

# Pride of Ownership: Do you Recognize the Value of Your Bachelor's Degree in Psychology?

Stacie M. Spencer, PhD  
MCPHS University

**P**RIDE OF OWNERSHIP is used in real estate to refer to the benefit of owning a home and to the pride homeowners demonstrate through the maintenance of their property. The term is often used to describe a home that is on the market as in “this home shows real pride of ownership.” Just as investing in a home results in pride, so should the investment you make in your bachelor's degree in psychology. The financial investment and the care you take in choosing your courses, developing knowledge and skills, and adding volunteer, internship, and research experiences should result in a pride in your degree that stands out when you put yourself on the job market.

In 2014–15, more than 117,550 students graduated with bachelor's degrees in psychology, making psychology the fourth most popular major three years in a row (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). If the psychology major is so popular, aren't psychology baccalaureates proud of their degrees? Unfortunately, outside of the bubble of the psychology department, the value of the major is frequently called

to question. And, many psychology baccalaureates don't see a connection between the knowledge and skills developed through the major and the jobs they get after college (Borden & Rajecki, 2000).

Whether at a family dinner, when introducing oneself in a social setting, or talking to strangers on the bus, there is an almost requisite set of questions that psychology majors are asked and comments that are made. “You're majoring in psychology? What are you going to do with that?” “You can't do anything with a psychology degree. All the psychology majors I know aren't doing anything with their degrees.” On a much larger scale, the value of the bachelor's degree in psychology entered the Twitter world in 2015 when presidential candidate Jeb Bush stated that psychology majors (and other liberal arts majors) end up working at Chick-fil-A (Mills, 2015).

## What Does Pride of Ownership Look Like?

A homeowner shows pride of ownership by taking care of the home and making it look good to others. People who are proud of

their bachelor's degree in psychology

- can describe the knowledge and skills gained through the major;
- are aware of the value employers place on the knowledge and skills gained through the psychology major;
- can apply the knowledge and skills gained through the major to a job that is stimulating and rewarding; and
- can explain the connection between the major and their job.

If you can't do one (or any) of these, don't worry. By the time you finish reading this article, you will be well on your way to developing a strong and threat-resistant pride in your undergraduate degree.

## Potential Threats to Pride of Ownership

There are several potential threats to your pride in having a bachelor's degree in psychology. These threats can come from others or from within yourself. The first three reflect misperceptions and the fourth reflects a lack of knowledge and experience.

## Threat #1: A Misunderstanding of the Differences Between Undergraduate Education and Occupational Training

*Education* refers to the development of a broad knowledge base and a broad set of skills that can be applied to a variety of contexts. *Training*, on the other hand, refers to the development of the skills needed for a specific job or occupation. Students in liberal arts majors like psychology, political science, and math are educated; students in bachelor's degree programs like nursing, accounting, and architecture are educated and trained.

When someone says, "You can't do anything with an undergraduate degree in psychology," the justification is that the undergraduate degree doesn't train psychology majors for a specific job. True. A bachelor's degree in psychology prepares psychology majors to succeed in a variety of jobs. In fact, psychology majors have the broad knowledge and skills that employers want. According to a study conducted by Hart Research Associates (2015), employers prefer employees with broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences, and with communication (oral and written), teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, information literacy, and ethical judgment and decision-making skills.

## Threat #2: A Misunderstanding of the Differences Between Careers, Occupational Titles, and Job Titles

Many people use the terms *career*, *occupation*, and *job* interchangeably. A *career* refers to the jobs or occupations a person engages in over a lifetime. Although you might get a job out of college and stay in that job for the entirety of your career, it is more likely that you will change jobs over the course of your career. For the most part, *occupation* and *job* mean the same thing; however, an *occupational title* is often very different than a *job title*. Think back to kindergarten career day and the ways in which your classmates answered the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I bet the answers included firefighter, police officer, nurse, doctor, veterinarian, chef/baker, teacher, and anything else that can be drawn easily or comes with a uniform. These are occupational titles. There are many other occupational titles, of course, but the outfits aren't as obvious or fun (e.g., accountant, lawyer, psychologist).

Job titles, on the other hand, are the names employers use to identify positions within their company. In some cases, a job title is the same as an occupational title. For example, *teacher* is an occupational title and a job title. In other cases, jobs titles do not have corresponding occupational titles. For example, an employer might seek to hire a Client Liaison, Administrative Coordinator, Student Support Specialist III, or Research Assistant II. I would be willing to bet that you went to college with the expectation you would pursue a career with a recognizable occupational title, not to get a job with a vague title that includes Roman numerals that reflect some employer-defined level. But you shouldn't devalue your degree just because a challenging and rewarding position has an unimpressive job title.

## Threat #3: The Expectation That the Name of the Major Should Appear in the Job Title

Liberal arts majors suffer the curse of the "ists," "ians," and "ers." For example, psychology majors are expected to become *psychologists*. Math majors are expected to become *mathematicians*. Philosophy majors are expected to become *philosophers*. The investment in the major isn't questioned when the occupational title includes the major with the appropriate suffix or when the psychology major becomes a psychiatrist, psychological scientist, psychology teacher/professor, or psychotherapist.

Judging the value of the bachelor's degree in psychology based on whether someone has a position with the word *psychology* in the title reflects a pervasive misunderstanding of the breadth of the field of psychology. There are many jobs that use the knowledge and skills developed through the psychology major but don't have *psychology* in the title. For example, software development companies need employees who can ensure a new app provides a solution to a human need, is interesting, and is easy to use. I don't know about you, but I don't care what that job is called because it sounds awesome. But I'm sure that if I had that job, someone would try to tell me the job is a waste of my undergraduate degree in psychology.

## Threat #4: Insufficient Career Exploration and Professional Development

*Career exploration* is the process of learning about yourself and about jobs that fit your values, interests, and strengths. *Professional development* is the process of developing the knowledge and skills needed to compete for the types of jobs that are a good fit for you. Both processes are important. Without knowing yourself (your values, interests, and skills) and without learning about a lot of different jobs, you can't know if a job or career path is appropriate for you. Pride of ownership is at risk when you don't have a clear idea of who you are and the ways in which the knowledge and skills you gained through the psychology major are connected to your job.





## Developing Pride of Ownership and Protecting Yourself From Potential Threats

I can tell you to be proud of the knowledge and skills developed through the major, and I can tell you that the knowledge and skills you gain through the major are important for a wide range of occupations and jobs. But pride comes from discovering it for yourself. Doing the following activities will open your eyes to how incredibly valuable your degree is.

**1**

### Review the Goals Outlined in *Guidelines 2.0*

*Guidelines 2.0* is short for *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major, Version 2.0* (2013). This document describes five goals every psychology major should achieve through the undergraduate curriculum. The five goals are (a) a knowledge base in psychology, (b) scientific inquiry and critical thinking, (c) ethical and social responsibility in a diverse world, (d) communication, and (e) professional development. This will help you understand why your degree is more than an accumulation of knowledge and will help you determine which goals you have met and which goals you need to work on.

**2**

### Read the Hart Research Associates Report

As mentioned already, Hart Research Associates (2015) published a report that describes the knowledge and skills that employers value. After you read the report, you will see that the APA goals align with the knowledge and skills valued by employers, and you will be able to think about how you can use the skills you develop through the major to sell yourself to potential employers.

**3**

### Look at Real Job Postings

Even if you are not ready to seek a full-time position, search Indeed.com or Monster.com using the term *bachelor*. As you read job descriptions, check off the required and preferred characteristics that correspond with the five goals outlined in *Guidelines 2.0*. Then, mark the qualifications you already meet and the ones you will meet by the time you graduate. You will discover many interesting jobs with uninteresting titles for which you will be qualified with your bachelor's degree in psychology.

**4**

### Explore Occupational Titles

Drew Appleby maintains an extensive list of occupational titles with links to descriptions and resources. The most recent version (Appleby, 2016) includes 300 titles and can be accessed through the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (see link in references). Another great resource is the O\*NET database through which you can search for specific occupational titles or within categories (e.g., occupations with a bright outlook, education level, industry, and even occupations within the green economy sector; <https://www.onetonline.org/find/>). Each occupation is described in terms of tasks, skills, knowledge, abilities, education, interests, values, work styles, and related occupations. Through this, you will discover the many ways in which the knowledge and skills developed through the psychology major are relevant to a broad range of occupations.

**5**

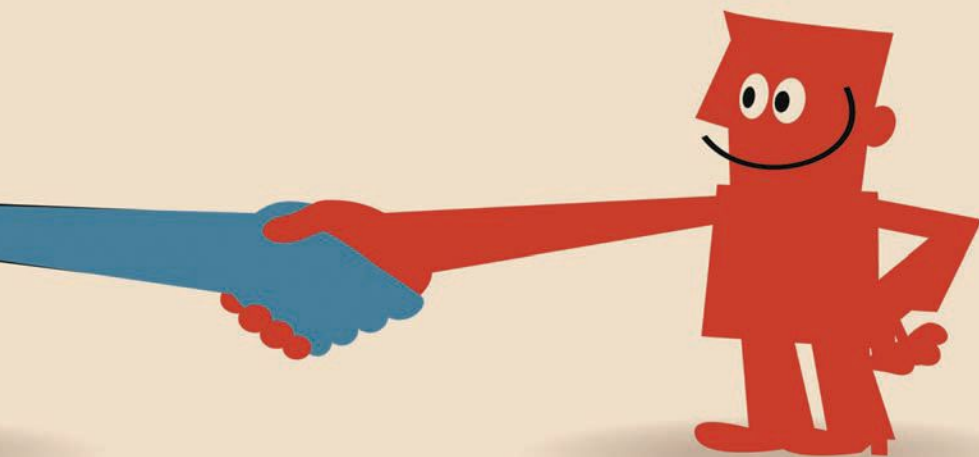
### Explore the Breadth of the Field of Psychology

One of the best ways to appreciate the value of your psychology degree is to learn more about the breadth of the field. Visit the websites for the Association for Psychological Science (APS; [psychologicalscience.org](http://psychologicalscience.org)) and the American Psychological Association (APA; [apa.org](http://apa.org)). Read the *Monitor on Psychology* ([apa.org/monitor/index.aspx](http://apa.org/monitor/index.aspx)) and the *APS Observer* ([psychologicalscience.org](http://psychologicalscience.org); click the link at the top of the page) to learn about hot topics in research, applications of psychology, and professionals in the field. For a quick view of the breadth of the field, scroll through the list of divisions within APA ([apa.org/about/division/index.aspx](http://apa.org/about/division/index.aspx)) and read about the divisions that grab your attention. There are 54 divisions, including everything from Development Psychology (Division 7) and the Society of Clinical Psychology (Division 12) to the American Psychology-Law Society (Division 41) and the Society for Media Psychology and Technology (Division 46).

**6**

### Think About Why You Chose to Major in Psychology

Which courses interest you most? How can your favorite topics be applied to a work setting? For example, if you loved human development, you can become a child psychologist, teacher, or pediatrician. But wouldn't it also be great to use your knowledge of physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development to determine the appropriate age recommendations for new toys?



## 7 Prepare an Elevator Pitch

An elevator pitch is a short summary used to sell something (in this case, yourself). Use this concept to quickly and concisely explain how your knowledge and skills align with a job you are pursuing. You can also use this concept to create responses to the questions and comments you will inevitably get about your degree.

## 8 Assess Yourself

Careeronestop ([careeronestop.org](http://careeronestop.org)) provides free online work values, interests, and skills assessments that link your results to the O\*NET descriptions for the occupations that best fit you and will help you identify the skills you need to develop to prepare for specific occupations. Visit the career center on campus to see what other assessments and resources are available.

## 9 Make Thoughtful Course Selections & Get Experience in a Variety of Settings

There should be plenty of room in your curriculum to select courses that will strengthen your knowledge and skillset. And, you should make time to include experiential opportunities. Choosing courses with attention to the knowledge and skills that employers seek, and acquiring diverse work, volunteering, and/or internship experiences will help you see the connections between the major and a variety of jobs.

## 10 Organize the Information You Generate Through These Activities

Collect the resources described here and others you discover as you explore careers, save interesting occupation descriptions and job postings, keep the many versions of elevator pitches, resumés, and cover letters you draft, and save your self-assessments. Store all these materials in one place along with goals, accomplishments, and notes (I highly recommend OneNote, a virtual notebook by Microsoft). As your collection grows and you reflect on what you discover along the way, I have no doubt your ability to articulate the value of your degree will improve and your pride will grow.

## Final Comments

Questions and comments about the value of your bachelor's degree in psychology are not likely to go away when you develop pride in your investment. Rather than get frustrated or defensive, help educate the people who question your degree. When someone asks what you will do with your degree or one day asks what psychology has do with your job, I hope you say, "Oh, my! Where do I begin?"

## References

- American Psychological Association. (2013). *APA guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major: Version 2.0*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/undergrad/index.aspx>
- Appleby, D. C. (2016). *An online career-exploration resource for psychology majors*. Society for the Teaching of Psychology's Office of Teaching Resources. Retrieved from <http://teachpsych.org/resources/Documents/otrp/resources/appleby16students.docx>
- Borden, V. M. H., & Rajcecki, D. W. (2000). First-year employment outcomes of psychology baccalaureates: Relatedness, preparedness, and prospects. *Teaching of Psychology, 27*, 164-168. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15328023TOP2703\\_01](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15328023TOP2703_01)
- Hart Research Associates. (2015). *Falling short? College learning and career success*. Retrieved from Association of American Colleges and Universities website: <http://www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research>
- Mills, C. (2015, October 24). *Jeb Bush: Psych majors work at Chick-fil-A*. *Washington Examiner*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/jeb-bush-psych-majors-work-at-chick-fil-a/article/2574851>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Bachelor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by field of study: Selected years, 1970-71 through 2014-15*. *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16\\_322.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_322.10.asp)



**Stacie M. Spencer, PhD**, is a professor of psychology and the director of the BS in Health Psychology program at MCPHS University (formerly the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences; Boston, MA). She received her PhD from Northeastern University, MA. Dr. Spencer teaches a series of career exploration and professional development courses, and conducts research on problem-focused learning and interprofessional education. You can contact her at [stacie.spencer@mcpchs.edu](mailto:stacie.spencer@mcpchs.edu).