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The skillful psychology student: Skills you will need to succeed in the 21st-Century workplace

Employer-valued skills that will prepare you for any career.

By Drew C. Appleby, PhD ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Appleby, Drew C.%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Appleby,Drew%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)), Jason Young, PhD ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Young, Jason%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Young,Jason%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)), Jaye Van Kirk, MA ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Van Kirk, Jaye%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Van%20Kirk,Jaye%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)), Jerry Rudmann, PhD ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Rudmann, Jerry%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Rudmann,Jerry%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)), Karen Z. Naufel, PhD ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Naufel, Karen Z.%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Naufel,Karen%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)), Stacie M. Spencer, PhD ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Spencer, Stacie M.%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Spencer,Stacie%20M.%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)), Paul Hettich, PhD ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Hettich, Paul%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Hettich,Paul%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)), Bernardo J. Carducci, PhD ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Carducci, Bernardo J.%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Carducci,Bernardo%20J.%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)), and Aaron S. Richmond, PhD ([https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Richmond, Aaron S. %22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Richmond,Aaron%20S.%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc))

The case for developing career skills

If someone asked you if you use your psychology knowledge in your job, most likely you would say, “No, I’m not using my psychology degree.” Unfortunately, by doing this you risk overlooking the value and preparation that your undergraduate psychology experience provided for your career. You do not have to go into a clinical practitioner (or other “psychology-sounding”) job, or graduate school to make use of the employer-valued skills you developed in order to succeed in any job. Indeed, the key here is to identify, understand, master and strategically highlight to employers the job-related skills you can develop as a psychology student.

The need for the skillful psychology student

The ability to emphasize the generalizable workplace skills that psychology provides has never been more critical. Employers make it abundantly clear that while acquiring academic knowledge is important, it's not enough. The ability of applicants to highlight job-relevant skills often grabs prospective employers' attention more effectively than a high GPA. As a result, we — as members of APA's Committee on Associate and Baccalaureate Education 21st-Century Skills task force — created an evidence-based list of the top transferable employer-valued skills that psychology students can develop if they take full advantage of the curricular and extracurricular opportunities their undergraduate educations offer. These are the employer-valued skills that will prepare you for success in the 21st Century workplace regardless of the occupation you enter.

How did we find and organize these skills?

Employers often spell out the range of skills they want applicants to possess. To assemble a list of the top skills needed to succeed in both the current and future workplace that can be learned in psychology, we searched thousands of online job ads (e.g., Indeed) and O*NET (the world's most comprehensive database of worker competencies and occupational requirements) for the frequency of skills and attributes derived from APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major (APA, 2013). Ultimately, we identified five basic skill domains with 17 individual skills that are integral to the mission of most undergraduate psychology programs and are key to successful workforce preparation. These skills fall under the domains of:

- Cognitive (e.g., creativity and information management).
- Communication (e.g., active listening and public speaking).
- Personal (e.g., conscientiousness and integrity).
- Social (e.g., collaboration and leadership abilities).
- Technological (e.g., flexibility and familiarity with hardware and software).

For further descriptions of these skills see The Skillful Psychology Student resource page (</careers/resources/guides/transferable-skills.pdf>) (PDF, 40KB).

A three-step strategy to prepare for your occupational future

Step one: Become aware of these skill sets so you can have a better appreciation of how your teachers' class assignments helped you build skills that will prepare you to achieve your future occupational goals. For instance, many research methods classes require group projects whose results can be presented during undergraduate research conferences. Such opportunities provide you with the opportunity to practice and strengthen all five of your skill sets as you collaborate with your peers to create and test hypotheses, create Institutional Review Board protocols that validate your scientific integrity, and demonstrate your public

speaking ability with the aid of presentation software such as PowerPoint.

Step two: Work with your academic advisor to choose classes and activities that will enable you to acquire and further strengthen these skillsets, beyond the classes needed to fulfill your basic graduation requirements. For example, given the crucial role of communication skills for job success, consider enrolling in classes such as interpersonal communication and technical writing.

Step three: Learn how to market these skills to potential employers. Following steps one and two will better prepare you for seeking assistance from your career center to help you effectively highlight your skills in the following manner during the job-search process.

- **Incorporate your skills into your resume.** For example, to emphasize your personal, cognitive and technological skills you could include, “Able to work independently to conscientiously collect, manage, and statistically analyze large sets of information.”
- Weave your skills into your cover letter. To highlight your social and communication skills, for example, you could include, “I worked as part of a collaborative research team, and I wrote the methods section of our report and presented the results of our study at an undergraduate research conference.”
- **Put your skills front and center in your interviews** by learning how to highlight them in a clear and compelling elevator pitch to use during job fairs and creating and practicing confident answers to challenging interview questions such as “How did your undergraduate education help you develop the skills needed to succeed in the job for which you are applying?”

Our recommendation is for you to put this three-step plan into action **now**, not tomorrow, not at the end of this semester, and absolutely not until after you graduate. Just remember that thousands of other psychology students will graduate with you. They all want good jobs too, but until they read this article, you will have the knowledge and a plan they do not yet possess.

References

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About the authors



Karen Z. Naufel, PhD, is a professor and undergraduate curriculum coordinator at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia. Her research interests are in the domain of applied social cognition. She also has strong interests in the ethics of research, increasing public understanding of psychological

science, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. She loves teaching everything from introductory psychology to psychology of evil. At the graduate level, she enjoys teaching research design and seminar in teaching psychology. Her accomplishments in teaching have been recognized at the university level, with the 2014-15 Award for Excellence in Instruction, and nationally, with the 2010 Jane S. Halonen Early Career Teaching Award from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology.



Aaron S. Richmond, PhD, is a professor of educational psychology and human development at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Richmond is a passionate teacher and approaches teaching by focusing on model teaching skills, such as, engaging students, being caring, respectful and prepared. As a result of his approach and dedication to teaching, Richmond has garnered several awards for excellence in teaching and mentoring including the Psi Chi Excellence in Teaching Award and the Society for Teaching of Psychology Jane S. Halonen Award for Excellence in Teaching. Additionally, in more than 75 peer reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters Richmond has explored effective pedagogical approaches to instruction in both k-12 and higher education. He specifically investigates cognitive and elaborative processes, model teaching competencies, the efficacy of instructional strategies, and various other topics in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Furthermore, as evident by publishing and presenting research with over 25 undergraduate and graduate students, Richmond strongly believes in mentoring students through the research process in hopes to help shape future leaders in psychology and SoTL research.



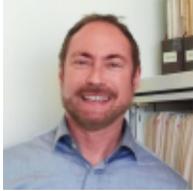
Drew Appleby, PhD, earned his BA from Simpson College in 1969 and his PhD from Iowa State University in 1972. He chaired Marian University's psychology department, was the director of Undergraduate Studies in the Indiana University Purdue School of Science Department of Psychology (IUPUI), and served as the associate dean of the IUPUI Honors College. He used his research on teaching, learning, advising and mentoring to help students develop academic competence and achieve their career aspirations. He published over 200 books and articles; made over 600 professional presentations (including 29 invited keynote addresses); received 44 institutional, regional and national awards for teaching, advising, mentoring and service; and was honored for his contributions to psychology by being named a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the 30th distinguished member of Psi Chi. Over 300 of his students earned graduate degrees in a wide variety of professional fields, and he was designated as a mentor by 777 IUPUI psychology majors, 222 of whom indicated he was their most influential mentor by selecting the following sentence to describe his impact: "This professor influenced the whole course of my life and his effect on me has been invaluable." Appleby retired from IUPUI with the rank of professor emeritus in 2011.



Jerry Rudmann, PhD, is professor emeritus of psychology at Irvine Valley College. Jerry's career experience includes human factor engineering for



Rockwell International (7 years), director of institutional research at Coastline College (7 years), Executive Director of Psi Beta (13 years) and teaching psychology fulltime (35 years). Rudmann has served on many of APA's Board of Educational Affairs task forces.



Jason Young, PhD, is professor of social psychology in the department of psychology at Hunter College of the City University of New York. His research investigates the impact of emotion on judgments and decision-making, such as how news media influence fear of crime, and how math anxiety affects every day financial decisions. From 2007-2014, he served on Psi Chi's board of directors, including the role of society president, during which major efforts were introduced to provide students with more effective tools for developing research and employment skills. More recently, he has been a member of several education-focused committees at APA to enhance not only the psychology major in general, but also the learning and occupational opportunities that we afford our graduate and undergraduate students. Recent projects he has been involved in include the APA Summit for the National Assessment of Psychology, and the booklet Top 20 Principles From Psychology for PreK-12 Teaching and Learning.



Jaye Van Kirk, MA, is a lifelong learner earning a BA in psychology (San Francisco State University), MA in experimental psychology (CSU Fullerton), ABD in psychobiology (Ohio State University) and MA in Zoology (Miami University). As a professor of psychology (San Diego Mesa College) she teaches career opportunities in psychology, introduction to research methods, physiological psychology and human sexuality. Jaye was invited to participate in two national conferences sponsored by APA including the 2008 National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology and the 2016 APA Summit on National Assessment of Psychology. She is currently serving on the CABE 21st Century Skills task force. She served as a civic scientist advocate for APA for Psychological research on Capitol Hill. Her honors include: Virginia Staudt Sexton Faculty Advisor Award, Asian Heritage Award (Education), SACNAS Community/Tribal College Mentor award and Weiten Teacher of the Year Award. As past national president for Psi Beta, she shares her passion for connecting students to opportunities for academic and professional development to help students successfully traverse the academic pipeline from undergraduate to graduate levels. She served as co-director of the NIH Bridges to the Baccalaureate program bridging ethnic minority scholars to opportunities to develop into the next generation of research scientists in biomedical and behavioral sciences.



Stacie M. Spencer, PhD, is professor of health psychology at MCPHS University (formerly known as Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences) and the director of the BS in health psychology program. She received her BA in psychology from Allegheny College and her PhD in experimental social and personality psychology from Northeastern University. She completed a post-

doctoral fellowship in behavioral medicine at the University of Miami and a post-doctoral fellowship in psycho-oncology at the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute. Spencer's research focus is on professional development and interprofessional education. She is recipient of the 2006 MCPHS Trustees' Award for Teaching Excellence.



Paul Hettich, PhD, earned degrees in psychology from Marquette University, New Mexico State University and Loyola University Chicago. He served as an Army personnel psychologist, program evaluator and applied research scientist — positions that created a “real-world” foundation for a 35-year career at Barat College (Illinois). He chaired the psychology department, served as academic dean and directed institutional research, grant writing and community college articulation. He was Barat's first recipient of the Sears-Roebuck Foundation award for teaching excellence and campus leadership, and taught at St. Clare's College in Oxford and the University of Stirling (Scotland). Following DePaul University's acquisition of Barat College, he headed the psychology program and retired as professor emeritus. Hettich is a fellow in Divs. 1 (General Psychology), 2 (Teaching of Psychology) and 52 (International Psychology) of APA. He has spoken at numerous conferences, published several peer reviewed journal articles and three book chapters, coauthored three books (including "Your Undergraduate Degree in Psychology from College to Career" with R E Landrum, 2014), and writes the “Wisdom from the Workplace” column for Eye on Psi Chi. His interest in workplace readiness issues derives from alumni and employer complaints about the disconnect between university and workplace cultures and practices.



Bernardo J. Carducci, PhD, was a professor of psychology at Indiana University Southeast, where he taught classes on personality psychology and introductory psychology for the 37 years and was the director of the Indiana University Southeast Shyness Research Institute. He was a fellow of Div. 1: General Psychology, Div. 2: Teaching of Psychology, Div. 8: Personality and Social Psychology, and Div. 52: International Psychology of the American Psychological Association; past national president of the Council of Teachers of Undergraduate Psychology, founding editorial board member of the *Journal of Business and Psychology*, past vice president and president of the Association of United Italian Psychologists. In addition to his research interest in the study of shyness, Bernie's professional writings related to such topics as teaching activities to enhance classroom instruction, student development and career opportunities for psychology majors have appeared in journals such as *Teaching of Psychology* and *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* in psychology and many other American Psychological Association sponsored publications on teaching. In 2015, Bernie was the first inductee into the Community College Pathway Psychologists (CCPP) Hall of Fame. Sponsored by Psi Beta, the National Honor Society in Psychology for Community and Junior Colleges, the CCPP Hall of Fame recognizes psychologists graduating from a community college or junior college who have made a significant contribution to the study of psychology.

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