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

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Pride 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.
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.
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.

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.

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) and the American Psychological Association (APA; apa.org). Read the Monitor on Psychology (apa.org/monitor/index.aspx) and the APS Observer (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.

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.

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?
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.

Assess Yourself

Careeronestop (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.

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.

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, resumes, 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


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