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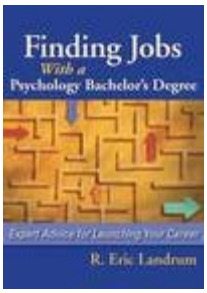


# The Blessing and the Curse of the Psychology Major

A Review of

Finding Jobs With a Psychology Bachelor's Degree: Expert Advice for Launching Your Career
by R. Eric Landrum
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009. 158 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0437-3. $29.95, paperback

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Not too long ago, a psychology major (I'll call her Sandy) was perusing a Careers in Psychology bulletin board outside my office. The bulletin board, created by our Career Services office, listed a large number of job titles held by our alumni. When I asked Sandy if she saw any good jobs, she replied, "There are so many jobs up here, but I don't know what any of these really are."

I often tell both prospective and current students that the psychology major is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that the psychology curriculum prepares students to be successful in many different careers. The curse is exactly the same. There are many opportunities available for psychology graduates, but it can be difficult to choose a particular direction. Fortunately, there are resources available to help students wade through the possibilities. Landrum's *Finding Jobs With a Psychology Bachelor's Degree: Expert Advice for Launching Your Career* is a unique and useful contribution to this list of resources.

An important benefit of career resources for psychology majors should be to help students better understand how the skills they are learning apply in the workforce. When students say things like, "I can't get a good job because I'm just a psychology major," they are selling themselves short. Landrum's book will help students appreciate how the psychology major has prepared them for jobs they might not have even imagined.

Data from the U.S. Department of Education (Torpey, 2008) indicate that students who majored in the social and behavioral sciences ranked eighth out of nine fields in average earnings ($26,500) one year after graduating. In contrast, students who earned degrees in the social and behavioral sciences were in the middle of the pack in salaries (fifth out of the nine fields at $62,300) when measured 10 years after graduation. Psychology majors can have successful careers without going on to graduate school, as illustrated by many of the individual cases reported in Landrum's book in which graduates have advanced into higher level positions.

Most of my students say they plan to go on to graduate school, yet the majority of psychology majors do not do so. The more common route of going directly into the workforce may seem more appealing when students understand the wealth of opportunities available to them. When students are adequately prepared to pursue these opportunities, they will find that it is possible to have a rewarding career after earning only a bachelor's degree.

What makes Landrum's approach unique is the emphasis on individual examples of psychology majors who pursued careers without having a graduate degree in psychology. The core of the book is a set of responses to an online survey of psychology graduates. These individual cases provide interesting and useful information about the diversity of career duties, preparation for careers, and compensation. The reader will also learn what alumni like and dislike about their careers. The cases provide examples both of how the psychology major was helpful and how it was not helpful.

The responses are organized into chapters according to career category (social, enterprising, etc.). Within chapters, they are organized by age of the respondent. Each individual has a unique story to tell, so there is no obvious way to organize them. The respondents differ dramatically in how long they have been in their current positions, from months to decades. Students might get a better feeling for how careers develop and change over time if they could read the cases in order of experience in the position. The survey asked respondents for entry-level salary information, although some respondents also supplied information about their current salaries. If students knew more about earnings for more senior positions, they might have a different view of their earnings potential in the long term.

Landrum provides a detailed description of the survey methodology he used. He makes it clear that the intention was to provide responses in a largely unedited form. This approach does make for a lot of repetition, however, as one reads through the survey responses. The reading would be more interesting if the cases were written in narrative form.

Landrum's approach is consistent with research indicating that learning from examples is particularly effective when the examples are supplemented with other information and followed by reflective questions (Lee & Hutchison, 1998). Landrum intersperses Questions to Think About sections among the cases, tying these questions to comments from the respondents. These questions would be good fodder for class discussions or discussion board assignments.

Landrum includes a chapter summarizing the lessons to be learned from the interviews in which he integrates the survey responses with other information about careers for psychology majors. Other chapters provide information more typical of career advice books. Landrum provides a wealth of specific suggestions, such as what to list on a résumé and what to ask in a job interview. One of the most compelling aspects of the book is the use of both individual cases and research (e.g., employer and student surveys, employment statistics) to address common myths about careers in psychology.

Faculty who teach about careers in psychology should consider adopting the book as a supplement and recommending it to their undergraduate advisees. Students like Sandy will benefit by finding answers to their questions about the jobs they can get and the places they can go.

## References


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Torpey, E. M. (2008). The class of 1993: Earning and occupations by college major, 1 and 10 years after graduation. *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, *52*(2), 15–25.



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