A Skills-Based Academic Advising Strategy for
Job-Seeking Psychology Majors

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According to (Halonen, 2013, para. 6), “Students who complete a baccalaureate degree in psychology will have completed an almost ideal workforce preparation.” However, many psychology faculty who serve as academic advisors to their job-seeking majors abdicate their advising duties to professional advisors or career center personnel because they lack the confidence to successfully advise students who will not follow their professional path (i.e., graduate school). Halonen (para. 7) labels the students who are negatively affected by this unfortunate situation as “The Great Unwashed.” She uses the term “The Worthies” to describe those whose professional aspirations more closely parallel the trajectory of their faculty advisors and, therefore, receive more confident and beneficial academic advising.

This article provides an alternative strategy to psychology faculty who may have inadvertently perpetuated this unfortunate dichotomy in the past. This strategy provides them with data-based information that can increase their confidence in their ability to help their advisees develop not only the constellation of skills that employers value during the hiring process, but also the skill set that will help them survive and thrive in the jobs they can obtain with a bachelor’s degree in psychology.

More than 100,000 psychology majors graduate each year with a bachelor’s degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), but only about 20-25% of these continue their education by enrolling in a graduate program (Hettich & Landrum, 2014). The remaining 75-80% enter the job market, and fewer than 25% of these will work in a field directly related to psychology (Halonen, 2011). Because the baccalaureate degree in psychology does not qualify a student to enter a specific profession like some other majors (e.g., nursing, education, engineering, and accounting), academic advisors should make psychology majors aware of the broad range of occupations they can enter (Appleby, Millspaugh, & Hammersley, 2011; Rajecki, 2009) and the types of transferable skills they must develop during their undergraduate education so they can gain meaningful employment in today’s challenging job market (Shaffer, 1997). If psychology majors lack this knowledge and these skills, they risk job dissatisfaction (Light, 2010), the disturbing belief that their jobs are not related to their major (Borden & Rajecki, 2000), and the very real possibility of having to accept a job that does not require a bachelor’s degree (Rajecki & Borden, 2009).

Professional development is one of the five basic learning goals contained in the most recent version of the APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major (American Psychological Association, 2013). Academic advisors can help students achieve this goal by providing them with strategies to “apply psychological content and skills to career goals” (p. 33). More specifically, the “skills in this goal at the baccalaureate level refer to abilities that sharpen student readiness for postbaccalaureate employment” (p. 33). One strategy to facilitate the actualization of APA’s professional development goal is to introduce both advisors and their advisees to the concept of the covert curriculum.

Students must master two very different curricula during their undergraduate experience (Appleby, 2001; Hettich, 1992). All academic advisors are aware of the overt curriculum, which consists of the courses students must take to graduate and the knowledge learned in these courses. However, many advisors are less aware of the covert curriculum, which refers to the life-long learning skills and work habits that students can develop as they complete the overt curriculum. Unfortunately, many advisors spend so much time emphasizing the overt curriculum that they neglect to stress the importance of the covert curriculum during advising sessions.
This chapter has two purposes. The first is to increase academic advisors’ awareness of the value of the covert curriculum in the job-preparation process by familiarizing them with the results of two studies. The first study is a meta-analytic review (Appleby, 2009) of 31 publications that addressed the skills employers value in college graduates who apply for jobs. A content analysis of the 341 skills identified in these publications yielded the seven following skill sets, which are arranged in descending order of the total number of times their component skills appeared in the literature sample: communication (85), critical thinking and research (78), collaboration (74), self-management (53), professional (24), technological (18), and ethical (9). The second study is a survey whose results yielded the categories of behaviors whose presence or absence leads employers to promote, reprimand, discipline, or fire new college hires (Gardner, 2007). The second purpose of this chapter is to provide advisors with advice based on the data from these two studies that can enable them to help their job-seeking advisees select a constellation of curricular and extracurricular undergraduate experiences whose successful completion will prepare them to obtain a challenging, rewarding, and meaningful job, and then to survive and thrive in that job.

The next portion of this article contains seven sections, each of which addresses one of the seven skill sets produced by the author’s content analysis. Each of these sections contains two major parts. The first major part (Results), contains (a) brief summaries of Appleby’s (2008) findings for the seven skill categories, including specific behavioral examples of each category (During the Hiring Process) and (b) Gardner’s (2007) reasons why new college hires are promoted, reprimanded, disciplined, or fired (On-the-Job). The second major part (Advice to Advisors), provides information academic advisors can use to enable their advisees to make the wise educational decisions they will need to develop the skill set that is the topic of each section.

Communication Skills

Results

During the Hiring Process. Communication skills (i.e., the ability to write, speak, read, and listen) were reported more often than any of the other employer-valued skills.

On-the-Job. Presenting ideas persuasively in written and oral forms is 1 of the 13 top reasons why new hires are promoted or given new assignments. Ineffective verbal communication, ineffective written communication, and the failure to follow written and spoken directions are 3 of the top 10 reasons why supervisors reprimand or discipline new college hires. Failure to follow directions is one of the six top reasons why new college hires are fired.

Advice to Advisors

It is crucially important for advisees to understand that people employed in the management positions to which most college graduates aspire must not only write and speak in a clear, coherent, and persuasive manner, but must also attend to, remember, understand, and act upon the information they read and hear. Unless they are aware of these crucial job-related requirements, they often avoid classes that require extensive reading assignments, information-rich lectures, demanding writing assignments, and formal oral presentations. Effective advisors can use their knowledge of the covert curriculum to encourage advisees to enroll in these types of classes and to view them as valuable learning opportunities. All students are required to take basic communication courses such as English Composition and Speech. Unfortunately, most students take these courses simply to “get them out of the way” rather than to learn from them. Advisors can encourage students to take more advanced courses in these areas (e.g., Technical Writing and Interpersonal Communication) and seek out experiences that will require them to polish their ability to communicate because they understand that strong communication skills will help students distinguish themselves from others during the hiring process (i.e., cover-letter writing, resume production, and interviewing) and enable them to avoid being reprimanded, disciplined, or fired after they are hired.

Critical Thinking and Research Skills

Results

During the Hiring Process. The combination of research and critical thinking skills was the second-most-often reported skill valued by employers. Employers appear to be particularly eager to hire college graduates who can apply information to solve organizational problems; use statistical and quantitative skills to summarize, organize, and analyze data; find, gather, and organize information from a variety of sources; and create new knowledge by integrating existing information.

On-the-Job. Critical thinking skills such as thinking analytically, evaluating data, remaining open-minded, and being creative are 1 of the top 13
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reasons why new hires are promoted or given new assignments.

Advice to Advisors

One of the most effective ways to develop the six critical thinking skills described in Teaching, Learning, and Assessing in a Developmentally Coherent Curriculum (APA, 2008) is to engage in research. During the research process, students must retain and comprehend information about the subject of their research, analyze and evaluate the research that has preceded theirs, create and test hypotheses, and suggest ways to apply their findings to promote human welfare. Once advisors are aware of how the research process fosters critical thinking, it should become natural for them to encourage their advisees to excel in courses that will teach them research skills (e.g., Research Methods, Statistics, and Tests and Measurements) and then seek out opportunities to engage in research by volunteering as research assistants in faculty labs and enrolling in credit-bearing research experiences such as independent studies and research-based capstone classes that culminate in a senior thesis. It is also vitally important for students to acquire a fundamental working knowledge of statistical methods because, on-the-job, those who do not possess this knowledge are at the mercy of those who do.

Collaboration Skills

Results

During the Hiring Process. Collaboration skills such as working effectively in groups, dealing sensitively and effectively with diverse populations, and various forms of leadership (e.g., supervising, influencing, and motivating others) were the third most-often-reported employer-valued skills.

On-the-Job. Leadership (e.g., management skills, employee development, consensus building, and goal accomplishment); organizational savvy (e.g., navigating competing interests in an organization, working well with others, and fitting into an organization); and followership (i.e., helping leaders to accomplish their goals) were 3 of the 13 top reasons why new hires are promoted or given new assignments. Being ineffective in teams is 1 of the top 10 reasons why supervisors reprimand or discipline new college hires and also 1 of the 10 top reasons why new hires are fired.

Advice to Advisors

Advisors should stress that employers require employees to perform complex tasks that require teamwork. No one works alone, and almost all teams are composed of different types of people. The skills necessary to be a productive member of a diverse team must be acquired through practice, and what better place to practice these skills than in course-based group projects or extracurricular activities (see Stewart, Appleby & Ferrari, 2013 for an extracurricular example and a method to communicate these skills in a resume) where mistakes are far less costly than in the work place. Many students avoid projects in which they must collaborate with their peers because they fear their grades will suffer. What they do not realize is that even if their grades are high, their inability to provide employers with evidence of collaboration skills during the hiring process and their lack of teamwork skills on-the-job may have very negative consequences. Advisors should also stress that the working world is becoming increasingly diverse. Successful employees are those who can interact in a civil and productive manner with a wide variety of people (e.g., a supervisor who is older, a client of a different race, or a coworker with a different sexual orientation). Some people are naturally comfortable with diversity, but for those who are not, the university setting is the perfect place to develop this crucial characteristic. The best way for students to become more comfortable with people who are different from themselves is to take advantage of curricular and extracurricular activities that bring them in contact with diverse people. The worst thing they can do is to isolate themselves from diversity by deciding to live, work, and spend their leisure time with only those people who are like themselves.

Self-Management Skills

Results

During the Hiring Process. Self-management skills such as adapting to new situations; learning new skills and information; and managing time, stress, and conflict were the fourth most-often-reported employer-valued skill.

On-the-Job. Displaying strong self-management skills (e.g., regulating work by setting priorities, understanding quality indicators of work, managing stress successfully, behaving in an accountable manner, and completing work in a timely manner) is 1 of the top 13 reasons why new hires are promoted or given new assignments. Missing assignments or deadlines and being late for work were 2 of the top 10 reasons why supervisors reprimand or discipline new college hires. Being late and missing
assignments or deadlines were also two of the top six reasons why new hires are fired.

Advice to Advisors

The best advice advisors can provide about this skill is one that many advisees, especially those whose self-management skills are weak, will not want to hear. The advice is this: intentionally seek out challenging courses whose instructors expect students to perform in the same responsible ways that their future employers will demand. Students should avoid classes taught by instructors (a) whose classes are perceived as non-stressful because their subject matter is easy or they do not require students to learn new skills (e.g., writing in APA style), (b) who reinforce procrastination and irresponsible behavior by accepting late assignments or allowing students to “make up” missed tests, and (c) who do not seem to care if their students come to class late, leave class early, or miss class entirely. The lessons students learn from these instructors produce the types of on-the-job behaviors that lead to reprimands from their supervisors or, worse yet, termination from the jobs they believe they were preparing for during their undergraduate education.

Caveat: Advisors should be warned that the advice provided in the previous paragraph may not be received positively—or perhaps even understood—by their “Generation Me” advisees who were born between 1970 and 1990 (Twenge, 2006), who often exhibit an attitude of entitlement characterized by “the pervasive belief that one deserves special treatment, success, and more material things” (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 230). According to Hettich (2013), this belief often produces workers who feel they are entitled to come to work late, leave work early, and place a higher priority on their own personal concerns than on the requirements of their jobs. Advisors will find that this deeply engrained mind set (produced by parental leniency, lowered social standards, and a pervasive emphasis on self-esteem) is highly resistant to change, but without at least bringing it to the attention of their advisees, advisors will be placing them at risk during the hiring process and on-the-job.

Results

Professional Skills

During the Hiring Process. Professional skills such as organizing, planning, and carrying out projects; managing resources; and acting and dressing in a professional manner were the fifth most-often-reported employer-valued skills.

On-the-Job. Taking initiative (e.g., being self-motivated, volunteering for additional activities, and being a self-starter); displaying commitment and passion for the job; demonstrating competence acquired during internships and co-ops; and displaying desirable professional attributes (e.g., being dependable, patient, flexible, reliable, and friendly) were 4 of the top 13 reasons why new hires are promoted or given new assignments. Lack of motivation or work ethic and failure to take initiative were 2 of the top 10 reasons why new hires are disciplined or reprimanded and lack of motivation or work ethic was one of the six top reasons why they are fired.

Advice to Advisors

The advice advisors can provide about developing professional skills is similar to that presented in the previous section. Students most in need of this advice are those who have chosen to take the path of least resistance during their undergraduate education by deliberately seeking out easy classes taught by undemanding professors. These students should be made acutely aware of the negative consequences of the lack of professional skills in the work place and should be advised to seek out challenging courses whose instructors set the bar high by expecting students to demonstrate the same type of professional skills that will be required for success—and to avoid failure—in the workplace. Students should enroll in classes taught by instructors (a) who help their students develop a strong work ethic by providing them with opportunities to work hard and receive high grades only for excellent work; (b) who do not allow students to make up for low performance on assignments or tests with extra credit; (c) who require students to create, plan, organize, and carry out complex projects; (d) who promote professional behavior and appearance by modeling it themselves; and (e) who do not tolerate the kinds of behaviors in their classrooms that are unacceptable on-the-job (e.g., texting, surfing the Web, or receiving cell phone calls; coming to class unprepared to participate; sleeping, or behaving and dressing in a distracting manner that disrupts the learning process).

Another very important piece of advice advisors can provide is to get a job. Employment will provide the opportunity to develop professional skills, to explore an occupational area, and to gain a credible letter of recommendation. An added advantage of work experience according to Job Outlook 2013 (National Association of Colleges and Employers) is that 91% of employers prefer to hire candidates with work experience.

Technological Skills
Results

During the Hiring Process. Technological skills such as computer literacy, word processing, and email were the seventh most-often-reported employer-valued skills.

On-the-Job. Technological competence is 1 of the 10 top reasons why new hires are promoted or given new assignments. Inappropriate use of technology was 1 of the 10 top reasons why supervisors reprimand or discipline new college hires and one of the six top reasons why new hires are fired.

Advice to Advisors

Although undergraduates often appear to be technologically savvy, advisors must make them aware that texting their friends, checking their Facebook page, and shopping online are not skills valued by employers. In fact, the presence of these types of actions on-the-job can lead to highly undesirable outcomes. Employers expect their employees to choose and use appropriate technological tools to identify, locate, acquire, store, organize, display, analyze, and evaluate verbal, numerical, and visual information. Therefore, advisors should advise their advisees to enroll in classes that require (a) papers written with word-processing programs, (b) the organization of information with databases, (c) the manipulation of numbers with spreadsheets, (d) the analysis of data with statistical programs, (e) the location of information with search engines, (f) the enhancement of speeches with presentation software, and (g) communication with their instructors and fellow students via the Internet. Advisors should stress that savvy students master these computer skills in college so they do not have to learn them on-the-job.

Ethical Skills

During the Hiring Process. Ethical skills—based on appropriate ethical knowledge, the ability to make ethical decisions based on this knowledge, and the willingness to act on these decisions—were the seventh most-often-reported employer-valued skills.

On-the-Job. Unethical behaviors were listed as 1 of the 10 top reasons why new hires are reprimanded and as the top reason why they are fired.

Advice to Advisors

Although this was the least-often-mentioned skill by employers during the hiring process, it is an extremely important skill to emphasize during advising sessions because of the dire consequences for new hires who fail to demonstrate it on-the-job. Advisors should make advisees aware that job interviews can include questions designed to evaluate their ability to think and act in an ethical manner, such as “Tell me about a project you worked on that required you to be aware of and behave in accordance with a set of ethical principles.” The only way to answer this type of question in a credible manner is to have actually participated in such a project. Advisors can recommend engaging in research projects that require the creation of IRB protocols, writing assignments that must conform to APA-style guidelines that prohibit plagiarism (see Appleby, 2010), or an internship that involves the solicitation of informed consent from clients who may be exposed to potentially risky treatments. It is also absolutely essential for psychology faculty who serve as advisors to model ethical behavior for their advisees by being fair, honest, and professional with their students both in and out of the classroom.

Conclusions

There is a perfectly acceptable ethical explanation for why psychology faculty may be hesitant to offer advice to job-seeking psychology majors. Section 2.01 of APA’s (2010, para.1) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct states, “Psychologists provide services, teach, and conduct research with populations and in areas only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, consultation, study or professional experience.” This chapter was created to provide psychology faculty with a document that offers them data with a set of ethical principles.” The only way to answer this type of question in a credible manner is to have actually participated in such a project. Advisors can recommend engaging in research projects that require the creation of IRB protocols, writing assignments that must conform to APA-style guidelines that prohibit plagiarism (see Appleby, 2010), or an internship that involves the solicitation of informed consent from clients who may be exposed to potentially risky treatments. It is also absolutely essential for psychology faculty who serve as advisors to model ethical behavior for their advisees by being fair, honest, and professional with their students both in and out of the classroom.

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of these students from “The Great Unwashed” to “The Worthies” (Halonen, 2013, para. 7). On a more global level, this combination can also help American colleges and universities become more like high-performing American high schools that, “like their counterparts in many high-performing countries...are data-driven and transparent not only around learning outcomes [the overt curriculum], but also around soft skills like completing work on time, resilience, perseverance and punctuality [the covert curriculum]” (America Achieves, 2013, p. 10).


**References**

References marked with an asterisk indicate studies included in the meta-analysis.

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**Author Note**

I would like to thank Paul Hettich for introducing me to the concept of the covert curriculum and Eric Landrum for providing me with the incentive to gather the data upon which this chapter is based. I have created two sets of documents that psychology faculty can use to enable their advisees to benefit from the information in this chapter. The first set is a PowerPoint presentation and its accompanying handout that can be used during group-advising sessions. The second set consists of a cover letter and a skills-based (i.e., functional) resume that provide advisees with examples of how they can bring the skills they develop to the attention of potential employers during the hiring process. Contact me via E-mail to receive these documents as attachments. Correspondence to this chapter should be addressed to Drew Appleby, 107 Glentown Way NE, Atlanta, GA 32308. E-mail: dappleby@iupui.edu