

# **Majoring in Psychology**

Achieving Your Educational  
and Career Goals

Jeffrey L. Helms and Daniel T. Rogers

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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## About the Authors



Dr. Helms is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Kennesaw State University where he joined the faculty in 2003. Prior academic appointments included teaching not only at the undergraduate level but also at the master's, specialist, and doctoral levels. His publications, research, and practice interests are predominantly in the areas of forensic psychology and the scholarship of teaching. He was an associate editor of the *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice* (2002–2009) and presently serves on its editorial board. Currently, he holds licensure

as a psychologist in Georgia and maintains a small private forensic and clinical consulting practice. His clinical experience includes work in the community mental health arena, inpatient psychiatric facilities, and multiple forensic environments. He has previously practiced and taught in California and Kentucky. Dr. Helms is a member of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychology-Law Society.



Dr. Rogers is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Kennesaw State University where he joined the faculty in 2005. His research and practice interests are in the areas of personality assessment, measurement, interpersonal and psychodynamic theories, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Currently, he holds licensure as a psychologist in Georgia. He previously practiced and taught in Michigan. His clinical experience includes work across the age spectrum and across levels of impairment, with emphasis on psychological assess-

ment and psychodynamic interventions. Dr. Rogers is a member of the American Psychological Association; the Division of Evaluation, Measurement, and Statistics; the Society for the Teaching of Psychology; and the Society for Personality Assessment.

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# Preface

This book grew out of our experience teaching and working with psychology students on issues related to academic and career success. Whether in the classroom of our Careers in Psychology course that addresses these topics, or in the midst of advising a student, we have developed a deep appreciation for how simultaneously exciting and overwhelming the process of pursuing academic and career goals can be. Students are passionate about discovering the options available to them and identifying their unique goals. Instructors relish the opportunity to guide students through this process and watch them succeed. However, students and instructors alike can at times feel lost given the range of complex issues involved in academic and career development. In fact, some of the most helpful information, strategies, and resources for meeting these goals go unused simply because students or their instructors are unaware of their existence. Our appreciation for this mixed experience from both the student's and instructor's perspectives led us to write this book.

This book provides students interested in psychology, and the instructors who work with them, with information that is vital to academic and career success in the field. As such, the book is an ideal text for courses that address aspects of majoring in psychology (e.g., academic strategies, career and graduate school preparation) and/or aspects of career planning (e.g., learning about the careers of psychologists in various subfields and their education and training). Students who are seeking to clarify their academic and career goals and develop knowledge and skills to support achieving these goals will find the book most helpful.

There are other texts available that concentrate on one or two of the areas covered in this book, such as selecting a career, navigating your academic path, or preparing for graduate school. Many of these texts are excellent resources, and we encourage students and instructors to examine them according to interest and need. However, our goal was to bring these and other related topics together in one place. In doing so, we compile sound, research-based information and strategies on succeeding as a psychology major and communicate them in an interesting and compelling way.

We hope that the book answers questions about the major and its career paths while supporting the pursuit of academic and career goals.

This book is divided into two sections. Part I concentrates on student success in achieving general educational and career goals. In this section we examine such issues as the utility of a psychology degree, strategies for academic success, career decision making, and employment and graduate school preparation. In addition to content, the chapters offer suggested exercises, readings, and resources to enhance understanding of the issues at hand. Part II of the book concentrates on student success in achieving specific educational and career goals. In this section we examine the various career options within psychology and issues related to these careers. Each chapter addresses a major area within psychology and provides valuable information about the focus, training, and work of individuals with careers in these areas. The chapters also include information about relevant career options at both the graduate *and* bachelor's levels. In addition to suggested exercises, readings, and resources, each chapter offers a glimpse into the careers and perspectives of two nationally recognized psychologists working in their respective subfield.

It is our belief that success as a psychology major cannot simply be defined as earning good grades, securing a job after graduation, or gaining acceptance into graduate school. Instead, success involves becoming a strong student who is well informed not only about the field but also about her or his relationship to it. As such, we hope that this book serves as a reliable and trustworthy guide both for students curious about the field and their place within it and for instructors who are assisting them in their pursuit.



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**Part I**

# **Majoring in Psychology**



# Why Major in Psychology?

## Introduction

Psychology is a fascinating and diverse field of study. It attracts students with varied backgrounds, interests, and abilities, all of whom come to the field hopeful that psychology is a good fit for them. In addition to pursuing topics that they find compelling, these students stand to benefit from devoting themselves to the study of such a broad field. Psychology's breadth is what makes it possible for students to acquire a wide range of knowledge and skills that are applicable to a variety of careers. In other words, psychology offers many different things to many different types of individuals. Consider for a moment three such students, all undergraduates majoring in psychology.

Valerie is 19 years old and always knew she would go to college. Since middle school she had planned to become a teacher, so she first chose education as her major. However, after taking several introductory courses and talking with faculty members in the education department, Valerie decided that teaching was not for her. She next considered majoring in nursing, but the admission standards for the local nursing programs are highly competitive. Valerie feared that the grades she earned in two courses required for the nursing program would make her acceptance unlikely. One day last semester, Valerie's roommate described an interesting demonstration her psychology professor had presented in class. This reminded Valerie of her interest in psychology in high school, and she decided to take a course to see what psychology was like at the college level. Valerie enjoyed the course and performed well, so she decided to change her major to psychology. When she recently mentioned the change to her parents, they were not especially positive. They asked questions about what she could do with the degree and how her career options would compare to those of education or nursing majors. Valerie was unsure how to answer their questions because she had not yet given much thought to what she can or will do with her degree. But, she figures that if so many other people major in psychology, there must be employment options for her.

Katrina is 37 years old and has attended college at several points in the past at two different institutions. Most recently she stopped attending after the birth of her first child. She then resumed working full-time and was unsure if she would ever return to school to complete her degree. Now that her children are older and her financial status is more secure, she has decided to return to college part-time in order to get back into the academic routine. Ever since she was young, Katrina has had a desire to become a clinical psychologist. She was involved in family therapy as a child and individual therapy as an adolescent. She has fond memories of the psychologists she interacted with and the benefits of these treatments. Since then she has taken it upon herself to read psychological theory and some of the latest research in the field. Now that she is returning to school again, Katrina has committed herself to taking her education seriously and staying focused on her career goal. She knows meeting this goal will require completing her bachelor's degree and then moving on to complete her doctorate. Although Katrina is excited to begin moving forward along this path, she is also concerned about starting what feels like a long road ahead.

Ajay is 25 years old. He began college two years ago after working for several years in his family's business. His first major was computer science, an area of interest for him since high school. His teachers, family, and friends encouraged him to pursue this major given his talents and technological skills. He enjoyed the courses at first, but later realized that he did not feel passionate about the topics or the prospects of future careers in the field. Due to his growing apathy, and his working 30–40 hours a week, Ajay's grades suffered. Then he took a psychology course several semesters ago and started a dialogue about his interests with the professor. As a result, Ajay decided to switch majors to psychology. Since that time he has invested himself in his coursework and excelled academically. After serving as a research assistant in one of his professor's labs over the past year, Ajay is now planning to pursue a research career in cognitive psychology. He intends to merge his computer science skills with his developing interest in human memory. Although changing majors extended his graduation date for another year, Ajay now knows exactly what it is he wants to do in his career and has worked diligently to learn about the field, improve his academic skills, and gain valuable experience.

Valerie, Katrina, and Ajay represent typical undergraduate psychology majors. Some of you will identify with one or more aspects of their histories and experiences. Others of you may not see parts of yourself in these particular students, but there are still several things you all have in common. Each of you has decided to major in psychology, or seriously consider it, as a result of intertwining experiences and life circumstances. Each of you has found something intrinsically interesting about the field. Each of you is hoping that this major will be the one that satisfies your interests and allows you to accomplish your goals. In essence, each of you hopes that you have found a home in psychology.

As professors of psychology who have taught, advised, supervised, and mentored thousands of undergraduate students in all areas of their academic and career pursuits, we have worked with many students like Valerie, Katrina, Ajay, and you. We are highly invested in helping all students succeed in the ways that best match their goals. In doing this, we encounter students on a daily basis who could have benefited from