

# What Can You Do With a BA in Psychology?

Lyn Aubrecht, PhD  
Meredith College

**M**ANY, MANY THINGS. INCLUDED with this article is a partial list of “General Job Areas for Graduates with a BA Degree.” Under each job area one could go on to list several different jobs. For some job areas, the number of different jobs listed could run into the hundreds. Each of these general job areas are ones in which graduates with a BA in psychology find jobs.

How could a major in psychology help a person qualify for so many different jobs? How can you use *your* knowledge of the realities of job placement for psychology graduates to *your* advantage?

To answer these questions there are some important things you should know. First, the basic requirement for a wide variety of jobs in the world of business, government, and many other public and private work domains is a college degree. So, from the standpoint of the *minimum requirement* for most jobs, a BA degree with a major in psychology is as good as a BA degree with a major in almost any other area. Second, however, with regard to many jobs, a major in psychology is not just another major. *Psychology is a better major.* This is true because for these jobs psychology can provide you with better preparation for the tasks that you will be asked to do. Third, if you make the choice to take advantage of the many additional options available to you as a psychology major, you could be especially well prepared for one or more career choices when you receive your BA degree.

Finally, it should be noted that no general job area for the graduate with a BA degree includes the job title “psychologist.” You can find a job in which you are called a “counselor,” but you will not find a job in which you are called a psychologist. This is because psychology

has decided that one minimum requirement in order to be called a psychologist is an advanced degree (usually a PhD, or a PsyD, but sometimes an MA). You can go on to become a psychologist, and getting your BA in psychology is a big step in the right direction, but you will have to continue your education in graduate school.

Let us consider some of these issues in a little more detail.

A college degree means something positive to a prospective employer. In addition to the statement that your college degree appears to make about your intellectual and learning abilities, it also suggests that you have the ability to set a goal, carry out a plan, and manage resources, and, perhaps most significant of all, it means that you did not give up or quit (Carroll, Schmidt, and Sorensen, 1992). While all college graduates, regardless of major, may have these characteristics, you, as a psychology major, can bring several other valuable characteristics to your new job.

Success in many jobs depends largely upon you, the worker, being successful in understanding, relating to, and working with, people. Psychology majors are often persons who start out with an above-average interest in people. And all psychology majors take many courses in which they are encouraged to understand and appreciate people from a wide variety of perspectives. After all, the understanding of human behavior has been one of the major goals of psychology for a long time. As a psychology major you know something about people and you know how to interact with them. These are characteristics that employers value.

But being able to understand and relate to people is not the only special strength of psychology students. The

scientific study of human behavior by psychology turned out to be one of the most complex tasks in the history of science. In order to do this task well, psychology decided that all students of psychology must have solid preparation in the techniques of scientific research and statistical analysis. As a result, a typical student with a BA in psychology has had more training in doing, analyzing, and writing up scientific research than a typical BA-level student in almost any other science or discipline. As a psychology major you have important research and writing skills. You can use these important skills to benefit your employer.

In addition to these general strengths, there are other choices that you as an individual can make to help you become a better job candidate. The most obvious may be your choices regarding courses you take to complete your psychology major. If, for example, your career goal centers on “working with children in an educational setting,” you will want to take courses in developmental and child psychology, and perhaps a course on the psychology of exceptional children. In addition to these courses, however, you could also choose to select courses that provide related information, insights, and skills that may prove useful to you—and to your employer. For this example, courses like behavior analysis, perception, tests and measurement, and theories of personality, among others, might be included. Get advice from someone who knows something about both your career area *and* the courses taught in psychology. From an academic standpoint, you will be even better prepared for a job in your area when the time comes.

Want to be *especially* well prepared for a particular job or a career? Here are two additional options that you can choose to do.

The first option is a variation of the “course choice” suggestion just noted. In addition to looking for courses *within* psychology that can provide you with information, insights, and skills useful in a chosen job or career field, look for courses *outside of psychology* as well. For example, if you are considering a career in a particular area of business, you might choose to take one or more courses in accounting, marketing, and/or personnel management. Don’t overlook courses that can help you develop useful *general* abilities and skills as well. Examples of choices like these include courses in computer science, public speaking, and Spanish. While you are thinking about it, have you ever considered a minor in an important related area to go along with your psychology major? What about a second major? Once again, advice from someone who knows something about your chosen career field can be very important. Do you know the people in your college’s career services office? You should. Someone in that office may be just the right person for you to talk with. Taking these courses will expand your knowledge and abilities beyond what you have attained in your general education courses and in your major area, psychology. You may even be a much more attractive candidate for a job as a result.

The second option is to take advantage of opportunities to develop important skills and abilities *outside of class*. Being a member of a team—working with others to accomplish a common goal, teaching a self-help skill to a frustrated child, actually doing psychological research, being a leader who defines goals and then helps people to reach them—all of these might be best learned by experience rather than “out of a book.” Look for opportunities to nurture and develop these skills and abilities in yourself.

On campus for example, you can choose to belong to (or start!)—and take a leadership position in—the Psychology Club or the Psi Chi chapter at your school. You can also become involved in other worthwhile organizations on campus as well. You can find a professor to work with you on an independent research project. Put a lot of genuine effort into each of these tasks and you will learn a great deal. Your skills and your confidence will grow too.

Off campus, for example, you can choose to be a volunteer at the suicide hotline or at a nursing home. You can arrange for an “internship” at a children’s center or at the courthouse. You might even be able to get a summer job at a bank, a consumer market research firm,

or a state social services facility. If you think you already know the kind of work you are interested in, try, if possible, to get positions that are close to that kind of work. With each experience you will help yourself formulate a clearer idea of what you want to do, and what you don’t want to do, in your job—in your career. When a potential future employer asks you why you want the job you are applying for, you will be able to answer with greater conviction—and with an answer that is based upon personal experience. You will also have some *job experience* to report on your job applications and on your résumé.

Both on campus and off campus, outside-of-class experiences often result in yet another powerful advantage, more and better personal contacts. By choosing to make this time commitment, you create opportunities that allow others to get to know you—not only what you have learned in class, but your personal qualities as well: your positive attitude, your responsibility, your willingness to work hard, etc. See the list of “Student Characteristics Valued by Professors and Employers” included with this article. And you get to know other people too, people you otherwise might not have an opportunity to know: professors, bosses, advisors, professionals, etc. This can be *very* important when it comes time for you to get good letters of recommendation. This can be even more important if, as a result of the working relationships you have established, you are offered a good job.

Look at the listing of “General Job Areas for Graduates with a BA Degree” again. Select three or four of the general job areas that might be of most interest to you. Consider how good your application for a job in each of those areas might be if you took just basic psychology courses and made no effort to take special courses or to get involved in outside experiences.

## General Job Areas for Graduates with a BA Degree

Each of these areas include several jobs that students with a BA in psychology can obtain.

- Admissions/Financial Aid
- Advertising
- Bank Management
- Child/Youth/Elder Care
- Community Services
- Consulting Services
- Court/Juvenile Services
- Customer Services
- Educational Services
- Employee Relations
- Employment Services
- Financial Services
- Government/Legislative Services
- Hotel Management
- Human Resources
- Human Services
- Insurance Claims/Underwriter
- Insurance Sales
- Law Enforcement/Police
- Manufacturing/Production
- Market Research
- Military Service
- Museum Programs
- News Reporting
- Personnel/Human Resources
- Private/Nonprofit Management
- Production/Quality Control
- Property Management
- Public Relations/Media Services
- Purchasing
- Real Estate Sales
- Residential Services
- Restaurant Management
- Retail Management
- Retail/Wholesale Sales
- Social Services
- Special Populations Services
- Stocks/Bonds Sales
- Student/Alumni Services
- Substance Abuse Services
- Supply Management
- Teaching
- Technical Writing
- Travel Services
- Volunteer Services
- Youth Services

**Lyn Aubrecht, PhD**, is professor of psychology at Meredith College, Raleigh, North Carolina. He received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in psychology from Illinois State University and his PhD in experimental psychology from Ohio State University. With special interests in intelligence and its origins and the application of psychology to everyday life, Dr. Aubrecht has been a long-time advocate of appropriate educational opportunities for gifted children. Soon after joining the Meredith faculty, Dr. Aubrecht helped start the Psychology Club, the Meredith Chapter of Psi Chi, and, with students, designed, and built equipment for, Meredith’s first psychology laboratory. Later, to encourage and promote research by undergraduate students, Dr. Aubrecht, along with Dr. Jack Huber of Meredith and Dr. Slater Newman of North Carolina State University, was a cofounder of the Carolinas Psychology Conference. During his time at Meredith, Dr. Aubrecht received the Outstanding Christian Teaching Award, was selected to be a Danforth Foundation Associate, was selected to be a Congressional Science Fellow of the APA, and, in 1990, was Meredith’s nominee for National Professor of the Year.



Now consider how good your job prospects might be if—in addition to your basic psychology courses—you had chosen to take several special courses, had shown evidence of “getting involved” and “being a leader,” had done independent research (maybe with a professor’s help), had participated in two or three off-campus work experiences that were somewhat related to the job area, *and* you had two or three good letters of recommendation! As a student of psychology, what would your evaluation be of the advantages of choosing to take on additional opportunities?

It is important to understand that even if you have done all of these things, you will not receive full benefit from them until you can effectively communicate what you know and what you can do to your prospective employer. What if, as a psychology major, you *are* a person who is interested in people? You are good at relating to people and interacting with them. What if, as a psychology major, you have learned to do research studies? You have learned to analyze differences to see whether or not they are statistically significant. What if, as a psychology major who has chosen to be especially well prepared, you have learned more in related areas by taking special courses? You have developed interpersonal, leadership, and professional skills by actually being involved in making things happen on and off campus. Should you assume that your prospective employer will somehow know that psychology majors, that *you*, have these skills? The answer is no. To be sure of getting the benefit you deserve for the qualities and abilities you have, you must also learn to communicate effectively in your applications, on your résumé, and during interviews. This, too, is an important ability.

Of course not *all* of the options to be considered when asking the question “what can you do with a BA in psychology?” are suggested by the list of “General Job Areas for Graduates with a BA Degree.” An entirely new category of possibilities could be subsumed under the heading “postgraduate education.” Besides going to graduate school in psychology or some other discipline and working toward a MA, PhD, or PsyD, postgraduate education also includes options such as going to medical school or law school. Have you ever considered the possibility of continuing on in school?

Are you *really* interested in some area of psychology (medicine or law, etc.)? Are you a hard worker and do you earn good grades? Do you want to *be* a “psychologist” (doctor, lawyer, or someone


with a similar professional standing)? Are you willing to commit two, three, four, or more years of your life—after receiving your BA degree—to study and train in order to reach that goal?

If you have answered yes to just about all of these questions, then postgraduate study *might* be something you should consider. Postgraduate education is not for everyone, and there is certainly nothing wrong with deciding not to continue your formal education after completing your BA degree. But if you think that postgraduate education might be a possibility for you, then you need to seek out information and advice about that prospect as soon as possible. In addition to talking with someone in the psychology department and/or in your career services office, several good resources on this topic are noted within this article. Fortunately, if you have chosen to utilize several of the additional options to help you become a better candidate for a job with

a BA in psychology, you have already started doing most of the things that you need to do to get accepted for postgraduate studies as well.

Of course there is more to know about actually getting a job with a BA in psychology or actually getting into a postgraduate program than can be addressed in a short article like this one. How do you choose what area to go into? What are the most effective ways to search for a job? How should you choose the right graduate programs to apply to? What are the most effective ways to convince an employer or a graduate school to select you? What can you do to be successful on the job, or in graduate school, once you get there?

Fortunately, some experienced people have taken the time to try to answer many of these questions. Their answers can be found in the resources listed in the bibliography at the end of this article. Two of the best and most complete sources of help are the short books by Appleby (1997) and by Morgan and Korschgen (1998b). If you can, get a copy of both books and read them.

Asking what you can do with your BA in psychology is a very important question. Your answer to that question—along with the actions you take to help ensure a favorable outcome—could have an important effect on your future. Hopefully, some of the concepts introduced in this article will prove helpful to you as you begin to plan what to do next. Much of what may happen in your future may well be up to you. Carpe diem! 

### Student Characteristics Valued by Professors and Employers

*Here is a partial list of characteristics adapted from many sources. These characteristics, when judged to be “high” or “good,” are generally considered favorable by potential employers and by professors—including those serving on graduate school admissions committees. Which characteristics would you now consider among your strengths? Which two or three characteristics would you choose that could be significantly improved over the next year—if you decided to make the effort to do so?*

- Intellectual Ability
- Scholastic Ability
- Motivation
- Creativity
- Character
- Emotional Maturity
- Positive/Optimistic Attitude
- Empathetic Understanding
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Ability to Handle Stress
- Interpersonal Skills
- Group Work Skills
- Cross-Cultural Interaction Skills
- Independent Work Skills
- Written Communication Skills
- Oral Communication Skills
- Foreign Language Skills
- Analytical Thinking Skills
- Research Skills
- Statistical Skills
- Computer Skills
- Technology/Equipment/Material Skills
- Teaching Skills
- Counseling Skills
- Organization Skills
- Leadership Skills

### Bibliography

- Appleby, D. (1997). *The handbook of psychology*. New York: Longman.
- Appleby, D. (1999, Spring). Choosing a mentor. *Eye on Psi Chi*, 3, 38–39.
- Appleby, D., Keenan, J., & Mauer, B. (1999, Spring). Applicant characteristics valued by graduate programs in psychology. *Eye on Psi Chi*, 3, 39.
- Carroll, J. L., Shmidt, J. L., & Sorensen, R. (1992). Careers in psychology: Or what can I do with a bachelor’s degree. *Psychological Reports*, 71, 1151–1154.
- DeGalan, J., & Lambert, S. (1995). *Great jobs for psychology majors*. Lincolnwood, IL: VGM Career Horizons.
- Morgan, B. L., & Korschgen, A. J. (1998a, Fall). How do I maximize my chances of getting a good job with an undergraduate psychology degree? *Eye on Psi Chi*, 3, 27–28.
- Morgan, B. L., & Korschgen, A. J. (1998b). *Majoring in psych? Career options for psychology undergraduates*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.