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The Psychology Career Playbook: Developing and Achieving Your Professional Goals.
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CHAPTER 1

What Skills Will You Learn with a Psychology Degree?

Chapter 1 is the first of four chapters in Part I ("How Does a Psychology Degree Prepare You for a Range of Career Options?"). This chapter enables you to gain more awareness of the versatility of a psychology degree in order to help you answer the key question in Part I. This awareness of the kinds of skills that you gain with a psychology degree helps to facilitate your preparation for a variety of career and professional and personal goals, now and for the future. Read on to start learning more about the awareness and skills available to use with your psychology degree and why these matter for your future career.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:

- In what ways will a degree in psychology help you to accomplish your personal and professional goals?
- What are the learning goals for the undergraduate psychology major?
- Does a psychology degree yield any unique skills?
- What kinds of degrees are offered in psychology?
- Why does knowing your skills matter for your career?

As you begin this journey of exploring your career goals and pathways, take some time to reflect on how you chose to focus on psychology as a major. You can start by answering some questions. As Sinek (2009) emphasizes, it's important to "start with why" so that you can take action toward your career. To start the important process of self-exploration on your career journey, you can begin with why you chose this major. You can get started with knowing your "why" by responding to the questions in *Activity 1.1. Why Did You Choose Psychology as Your Major?*

> ***Did You Know?*** A significant predictor of why people choose to major in psychology is having an enjoyable experience in one's first psychology course in college (Marrs, Barb, & Ruggiero, 2007).

However you came to select psychology as your major, I am excited that you are here and part of a growing group of over 1.5 million

ACTIVITY 1.1. Why Did You Choose Psychology as Your Major?

Directions: Answer the questions below about how you chose to pursue further study in psychology. The purpose of this activity is to help you to learn more about the thinking process of your decision and factors that led to your decision. Feel free to use more space for each question on a separate page.

1. Why did you declare your major in psychology? (or Why are you considering this major?)
2. Did you always know that this was the right major for you? If so, what made you so confident? If not, what led you to this point?
3. Was it a teacher, mentor, or professor who led to your interest in the major? If so, what was it about this person or interaction that facilitated your interest?
4. Did you take a specific course that led you to declare your major in psychology? If it was, what was it about that course that led you to choose this major?

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psychology bachelor's degree recipients as their highest earned degree in the United States who are in the workforce (American Psychological Association, 2021a). You are like so many others who chose their major because of the interesting subject matter, career, and professional opportunities. Even though it's not hard to find people who agree about the fascinating nature of the major, not all students have a realistic understanding of careers in psychology. As a starting point, go ahead and complete *Activity 1.2. Three Questions* to get a baseline of how well you know yourself as it relates to psychology careers. As a heads up, you will also be completing a comparable activity again, except with an extra question in Chapter 6's *Activity 6.1. Four Questions* near the end of the book as a comparison of your self-knowledge as it relates to your future career.

In What Ways Will a Degree in Psychology Help You to Accomplish Your Goals?

Unless you have done your own personal research prior to reading this book, you might not know the full extent to which the undergraduate degree can help you with so many of your career and personal goals. A key value to a psychology degree is that it provides flexible options for your career, whether you are choosing to pursue a career in psychology or not. Walker and Appleby (2022) offer a growing list of more than 300 jobs that one can pursue with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Indeed, one major determining factor in job satisfaction among millennial and Gen Z workers was job flexibility (Waworuntu, Kainde, & Mandagi, 2022). By choosing a major that can lead to a range of professional options, you are already taking the next step to increased work satisfaction. As you will see in Chapter 2, the undergraduate degree can prepare you for hundreds of career opportunities, whether you choose to attend graduate school or go directly into the workforce after college graduation.

> **True or False:** *You need to know exactly what you want to do with your degree in psychology before you declare your major.* This statement is false. Because of the range of skills that you will gain as a psychology major, you will be prepared to consider a range of professional opportunities during college, and even while you are in the workforce. Just as you are growing and developing, your career and professional goals may also grow and change. Challenge yourself and

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ACTIVITY 1.2. Three Questions

Directions: Answer the three questions below about your interests, abilities, and personality. The purpose of this activity is to help you to identify a good career match. You may interpret these questions as you see fit. Feel free to use more space for each question on a separate page.

1. This is a two-part question about how you want to be spending your work time:
   a. At this point in time, what do you currently want to do with your career? If you are not sure, write down careers that you really could see yourself enjoying, knowing your *current* self.

   b. Assuming that you can't truly know what your *future* self will want to be doing for work in 10 years, what are some ways that you are willing to (or not willing to) compromise in your work life? For example, let's imagine that your current self dreams of being a tenured professor at a major research university. But your future self recognizes that this might mean spending more time away from your family than you would prefer, so you may not be willing to compromise on your family life in order to have your dream job.

2. What are your strengths? If you are not sure how to respond to this, consider your talents, skills, or proficiencies. More specifically, what talents, skills, or "superpowers" have others told you that you have in the past? If you are not sure, feel free to ask people who know you well and write their responses here.

3. What is your preferred style of working with others? If you are not sure, first consider your personality traits and more specifically Costa and McCrae's (1992) "Big 5" personality traits of extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, and/or openness to experience. How do you think that (any of) these five traits impact your preferences for work setting and type of work, as well as job satisfaction?

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grow your skill set so that you always have a job that you find fulfilling.

Knowing more about the skills in the psychology major, you will be able to showcase your selection of major when faced with people who don't see the versatility of the psychology degree. Chapters 1 and 2 offer many examples of skills and job options for people pursuing a psychology degree, regardless of whether the degree is at the graduate or undergraduate level. If someone you know is not entirely sure about the skills inherent in the major, there are multiple ways to help them understand the myriad opportunities that follow psychology training (Halonen, 2019). First, take the opportunity to correct any misconceptions about how successful psychology majors are in the workforce, using the data or information described in this book, especially in Chapter 2. Second, take the initiative to consider how each of your courses in psychology helps to build your work skills. For example, your Research Methods class helps you to design objective ways to understand problems. Finally, be prepared to communicate these skills you learned in your coursework and applied experiences effectively with potential employers or graduate programs. The chapters and activities in this book will help you to follow through with Halonen's (2019) suggestions and solidify your own confidence in choosing psychology as a versatile major for multiple career options after graduation.

In addition to preparing you for the workforce if you choose not to pursue further education, the psychology major also sets you up for professional flexibility after college if you choose to pursue further academic and professional training, whether inside or outside of psychology. If your goal is to provide psychological therapy, for licensure to practice in most states, you need advanced graduate training, at the master's or doctoral level, followed by licensure in the state in which you want to provide therapy. Although each program can vary in terms of where it is housed in the university, these programs are most often found in a psychology department (e.g., for a MA/MS or PhD/PsyD in a clinical/counseling psychology), department of education (e.g., for a MA/MS in Marriage and Family Therapy, MA/MS in Counseling, or Doctorate of Education/EdD), or graduate/professional school (e.g., for a Master's in Social Work/MSW). You may choose to attend medical school to earn a Medical Doctor (MD) or a Doctor of Osteopathy (DO) degree to pursue psychiatry. You can also pursue training as a nurse or allied health professional

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(e.g., Occupational, Speech, or Physical Therapist) with an undergraduate degree in psychology. Of course you are not limited to pursuing an advanced degree or training in the health field with a psychology major. You may want to have a career as a lawyer, so you attend law school for a Juris Doctor (JD) degree. Your career options are flexible with the psychology degree, and although some choose to further their education in psychology, others may choose other disciplines to study after college.

Although most people choose graduate school for the specialized training, one outcome of further education is generally higher salaries. When making a decision about career or degree options, salary is an important consideration, and it is important for you to know how advanced education impacts overall salary across a career. For example, people with a bachelor's degree earned a median $2.8 million more during their career than people who ended their formal education at high school (Carnevale, Cheah, & Wenzinger, 2021). If you think that this is a lot of money, consider the differential for those who go on to pursue graduate school. If you are like those in the study with a master's degree, you will earn a median $3.2 million over a lifetime, and pursuing a doctoral degree could enable you to earn a median $4 million (Carnevale et al., 2021). Just because two degrees can lead to comparable outcomes, the path to getting there may be different, and so is the salary. For example, you can have your dream career as a private practice owner as a marriage and family therapist (with an MFT), or psychologist (with a PsyD or PhD), yet your choice of degree will result in different tuition costs, different scholarship or graduate funding options, and time to start in the workforce after graduation. You will learn more about these degrees (also described in Table 1.1), financial considerations, as well as whether graduate training is the right choice for you and your professional goals in Chapter 7.

What Are the Learning Goals for the Undergraduate Psychology Major?

Now that you have seen the versatility and some of the benefits of the degree in preparing you for your future career, you might be surprised to learn that each course in the psychology major is intentionally designed for your learning. Your professors and your academic department thoughtfully established a set of classes and learning opportunities (e.g.,

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TABLE 1.1. Comparison of Different Degrees in Psychology

Degree	Purpose	Length of Time to Completion	Professional Opportunities
Associate of Arts (AA)	Foundational coursework in the psychology major.	Usually 2 years of college, often at the lower division level and usually completed at a community college.	Preparation for transferring to college to earn a bachelor's degree, or entry level educational requirements for certain jobs.
Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science (BA or BS)	General coursework in the psychology major, including lower division (foundational) classes and upper division classes (often around main specific subfields of psychology). See Figure 1.1 for the Five Learning Goals in the major.	Usually 4 years of college coursework; completed at a 4-year college or university.	A bachelor's degree is required for entry to graduate school at the master's or doctoral level (psychology major preferred). This general degree will help you prepare for a range of careers inside and outside the field of psychology.
Master of Arts or Master of Science (MA or MS)	More specialized coursework in psychology, often in a selected subfield.	Usually 2–3 years of college coursework; completed at a 4-year college or university.	A master's degree is not required for a doctorate in psychology. This more specialized degree will help prepare you to work in the field of psychology (e.g., as a counselor).
Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Psychology (PhD or PsyD)	Highly specialized coursework in a specific subfield of psychology. If you choose the PhD, your training will be more focused on research in that subfield. If you choose a PsyD, your training will focus more on applied, and often clinical, coursework and internships.	Usually 5–7 years of graduate coursework; completed at a university setting. Any graduate work completed at a different university may or may not transfer over.	This highly specialized degree will help prepare you to work in a specific subfield of psychology.

Note. These are the degrees most often housed in departments of psychology. Other mental health fields of study, such as counseling and marriage and family therapy, are often housed in departments of education.

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internships, clubs) in order to help you maximize your learning in the field of psychology. They did not just come up with these ideas without guidance. Instead, they likely based curricular and cocurricular activities on the American Psychological Association's guidelines for the psychology major. As our flagship membership organization in psychology, the American Psychological Association (2020) has identified five key pillars or foundational content domains of psychology, including biological, cognitive, social–personality, development, and physical–mental health. These five key areas are first presented in students' foundational coursework, such as Introductory Psychology, taken by majors and nonmajors, with more in-depth exploration throughout the major in required coursework in these five areas (American Psychological Association, 2020). You will be pleased to know that your faculty members are regularly making decisions about the best way to design or update the major requirements to maximize your learning experience, with guidance from the American Psychological Association. Also, because of the value that psychologists place on research, the American Psychological Association focus on best research-based teaching and learning practices to support undergraduates. Whether you are attending community college, a large public research-intensive university, or a small liberal arts primarily undergraduate college, the learning goals of the psychology major are relatively consistent across the psychology undergraduate major requirements. Figure 1.1 shows the American Psychological Association's (2023a) Five Learning Goals, along with sample outcomes for each goal.

Does a Psychology Degree Yield Any Unique Skills?

Yes. It offers some unique "superpowers," and skills also offered in other majors (Chew, 2021). For example, employers consistently report that they want job candidates to have skills in critical thinking, problem solving, collaborative skills, professionalism, and communication (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019). These skills are in line with American Psychological Association's five learning goals of the major, as shown in Figure 1.1. Also, these skills shown in Figure 1.1 are inherent in a liberal arts degree and are foundational to the psychology major (Landrum & McCarthy, 2018). But the psychology major goes further to help students develop unique skills throughout the undergraduate major curriculum. For example, our majors are encouraged to regularly

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American Psychological Association's Five Goals for the Psychology Major	Example Outcomes
1. Content Knowledge and Applications	• Describe key theories and ideas in psychology • Solve problems using psychological information
2. Scientific Inquiry and Critical Thinking	• Use psychological science to test psychological ideas • Design and evaluate research using psychology research methods
3. Values in Psychological Science	• Apply ethics in psychology across multiple contexts • Use psychological insights to make people's lives better
4. Communication, Psychological Literacy, and Technological Skills	• Display scientific literacy • Use effective oral and written communication
5. Personal and Professional Development	• Identify professional plans after earning a psychology degree • Use appropriate self-management skills

FIGURE 1.1. American Psychological Association's five goals (and example outcomes) for the undergraduate psychology major (based on American Psychological Association, 2023a). Guidelines for the undergraduate major, 3.0.

practice and apply ethical and data-driven problem-solving approaches using psychological principles in order to understand and facilitate positive human functioning.

There are numerous examples of how you can use the knowledge from your psychology coursework to identify your specialized skills for your future career. For example, from your Human Memory and Cognitive Psychology courses, you discern the conditions that help to maximize learning (Chew, 2021). From your Clinical Psychology or Health Psychology courses, you learn about mental health challenges and how to manage stress (Chew, 2021). From your foundational Research Methods and Statistics classes, and across other coursework including capstone projects, you discover the process of conducting research and analyzing data in order to solve problems (Chew, 2021). This understanding of research methodology applied to human behavior facilitates an understanding of

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scientific literacy that goes beyond that of other majors in science who also use the scientific method (Macias, 2019). You can identify biases and prejudicial beliefs that can often lead to social problems starting in early coursework and in upper division coursework such as Social Psychology (Chew, 2021). You learn about individual differences in human behavior as early as Introduction to Psychology and in coursework such as Personality Theories (Chew, 2021).

If you can get in the habit early on of seeing how your course learning outcomes map onto specific skills that you develop in the major, then you can market yourself better for future professional opportunities that are a good match for you (Schweinsberg, Mundy, Dyer, & Garivaldis, 2021). Figure 1.1 is a great starting point for thinking about your unique skill set. In particular, by mapping your unique skills and knowledge to each course in your major, you are also taking the initiative in the American Psychological Association's Learning Goal #5, which emphasizes personal and professional development. Ultimately, this intentional thinking and application to your major will help you to maximize your awareness of the range of career opportunities available to you, given your vast skill set, as a psychology degree holder.

What Kinds of Degrees Are Offered in Psychology?

There are a number of degrees that you can earn in the field of psychology, and your coursework curriculum leading to these degrees follows a general framework. At the undergraduate level (Associate of Arts, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science), you usually start the major with an introductory, or survey, course in the field of psychology. Then you start your pathway of developing your knowledge and skill set in statistics and research methods. This is usually followed by more advanced coursework in the five foundational domains or pillars (e.g., biological, cognitive, social–personality, development, and physical–mental health), grounded in ongoing understanding of research design in each of these content courses. At the graduate level, you will gain more specialized and empirically based knowledge, often in one of the foundational domains or subfields of psychology. Your level of specialization and type of training is based on the graduate degree that you pursue in psychology (Master of Arts, Master of Science, Doctorate of Psychology, or Doctorate of Philosophy in Psychology). See Table 1.1 for a summary of the goals,

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completion time, and professional opportunities for the different options for psychology degrees.

At community college, you are working toward an AA degree and/or taking coursework to prepare you for work and/or for transfer to a 4-year college or university setting. A community college degree provides you with foundational coursework in psychology, usually at the lower division level, such as Introduction to Psychology, as well as Statistics, and Research Methods in Psychology. At the college or university level, you will be working toward an undergraduate (Bachelor's) or graduate (Master's or Doctorate) degree. The coursework you complete in the undergraduate psychology major will start with lower-division foundational classes comparable to foundational coursework you would complete at the community college. Next, your upper-division coursework will often include classes in the main subfields of psychology such as clinical, social, cognitive, developmental, and biological psychology in alignment with the American Psychological Association's (2023a) Five Learning Goals in the major (See Figure 1.1). For a list of sample courses offered in each pillar, see Chapter 3 (Table 3.1). The bachelor's degree training will help you to do a range of jobs or pursue advanced training in psychology or nonpsychology fields. After earning your undergraduate degree in psychology, you may not be ready, or choose, to work toward a formal graduate degree, but you may instead pursue certification in related fields so that you can be a Life Coach, Substance Abuse Counselor, or Registered Behavior Technician.

At the graduate school level, the American Psychological Association does not have a specific list of learning outcomes comparable to what you saw in Figure 1.1, but each school has its own set of learning goals, coursework, and training requirements. Instead, the skills you learn will be more specific to your chosen subfield and specialized field of study, in preparation to work in that specific field. As an example, as an undergraduate, you may take a course called Empirically Validated Treatments that considers evidenced-based therapies from a biopsychosocial perspective; however, in graduate school, may take a more specialized course that focuses on one of these empirically validated treatments such as a course in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. Just as the course offerings can vary slightly within each main curricular pillar in your undergraduate program (based on faculty specialty and curricular emphasis), at the graduate level, your course offerings and experiences will vary depending on whether your program emphasizes more of a scientific or applied study

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of a subfield of psychology. So, for example, if you choose a research-oriented PhD program in clinical psychology, you might do research on clinical therapy outcomes, whereas if you choose a more practice-focused PsyD program in clinical psychology, you might spend your time taking classes on building your clinical skills and completing internships that enable you to practice those specific clinical skills.

Regardless of what kind of degree you are working toward, in all of these academic settings, you will usually find access to a range of support to help you to learn and advance your skill set, including mentors and advisors, internship opportunities, leadership opportunities in clubs or research labs, access to grants to support your academic goals, professional opportunities, and more. Take advantage of these opportunities. Learning does not just occur in the classroom setting, and these opportunities will enable you to practice or advance your academic skill set in other settings. Also, for many of these opportunities, no prior experience is needed, so don't be shy about applying for opportunities.

Why Does Knowing Your Skills Matter for Your Career?

You might already know that most employers value your work skills over grades or college coursework (Hettich, 2021). Research among Gen Z graduates found that job satisfaction was associated with a range of factors including supportive supervisors and work communities, opportunities for self and skill development, and work that is personally meaningful (Waworuntu et al., 2022). This is precisely why you want to know your specific interests, skills, and values. This way, when you are applying for a grant, job, internship, and/or graduate school, you will be able to better target your ideal job or career, and then market yourself accordingly. Be sure to complete *Activity 1.2. Three Questions*, to see how your skills, interest, and personality can help you to find the best career match for you.

Employers and/or graduate admission programs value candidates who can directly relate their skills and experiences to the job or program for which they are applying (American Psychological Association, 2023a). By recognizing the learning outcomes of your courses and how those outcomes map to specific skills, and knowing how to market yourself and your skills (Schweinsberg et al., 2021), you can make yourself attractive to selection committees for graduate school or hiring committees for

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jobs. Furthermore, you can also target the kinds of opportunities that match your skill set and interests. Unfortunately, graduates have difficulty articulating their skill set and even seeing how their coursework and experiences have prepared them for their next professional step. Another reason for knowing these skills is that you can be more confident in professional settings and in your readiness to enter the workforce (Schweinsberg et al., 2021) with your strong set of skills. However, by being here and reading this book, you are becoming familiar with your skills and preparing yourself to stand out for future opportunities.

With this in mind, take some time to reflect on some of the skills that you have by being a psychology major. I hope you can see how well positioned psychology majors are for a range of roles in the job market (Naufel et al., 2018). This is because majors develop a range of skills through their coursework and applied experiences in the major. These include cognitive skills (e.g., critical thinking), written and oral communication, personal development (e.g., adaptability), social skills (e.g., collaboration), and awareness and flexibility with technological systems (Naufel et al., 2018). This versatile skill set has led some scholars to identify the psychology major as a "premier choice" for career preparation (Halonen, 2014). You will read more about the range of professional skills (Conroy, Lin, & Stamm, 2021a) that employers value in Chapter 2's section "Myth 2: The Psychology Major Won't Prepare You with the Necessary Skills to Get a Job after College."

Contemporary employers are looking for applicants who hold certain skills and attributes developed in their undergraduate coursework and applied experiences (Gray, 2024). The top five attributes that employers seek on a résumé are in line with all five of the American Psychological Association (2023a) Learning Goals for the psychology major described in Figure 1.1. These top five skills valued by employers include problem solving (88.7%), ability to work as part of a team (78.9%), written communication skills (72.7%), and a strong work ethic (71.6%), along with flexibility and adaptability (70.1%) (Gray, 2024). Interestingly, the percentage of employers who reported screening candidates based on grade point average (GPA) has been declining over time, from 70.1% in 2017 to 38.3% in 2024 (Gray, 2024). A strong GPA is not enough in the current job market to get a job; instead, students are having to showcase their skills and experiences beyond their GPAs (Gray, 2024). When employers are choosing between two equally qualified candidates, the top three influential attributes that influence the decision are whether

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the candidate completed an internship with the organization or completed an internship in the industry, followed by the candidate's major (Gray, 2024). Check out Chapter 8 to learn more about how you can have a competitive edge by completing work or an internship while still in college. As you can see, by selecting the psychology major, you are still not only able to get a job but you also have a wide range of options based on the skills and opportunities, including internships, to highlight your skills to potential employers.

When applying for graduate programs, you want to know exactly what those selection committees want to see in potential applicants. Chapter 7 has more details on how to best prepare for graduate school and how to best market your skills in your application.

Even on a more personal level, you might simply want to expand your own knowledge and skills to enhance your life. If so, you would be in good company. People who are happiest at work are those who enjoy their work activities (Charles-Leija, Castro, Toledo, & Ballesteros-Valdés, 2023); understanding oneself about what someone would find enjoyable for work is an important element of one's career development and certainly the goal of this book. Given the psychology major's emphasis on understanding human thoughts and behavior, you might not be surprised to learn that job satisfaction of graduate degree recipients in psychology indicates that they are quite satisfied in their jobs, especially in terms of independence, contribution to society, and intellectual challenge inherent in the work (Conroy, Lin, & Christidis, 2019). Psychology bachelor's degree recipients' top four ratings of satisfaction were independence, job location, job security, and level of responsibility (American Psychological Association, 2021a). It is noteworthy that 85% of over 2 million bachelor's degree holders in psychology reported on the benefit of job security (American Psychological Association, 2021a). This is good news for psychology degree holders; given that their job security is higher, they are at less risk of other negative outcomes associated with job insecurity such as poor health and negative job-related and organizational-related attitudes and behaviors (Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002).

Conclusion

By choosing the psychology major, you are choosing a versatile major that prepares you for a range of career choices inside and outside field of

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psychology. You can increase this versatility by knowing how to identify and showcase the skills that you learn in your major. Unless you have taken a Career Development course, or you complete a capstone-type course that shows how each course in the major is integrated and builds on others, it can be difficult to see or understand how your coursework in the major comes together to enhance your future career development. When students take a career preparation course or they take the initiative to prepare early like you are doing by reading this book, they have a better understanding of careers in psychology, are more decisive about their future, and have more self-awareness as it relates to professional development (Ciarocco, 2017). Feel free to return to this chapter to remind yourself when you are applying for jobs or graduate about the skills and knowledge you have that will make you a successful candidate in a range of academic and professional opportunities. Read on in Chapter 2 to learn about the people who have chosen to pursue advanced training in psychology. If you have not already done so, you might even decide to pursue graduate education in psychology as well.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- To learn more about careers in psychology and different degrees, see American Psychological Association (2021a), *Careers in Psychology* [Interactive data tool]. Author.
- Learn more about the major, and relevant information about preparing for a career in psychology, by subscribing to the American Psychological Association's Psychology Student Network Newsletter.

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