported the use of psychology alumni-specific surveys to assess alumni satisfaction with the undergraduate education received. Ogletree (1998) generated department-specific recommendations based on the outcomes, such as identifying strengths (e.g., faculty accessibility) and weaknesses (e.g., lack of career advising). Lunneborg and Wilson (1985) asked this key question: Would you major in psychology again? They asked additional questions in areas, with substantial overlap with the present study, such as (a) preparation for graduate study, (b) career preparation and overall satisfaction, (c) importance of college experiences, (d) usefulness of courses to current job, and (e) satisfaction with the major to current work. For instance, Lunneborg and Wilson (1985) found alumni reported that satisfaction with career preparation was most strongly related to the acquisition of research skills, information-gathering skills, and critical thinking. In a broader study of social sciences alumni, Kressel (1990) found five variables that influenced satisfaction with the under-

graduate degree: job relatedness to major, undergraduate course difficulty, highest degree earned, undergraduate course enjoyment, and income satisfaction. There is some evidence that a global measure of job satisfaction may be as useful as multiple measures of the components of satisfaction (Scarpello & Campbell, 1983).

Although the statistics relating to numbers of alumni are national in scope, the bulk of the work in this area tends to be limited to one department due in part to the lack of a mechanism to collect data on a national basis in an efficient fashion. To counter that, colleagues from seven institutions collaborated to contact psychology alumni and encouraged them to complete an online survey about perceptions of the undergraduate experiences and how these experiences relate to career satisfaction. The goal was to examine the how specific course experiences, student club involvement, psychology department functions, the undergraduate degree, and global measures of career satisfaction vary with respect to age, gender, undergraduate GPA, salary, years since graduation, graduate school attendance and highest degree earned.

Method

Participants

In order to broaden the generalizability of the results, we asked members of a psychology teacher-specific listserv to assist with national survey regarding the opinions of their alumni regarding the opinions about their undergraduate experience. Faculty members from the following seven institutions requested the

participation of their alumni: Arcadia University, Belmont University, Boise State University, Clemson University, Emporia State University, John Brown University, and the University of San Diego. A total of 170 psychology alumni participated, with ages ranging from 21 to 75 ($M = 38.17$, $SD = 13.0$), 29.6% men and 70.4% women. They reported an average GPA of 3.40 ($SD = 0.3$), salaries ranging from \$0 to \$525,000 ($M = \$62,781$; $SD = \$75,648$), and at the time of completing the survey, they had graduated with their bachelor's degree an average of 13.89 ($SD = 13.4$) years ago. Respondents reported that the highest academic degree earned was a bachelor's degree (84.3%), master's degree (6.6%), or doctorate (9.0%). Of those reporting ethnicity, 92.9% of respondents were White/Caucasian.

Materials

An original survey instrument was designed to capture alumni perceptions in five different areas: usefulness of undergraduate coursework, impact of student clubs, value of the undergraduate degree, perspectives of the psychology department, and global questions about career satisfaction. We used 40 Likert-type declarative statements (using 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to capture perceptions in these 5 areas (see Table 1 for all 40 items). Additionally, we asked respondents listed above.

For further analysis in conjunction with the above demographic variables, we selected two representative questions *a priori* from the five categories of statements presented to respondents (from most specific to most general): college coursework,

student clubs, undergraduate degree, psychology department, and global satisfaction. We chose this approach to minimize the impact of Type I error with regard to multiple inferential statistical tests.

Procedure

Those institutions agreeing to participate ($N = 7$; see *Participants*) sent an email to alumni encouraging them to complete the survey by linking to a URL at survey-monkey.com. Participants linking to the survey were given unlimited time to complete it. Following the close of the survey, the data were downloaded into an Excel file and then exported to SPSS for statistical analysis.

Results

Of the forty survey items presented in Table 1, we selected two representative items a priori to use in assessing each of the 5 major areas covered in the survey (college courses, student clubs, undergraduate degree, psychology department, and global satisfaction). These 10 individual items are analyzed below. To protect from inflated Type I error, we only rejected the null with $p < .01$.

Item Relations with Age, GPA, Salary, and Years Since Graduation Variables

Using the 10 items spanning 5 categories, only 3 item correlations were statistically significant (survey items were answered on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Age was significantly positively correlated with the college course item "my psychology courses have helped me with my career," $r(165)$

$= 0.20, p < .01$. Self-reported undergraduate GPA was significantly negatively correlated with the psychology department item "My psychology department could have been more proactive in helping me achieve my career goals," $r(143) = -0.25, p < .005$. Self-reported current salary was significantly positively correlated with the global satisfaction item "I am happy with my current career choice," $r(150) = 0.21, p < .01$.

Item Differences with Student Club Involvement, Graduate School Attendance, Gender, and Highest Degree Earned

Each respondent was asked if they had participated in student clubs as an undergraduate, and t tests were used to determine if student club participation affected answers to the 10 survey items in 5 categories; there were no significant differences for any of the 10 items. We also asked if respondents had attended graduate school or not (which is a different question from their highest degree earned). There were 3 significant differences across the 10 items. There was a significant difference between those that had attended graduate school ($M = 3.39, SD = 0.9$) and those that had not attended graduate school ($M = 3.30, SD = 1.0$) on the college course item "my undergraduate coursework adequately prepared me for employment," $t(163) = 4.04, p < .001$. There was a significant difference between those that had attended graduate school ($M = 4.00, SD = 0.7$) and those that had not attended graduate school ($M = 3.55, SD = 1.1$) on the undergraduate degree item "my psychology degree is versatile," $t(162) = 3.05, p < .005$. There was also a significant dif-

Table 1
 Survey Agreement Items with Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

Item	M	SD
My psychology courses were beneficial to my education.	4.30	0.6
I am happy with my current career choice.	4.18	1.0
The knowledge I obtained in college is useful in my current job.	4.14	0.7
My job requires me to have a college degree.	4.11	1.2
I feel that undergraduate students should spend more time fully evaluating the career pathways they can take with a psychology degree.	4.11	0.7
My pre-requisite courses were beneficial to my education (i.e. math, history, English, art, theatre, etc.)	4.00	0.7
Now that I have my psychology degree, my standards for employment are higher than before I went to college.	3.95	0.9
My psychology courses have helped me with my career.	3.92	0.9
I am able to find better jobs now that I have my degree.	3.90	0.9
My psychology degree is versatile.	3.80	0.9
My undergraduate training was helpful in obtaining my current job.	3.73	1.0
My pre-requisite courses have helped me with my career.	3.67	0.9
My participation in student clubs was beneficial for a well-rounded college experience.	3.61	1.1
I am able to find jobs faster now than before I went to college.	3.56	1.1
Most of the things I learned in college are useful in my current job.	3.50	0.9
My undergraduate degree has put me at an advantage in the workplace.	3.42	0.9
My undergraduate coursework adequately prepared me for employment.	3.38	1.0
I have received more opportunities at work because of my psychology degree over those without a college degree.	3.29	1.2
My undergraduate degree has helped me with advancement and promotions in the work place.	3.25	1.0
My psychology degree has given me a good variety of job opportunities.	3.19	1.0
I wish my advisors in the psychology department had been more involved in helping me achieve my career goals after graduation.	3.11	1.2
My psychology department could have been more proactive in helping me achieve my career goals.	3.05	1.1
My participation in student clubs has done nothing to help me with job opportunities.	3.03	1.1
I feel that I was prepared for the "career world" upon graduation.	3.03	1.1
My psychology degree is necessary for my line of work.	3.02	1.2
My participation in student clubs has helped me in the job force.	2.75	1.1
If the psychology department had helped me more with my career goals, I feel that I could have been more successful.	2.66	1.1
A different undergraduate degree would be more useful with my current job.	2.62	1.1
I have received more opportunities at work over those with different degrees than I have.	2.60	1.0
If I had a different undergraduate degree, I would have more opportunities at my current job.	2.53	1.0
I wish I had practiced certain skills more in college that would help me be a better employee.	2.51	1.1
I had opportunities with my college coursework to learn skills and knowledge that I wish I had practiced more to help me with my current employment.	2.51	1.0
If I had the chance to choose to receive a different degree other than psychology, I would.	2.49	1.2
Only a small percentage of my college learning has been useful in my subsequent employment opportunities.	2.48	1.0
My participation in student clubs has helped me network for job placement opportunities.	2.46	1.0
Getting my degree has not made it easier to find a job.	2.30	1.1
My job requires me to have a psychology degree.	2.27	1.2
If I had taken learning in college more seriously, I would be better off at my current job.	2.15	0.9
I feel I could have landed my current job without going to college.	1.83	1.2
Nothing I learned in college is relevant to my current job duties.	1.57	0.7

Notes. N = 170. Respondents answered using 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

ference between those that had attended graduate school ($M = 4.49, SD = 0.8$) and those that had not attended graduate school ($M = 3.77, SD = 1.0$) on the global satisfaction item "I am happy with my current career choice," $t(164) = 4.81, p < .001$.

We examined each of the 10 items for gender differences, and there were no significant differences across the item items. We also analyzed differences across highest degree earned (bachelor's, master's, doctorate) on each of the 10 items using a one-way ANOVA, and there were 3 significant differences. There was a significant difference on the coursework item "my undergraduate coursework adequately prepared me for employment" (bachelor's $M = 3.33, SD = 0.9$; master's $M = 4.27, SD = 0.6$; doctorate $M = 3.47, SD = 1.0$), $F(2,163) = 4.76, p = .01$. A Tukey's post hoc test indicated that the master's degree mean was significantly higher than the bachelor's and doctorate means, $p < .05$. There was a significant difference on the coursework item "my psychology courses have helped me with my career" (bachelor's $M = 3.81, SD = 0.9$; master's $M = 4.45, SD = 0.5$; doctorate $M = 4.73, SD = 0.4$), $F(2,162) = 8.77, p < .001$. A Tukey's post hoc test indicated that the doctoral degree mean was significantly higher than the bachelor's degree mean, $p < .05$. There was also a significant difference for the global satisfaction item "I am happy with my current career choice" (bachelor's $M = 4.08, SD = 1.0$; master's $M = 4.82, SD = 0.4$; doctoral $M = 4.80, SD = 0.4$), $F(2,163) = 5.83, p < .005$. A Tukey's post hoc test indicated that the master's and doctorate means were both significantly higher than

the bachelor's degree mean, $p < .05$.

Discussion

Older alumni reported that their psychology courses have been more helpful in their careers than younger alumni; this could be due to more opportunities to apply their undergraduate psychological training over a longer career. Not surprisingly, current salary was positively correlated with alumni happiness with career choice. Those alumni with lower undergraduate GPAs agreed more that the psychology department could have been more proactive in helping to achieve career goals. Similar to Ogletree (1998), alumni surveys such as this one can help identify strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps faculty can trust that our "best" students eventually land on their feet, either by attending graduate school or succeeding in a career. However, should we reconsider faculty effort to help our less-than-best students succeed? Results from this study suggest that these students believe that their psychology department should have helped more.

When comparing those alumni who attended graduate school versus those who did not attend graduate school, those who attended graduate school agreed more that:

- (a) Psychology courses helped their career.
- (b) They believed their psychology degree is versatile.
- (c) They were happy with their current career choice.

However, because of the phrasing of the questions, it is difficult to discern whether the alumni respondents were referring to the value of their undergraduate

degree, or the value of a graduate degree they may have obtained. The message is clearer when directly comparing those with a bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctoral degree. Interestingly, alumni with a master's degree agreed significantly more than those with a bachelor's or doctoral degree that their undergraduate coursework prepared them for employment. Perhaps those obtaining a terminal master's degree and entering the workforce saw more applicability in their undergraduate education than their counterparts.

Differences exist among alumni, but similarities abound as well. For instance, there were no significant gender differences in alumni responses. There were no significant differences with career experience (years since graduation), although age was significantly positively correlated with helpfulness of psychology courses in one's career. Overall, alumni in this sample are generally happy with their undergraduate psychology education and the opportunities it has afforded, even though more opportunities are available to those continuing their education. Psychology faculty who care about the career paths and satisfaction of alumni need to continue to study these issues, because it informs us of our former students' opinions, who, after graduation, may have a better sense of the value of their undergraduate education. To better serve our current students, it helps to know the outcomes of our former students so that we may help each student maximize their undergraduate experience.

References

- Kressel, N. J. (1990). Job and degree satisfaction among social science graduates. *Teaching of Psychology, 17*, 222-227.
- Lunneborg, P. W., & Wilson, V. M. (1985). Would you major in psychology again? *Teaching of Psychology, 12*, 17-20.
- Ogletree, S. M. (1998). Using alumni surveys to evaluate and improve the psychology major. *College Student Journal, 32*, 215-221.
- Scarpello, V., & Campbell, J. P. (1983). Job satisfaction: Are all the parts there? *Personnel Psychology, 36*, 577-600.
- Snyder, T. D., Dillow, S. A., & Hoffman, C. M. (2007). *Digest of education statistics 2006*. National Center for Education Statistics Report No. 2007-017, Institute of Education Sciences, U. S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Wise, S. L., Hengstler, D. D., & Braskamp, L. A. (1981). Alumni ratings as an indicator of departmental quality. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 73*, 71-77.

Author Note

Address any correspondence to Eric Landrum, Department of Psychology (MS 1715), Boise State University, 1910 University Drive, Boise ID 83725-1715; E-mail elandru@boisestate.edu.

A Journal Pertaining To College Students

**Project
Innovation**

**C O L L E G E
S T U D E N T
J O U R N A L**

ISSN: 0146-3934

VOLUME 43

JUNE/2009
PART B

NUMBER 2
