BRIDGING EDUCATION AND CAREER

Non-linear Career Pathways in Psychology

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Based on a collaborative project by the Council of Graduate Schools and the American Psychological Association, this info-brief is one of a series that examines psychology doctoral graduates' program experiences and career outcomes.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Career pathways in psychology are not always linear—one in four psychology graduates moved across educational, government, and private settings when they last changed jobs.
- Compared to older cohorts, younger cohorts of psychology graduates were more likely to move across settings when changing jobs. Younger cohorts were also more likely to move from educational settings to non-educational settings when changing jobs.
- The versatility of psychology training gives psychology graduates the ability to explore different career pathways, as demonstrated through the career mobility of psychology graduates.

According to the National Science Foundation's National Survey of College Graduates, in 2017, there were approximately 187,000 psychology doctoral or professional degree holders in the workforce.[1] About 35% worked in educational settings, 55% worked in private settings, and 10% worked in government settings.[2] Despite the fact that they work in a variety of settings, 97% believed their jobs are related to psychology. How well did their psychology training prepare them for the job? How did they apply skills learned to the workforce? What career paths did they take?

Findings: How psychology PhDs move across educational and non-educational settings

A common myth of career pathways is that career paths need to constantly move in one direction within one sector—for example, graduates who start out in academia will stay in academia. In the PhD Career Pathways survey distributed by the Council of Graduate Schools and its partner institutions, psychology PhD graduates were asked about their last job and current job,[3] and many go through a non-linear path that does not follow a traditional model of career advancement.

[1] American Psychological Association. (2018). Careers in Psychology. [Interactive Data Tool]. https://www.apa.org/workforce/data-tools/careers-psychology

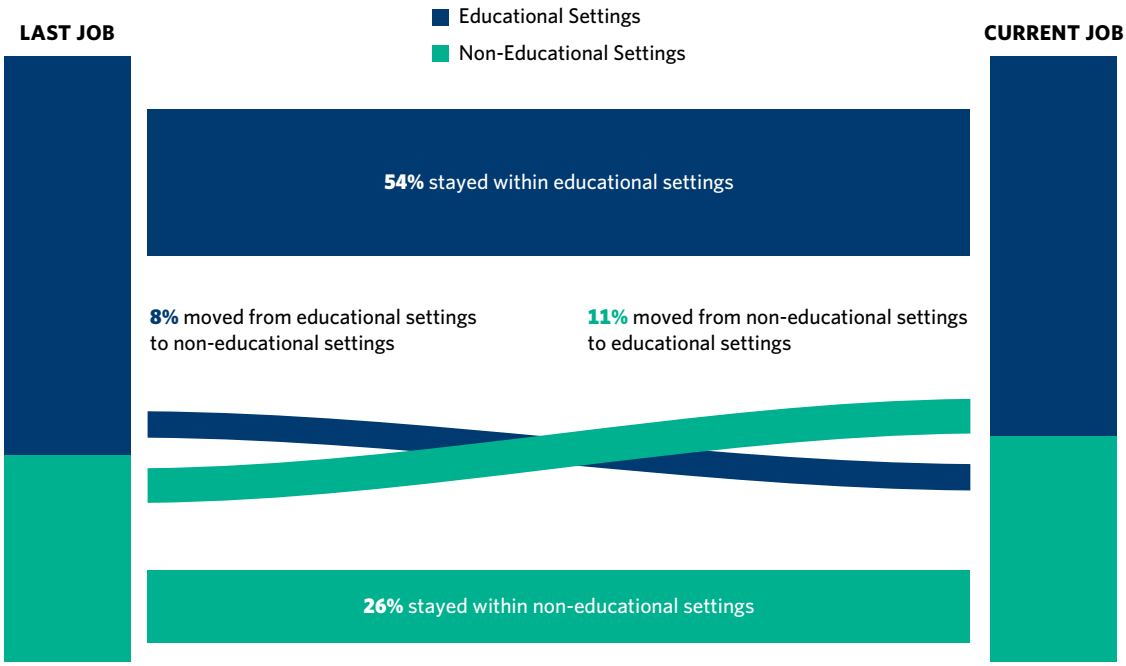
[2] Educational settings include research university, master's/regional university, liberal arts college, community or two-year college, college or university system, and preschool, elementary, middle, secondary school or school system. Private settings include non-profit and for-profit organizations. Government settings include US federal (including military), state, or local government, as well as non-US government. These work sectors are mutually exclusive categories.

[3] PsyD Degree holders were not included in the survey. Respondents were asked about the work sector of their current job and immediate last job. Approximately 65 percent of respondents provided work sector information about their last job. Analysis in this info-brief was based on these individuals who provided information about the work sector of their immediate last job.

Figure 1 displays the pathways of how psychology PhDs moved across educational settings and non-educational settings when they last changed jobs: Eight-percent moved from educational settings to non-educational settings, and 11% moved from non-educational settings to educational settings.

FIGURE 1

CAREER PATHS FROM LAST JOB TO CURRENT JOB, BY WORK SECTOR



Note: non-educational settings include government and private (for-profit and non-profit) settings.

Findings: Career mobility of psychology PhDs in general

More broadly, one in four psychology PhDs moved across education, government, and private settings when they last changed jobs. Figure 2 presents the career pathways for psychology PhDs by sector and cohort group. Approximately 8% moved from educational settings to government or private settings, 11% moved from government or private settings to educational settings, and 5% moved between government and private settings. The remaining 76% stayed in the same work sectors when they last changed jobs. This may indicate that psychology graduates tried out different positions, collecting skills and experiences from different work environments before the next step in their career pathways.

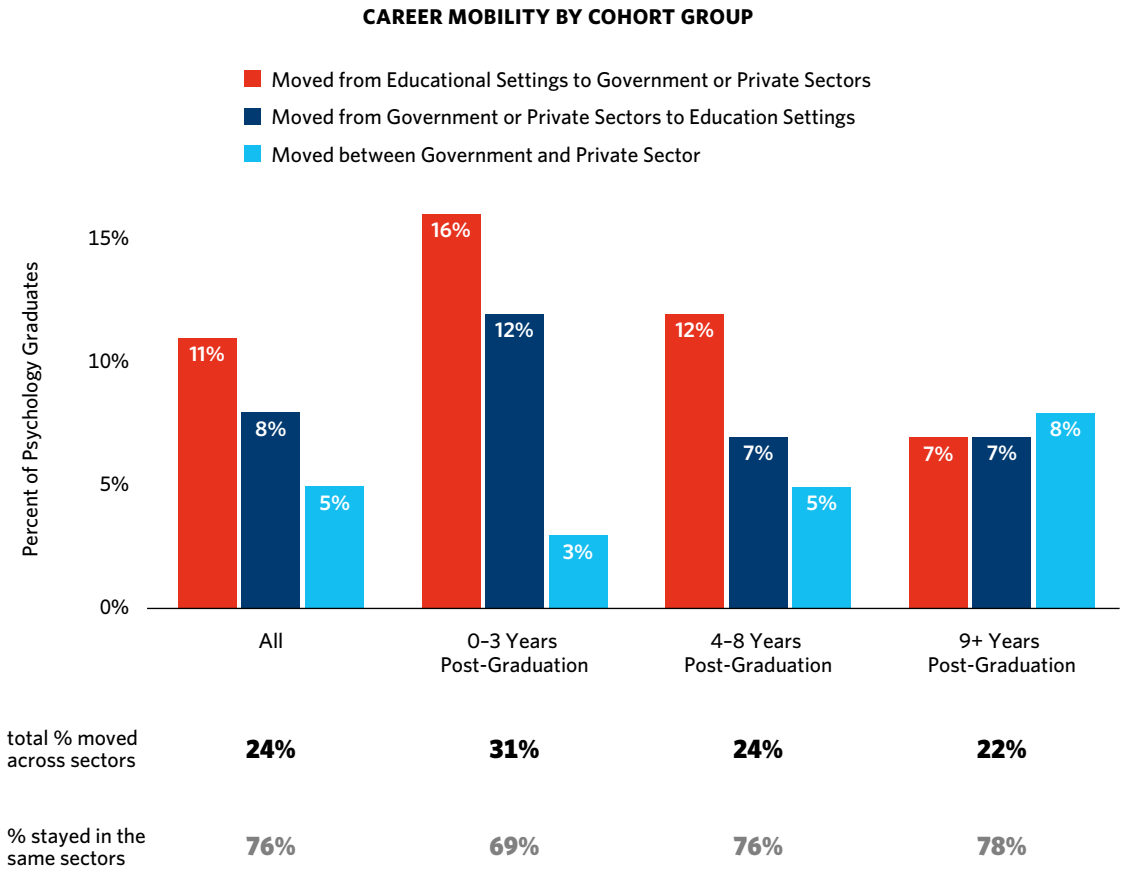
Compared to older cohorts, younger cohorts of psychology graduates were more likely to move across work sectors when changing jobs. For those 0–3 years post-graduation, 31% moved across work sectors when they last changed jobs and 69% stayed in the same sectors. However, for those 9 or more years post-graduation, only 22% changed sectors when changing jobs and 78% stayed in the same sectors.

Younger cohorts were also more likely to move from educational settings to non-educational settings than older cohorts. For those 0–3 years post-graduation, 16% moved from educational settings to non-educational settings, and 12% moved from non-educational settings to educational settings. For those 9 or more years post-graduation, those moving in and out of educational settings were largely in balance—both were 7%.

These findings suggest that the versatility of psychology training not only allows psychology graduates to work in a variety of work settings, but also gives them the ability to explore different career pathways, as demonstrated through the career mobility of psychology graduates, especially for those in earlier career stages.

FIGURE 2

CAREER PATHS FROM LAST JOB TO CURRENT JOB, BY WORK SECTOR AND COHORT GROUP



Conclusion and Discussion: How to help psychology graduates achieve their career goals?

Results from this analysis suggest that career pathways in psychology are not always linear; job changes can occur from early career to mid-career or even senior career stages. This suggests that programs can help psychology graduates prepare not only for their first jobs, but also the navigation of their career pathways as they explore the next steps in their career progression.

- Celebrate career diversity and encourage students to explore different career pathways. Although academic and practitioner occupations are common, psychology graduates work in a wide range of occupations and settings. Programs could better prepare students to understand the versatility of a psychology degree and their options available by utilizing resources such as APA's Careers in Psychology data tool to help them with career decisions.
- Increase professional development opportunities within and beyond academia and health services positions. Invite alumni with non-linear career pathways to share their experience about finding the right fit, and provide more resources and guidance to students to support the career exploration process. Engage and foster partnerships with current and prospective employers to provide more professional development opportunities such as internships.
- Engage students in investigating career pathways early, learning what skills different jobs and careers require and integrating opportunities to acquire and apply different skills while still in training. APA offers resources to help programs and trainees learn more about career pathways and jobs on its Individual Development Plan (IDP) resource portal and its How Did you Get that Job? webinar series.

About the Data

All data in the analysis were collected through the Council of Graduate Schools' (CGS) PhD Career Pathways Project (2017 and 2018 survey cycles), supported by grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (grant number 31600612) and the National Science Foundation (grant number 1661272). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders, nor do they constitute official policy of the APA.

The survey was distributed to PhD degree recipients and asked questions pertaining to their program experience and career outcomes. Each participating university administered the survey and shared the survey data with CGS. CGS produced aggregated data for APA to analyze the program experience and career outcomes of psychology graduates.

The analysis was based on a combined sample of psychology graduates, which consisted of 426 individuals from 33 institutions from the 2017 survey cycle, and 585 individuals from 40 institutions from the 2018 survey cycle. As the survey was distributed to PhD degree recipients only, PsyD degree holders were not included in this analysis.

For more information on the psychology education pipeline and workforce, visit www.apa.org/workforce
For more information on the PhD Career Pathways Project, visit cgsnet.org/understanding-career-pathways

Recommended Citations

American Psychological Association. (2021). Bridging education and career: Psychology training prepares PhD graduates for careers in a variety of settings. https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/psycpathways/training-preparation.pdf

American Psychological Association. (2021). Bridging education and career: Essential skills for psychology PhDs. https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/psycpathways/essential-skills.pdf

American Psychological Association. (2021). Bridging education and career: Non-linear career pathways in psychology. https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/psycpathways/non-linear-career.pdf

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