Could Psychology Majors Save the World?

A review of

Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A Blueprint for the Future of the Discipline

by Diane F. Halpern (Ed.)


Reviewed by

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In the summer of 2008 a diverse group of 80 psychologists and other academics met at the University of Puget Sound. They were charged with “designing the best possible future for undergraduate education in psychology” (p. 3) and with a goal of affecting one million students. This must have been an inspired gathering because at the end of their report, Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A Blueprint for the Future of the Discipline, the conclusion is that their recommendations “will have positive and long-lasting effects on . . . millions of students world wide” (p. 173).

Although the history of meetings on this topic goes back at least to 1951 (Lloyd & Brewer, 1992), the last major conference was held at St. Mary’s College of Maryland in 1991. Four of the 50 participants from that conference also attended this latest one at Puget Sound, including Diane Halpern, the editor of the volume under review, and Thomas McGovern, who edited the St. Mary’s report (McGovern, 1993). So there was some continuity, but the Puget Sound participants were mostly a new generation.
In her conclusion, Halpern says that “the situation is critical” and that action “is necessary for this country and the future of this planet” (p. 178). We certainly can do a better job with our undergraduates, and this report has a lot of good advice about what we should do.

Principles for Quality

Conference participants were organized into nine working groups to consider various topics (e.g., curriculum, technology, outcomes). The group reports are the first nine chapters, and group leaders (the Steering Committee) collaborated on a 10th chapter on five “Principles for Quality Undergraduate Education in Psychology.” Under each principle are a number of recommendations for various stakeholders (pp. 161–174). The principles as stated in the report are in italics, and my comments follow each statement:

1. *Students are responsible for monitoring and enhancing their own learning.* This means they should know how to learn and engage in metacognition, including learning from individuals who are different from them, and are responsible for seeking advice from available faculty and staff. Most students need help not only learning to learn but with learning habits that are called *responsibility.* It seems that faculty might have been asked to have a more active role in developing this principle.

2. *Faculty strive to become scientist-educators who are knowledgeable about and use the principles of the science of learning.* This is a strong call for commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and for including scholarly competence in the definition of effective teaching. Faculty are encouraged to teach critical thinking and help students develop basic skills in communication, numeracy, and working in groups.

3. *Psychology departments and programs create a coherent curriculum.* The report recommends a core and attention to learning outcomes that do not differ significantly from previous recommendations and common practice. However, this principle includes a recommendation that graduate programs require “formal instruction in teaching for all graduate students” (p. 170).

4. *Academic administrators support and encourage quality practices in teaching and learning.* SoTL should be rewarded and faculty supported for developing their teaching skills. Faculty development can lead to creative experiments in the
classroom when faculty take risks that may fail. This committee wisely says that risk takers should not be punished if students are critical in their ratings.

5. **Policy makers and the general public understand why psychological literacy is necessary for informed citizens and an effective workforce.** The concept of psychological literacy as a general outcome of undergraduate education is a major contribution of this report. Chapter 1, edited by Thomas McGovern, is an elaboration of this concept, including a nine-point definition that includes basic knowledge and vocabulary, the elements of critical thinking, effective communication, respect for diversity, and insight into one’s own and others’ thinking and behavior.

### Effective Teaching and Promising Principles

Two chapters in particular provide an important expansion of the definition of effective teaching beyond the usual elements of subject knowledge, enthusiasm, and rapport. Chapter 2, edited by Daniel Bernstein, presents a scientist–educator model of teaching that “treats professional work as an inquiry into the effectiveness of practice” (p. 30), that is, evidence-based practice. A detailed description of the components of the model is given in a table of “expertise levels” (p. 39) that could be used as part of an evaluation of teaching.

This chapter is the source of the recommendation under Principle 3 that graduate programs require all students to have formal preparation for teaching. It is a continuing shame that so many PhDs have minimal or no training before being given teaching assignments. This recommendation should be presented for discussion at the annual meeting of Chairs of Graduate Departments of Psychology (CoGDoP).

Chapter 8, edited by Frank Worrell, shows how to apply “promising principles” (p. 129) of learning to improve teaching. A principle is promising if it passes two empirical tests: laboratory experiments and real-world classroom research. Several examples are given of translating learning principles to teaching methods, for example, spacing of study sessions and deep processing of content. An effective teacher is knowledgeable about these principles, applies them in creative ways, and evaluates the outcomes. Acquiring that knowledge and learning to apply it should be part of programs that prepare teachers.
Curriculum Reform?

The discussion of a core curriculum in Chapter 3 (edited by Dana Dunn) begins with a list of factors (e.g., consumer culture, pressure for accountability) that make curriculum reform necessary. The proposed curriculum, however, is similar to the product from the 1991 St. Mary’s conference: an introductory course, followed as soon as possible (and often it is not possible) by research methods and statistics, then a distribution across content areas, with a final, integrative capstone course. There is no significant reform here either in the framework or the details. Later in the book, the authors of Chapter 10 assert that most departments can adopt all the conference principles, including this curriculum, “with minimal revisions” (p. 162).

Nevertheless, confirming the value of this typical structure is a useful recommendation. This report relates the curriculum to the recent American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines for the major (APA, 2007). These two documents give departments all they need to design a solid program, given their resources.

In reality, departments often have problems implementing this type of curriculum. Many students cannot take statistics and methods in the sophomore year usually because of scheduling difficulties or late entry into the major. Students do just fine in advanced content courses without a previous methodology course but are at a disadvantage for beginning individual research projects. Significant reform, for example, might propose a way to repackage statistics and methods courses as on-line tutorials that could be applied in content courses.

Another area for more significant reform would more deeply involve students in the science of psychology. It is not enough to shout that we are a real science by suggesting that psychology departments become departments of psychological science (p. 88) or to recommend that psychology courses should fulfill college general science requirements (p. 90). Science should be done in laboratories attached to advanced courses and required of majors, which would be another place for instruction in methodology. The report has no discussion of greater involvement of undergraduates in faculty research teams or of research supervision by graduate students. The dominant areas today in our discipline are neuroscience and cognitive science; a curriculum reformer might recommend that students take more courses in related sciences and mathematics.

A proposal that seems counter to reform is that psychology should consider certification or accreditation of undergraduate programs. Two of the working groups recommended this, but the idea did not make it into Chapter 10 on principles and final recommendations. In Chapter 8, Eric Landrum’s group lists the benefits and drawbacks of accreditation. In my view and from my experience with APA accreditation, the drawbacks win.
Chapter 7 on the digital world, edited by Keith Millis, is perhaps the most future oriented and should have significant implications for change. The concise discussion of the pros and cons of online (distance) learning concludes that there is great variability in research results. Online education is sure to grow and improve in quality as we come to understand how to make it more effective.

One of the interesting recommendations is that APA take action to support online instruction and develop standards for quality and accountability. I think this group might also have suggested that the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) support the development of online courses to help departments that do not have sufficient faculty to offer all the courses deemed important for a quality undergraduate program. For example, courses on the history of psychology are sometimes missing because of lack of faculty prepared in that area.

**Hoping for Action**

This report contains much that could stimulate action. For me, three areas are especially important. First, I would like to see the concept of psychological literacy developed, operationalized in practice, and becoming a primary outcome for all undergraduate psychology programs. Second, criteria could be developed to define teachers as scientist–educators and manuals written showing effective applications of principles of learning. Third, we should get serious about significantly increasing formal preparation for teaching. Initiating a discussion with CoGDoP would be a first step. Colleges where teaching is the primary mission could require formal preparation in teaching for all new hires.

Most of the recommendations in this report are stated as shoulds. A formal action plan apparently was beyond the mission of this conference. In her introduction, Halpern expresses the “hope that readers will be moved to action” (p. 7) by the suggestions in the report. I share that hope, with the expectation that the report will be widely publicized by APA and STP (see Dunn, 2009). Several conference participants are now or have been leaders in APA and STP and should be positioned to advance specific proposals. A few years ago, APA initiated a Psychology Partnerships Project to foster communication and collaboration among all levels of our education system. A similar mechanism should be designed to promote the quality principles from this conference. If there is a crisis and the future of the planet is at stake, we and our students must get to work now.

**References**

