Applied Undergraduate Training in Psychology and Career Choice

Nancy S. Hinga-Wright

Western Michigan University

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APPLIED UNDERGRADUATE TRAINING IN
PSYCHOLOGY AND CAREER CHOICE

by

Nancy S. Hinga-Wright

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Art
Department of Psychology

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 1985
The present investigation evaluated the relation between additional undergraduate practical training in psychology (other than standard course credit) and the graduate school or career choice of graduates with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Based on data from questionnaires and university student records, the results indicated a positive, significant relation between graduate school choice and subsequent career choice, although there was no significant relation between additional applied training and career choice. The results also showed no significant relation between grade point average and career choice, and sex and career choice. The conclusions suggested several outside variables that may influence students' decisions about career choice; but more importantly, the standard course requirements for undergraduate psychology students at the time of the study already placed a strong emphasis on practical training, so any additional training might have little affect on increasing the probability of students entering graduate school or a career in psychology or human services.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Richard Malott for his time and support needed to complete this project.

Nancy S. Hinga-Wright
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Western Michigan University M.A. 1985

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW
OF SELECTED LITERATURE

One of the goals of undergraduate psychology programs has presumably been to prepare students for graduate work in psychology and/or to directly prepare them for employment in a psychology related field. In relation to this goal there has been some concern about designing undergraduate curricula that would achieve the desired level of professional preparation. Previous research has, therefore, been directed toward determining the relationship between undergraduate education and subsequent employment or graduate school choice.

Based on a questionnaire administered to undergraduate psychology majors, Timmreck and Malin (1979) showed that psychology students considered preprofessional or practical training to be an important part of their undergraduate preparation prior to entering the professions. Based on the opinion of the students from the questionnaires and their own informal observations, Timmreck and Malin stated that certain discrepancies plagued undergraduate education in psychology: (1) Student goals contradicted the realities of graduate education; a large majority of students plan to obtain graduate training, but many will not qualify for admission, and (2) the interests of applied students conflict with the basic curricula; there is a discrepancy between student preprofessionalism and current
curricula, between the "basic" interests of the faculty and the "applied" interests of the students.

Boltuck, Peterson, and Murphy (1980) attempted to study employer goals in human service fields by trying to identify the necessary skills required of undergraduate psychology majors by these employers. The researchers collected information from questionnaires returned from 1,149 human service agencies (which included mental health facilities, hospitals, etc.) regarding the desirability of preparation in psychological content and skills, treatment skills and field work, and supplementary skills. They found that all of the agencies desired knowledge in legal and ethical issues, interviewing and group process skills, and skills in psychological report writing from the undergraduate psychology major. All other skills considered important were generally dependent on the type of services the agencies offered. The conclusions and suggestions Boltuck et al. (1980) made were:

1. There are human service positions available for undergraduate psychology majors, and prospective employers desire them to have specific types of training.

2. Agencies also desire students with a broad background which combines psychology skills with skills from other disciplines.

3. Undergraduate psychology programs should include actual experience in designing and implementing treatment procedures in field settings under close supervision of doctoral-level psychology students.
A number of studies have been done to determine what psychology undergraduate curriculum best prepares students for graduate school or a career in psychology. Caffrey, Berger, Cole, Marx, and Senn (1977) investigated four areas of concern for psychology undergraduate programs: an industrial-applied option, a community-clinical option, a pre-college teaching of psychology option, and an interdisciplinary option.

The objective of the first option, an industrial-applied option, was to give students a chance to apply their coursework and see the relevance of psychology. Ten students selected for this option chose a project of interest (five industrial locations). The project began with four hours of practicum per week and increased to six hours. Caffrey et al. discovered that the advantages of this project were that students applied previously learned skills in an actual setting and performed tasks which these agencies did not have the time or the resources to perform. Most of the problems encountered centered around scheduling conflicts for students and faculty (supervisors) and industrial sponsors.

The second option, a practicum in clinical psychology, addressed the issue that there were jobs available in psychology-related areas that could best be filled by students who have majored in psychology, but because of the lack of practical and applied orientation in undergraduate programs, these jobs go unfilled or are filled by individuals with less adequate training. The program cited a number of examples where students received firsthand experience in mental
health, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, halfway houses, etc. The findings suggested that basic psychology courses should be followed by a series of content courses in the areas of clinical psychology. The students would then be prepared for specialty courses in principles of behavior and behavioral techniques. Following the specialty courses, the students would be prepared to reap the benefits of practical experience. If the students later decided to continue onto graduate school, the experience would be valuable, at least to determine whether a particular area was what a student was interested in. Most importantly, this type of program would enable students to compete satisfactorily in the current job market.

While the first two options were actual studies, the final two options were recommendations made by the researchers. The third option dealt with pre-college teaching of psychology and consisted of having high school students partake in a psychology course taught using Personalized System of Instruction methods. Such a course should emphasize not only basic concepts and principles, but also the application of psychological knowledge.

The final option discussed by Caffrey et al. concerned experientially based learning through placements in community agencies and recommended interdisciplinary curricula. They suggested that undergraduate psychology instructors should give serious consideration to two readily available sources of experientially based learning, interdisciplinary preparation of students and experiential learning in regularly established psychology courses. They recommended that
students could be prepared for immediate employment in social and community agencies by combining their psychology curriculum efforts with other disciplines.

Pinkus and Korn (1973) surveyed administrators in the social services and businesses employing psychologists and found that employers considered applied training the most significant factor in obtaining a job with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Pinkus (1973) continued by establishing an applied training option at Carnegie-Mellon University. This option included training in applied research methods and the mechanics of field work at the undergraduate level. Pinkus concluded that this training option provided students with specific training in applied research techniques and the chance to apply skills acquired in the classroom to actual experience similar to those found on the job. Therefore, the training option provided students with the type of experience that employers often consider significant in obtaining a job (Pinkus & Korn, 1973).

In her review of the career status of Bachelor of Arts (BA) graduates in psychology, Norton (1973) also suggested that more research was necessary to find out what psychology majors do once they have graduated, and whether the experience they received in school increased the likelihood of their choice of a psychology related career. She stated that when undergraduates served as teaching assistants in psychology, they were more likely to continue their education in psychology, and therefore, to acquire a psychology related job.
Prerost (1981) also examined the effect of undergraduate field experience on student graduate school and career choice. He studied 96 students who completed field practica and were graduated during a five year period, and 327 students who were psychology graduates and did not participate in field experience. The field practica included direct service contact with a clinical group consisting of psychological, emotional and/or intellectual handicaps; direct supervision from an agency staff person; a variety of service activities; and weekly seminars at the academic institution which allowed for a sharing of information and experience among the students. Prerost found that 96% of the subjects who completed field experience were accepted at and entered a wide range of social/human service related programs or entered advanced education related to the human service area. Conversely, only 29% of the nonparticipating majors found employment or continued their education in the social/human services.

Based on the previous research, applied training experience for undergraduate students in psychology was suggested as a significant contribution to their finding jobs in their field or enrolling in graduate school. The present investigation attempted to determine whether a positive relation exists between additional undergraduate applied training in psychology (other than standard course credit only) and the career or graduate school choice of graduates with a bachelor's degree in psychology from Western Michigan University. If this positive relation does exist between additional undergraduate applied training in psychology and career or graduate school choice,
then it could be used as a source of information in modifying the current undergraduate psychology curriculum at Western Michigan University, and possibly at other colleges and universities. Of course, this research will only demonstrate an association and not a functional or causal relation, but it would be suggestive. The additional training consisted of independent study or research experience, practicum or field experience, and staff or teaching experience.
CHAPTER II

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The subjects were 45 students who received a bachelor's degree with a declared major in psychology from Western Michigan University and who completed and returned a questionnaire. The University's computer files listed 270 psychology graduates between 1975 and 1979, the duration of information listed on the computer files at the time of the study. A questionnaire was sent to each of these graduates following the completion of the school semester in December, 1979. The cut-off point for accepting completed questionnaires was when the response rate dropped to one questionnaire returned within two weeks, after approximately seven weeks. Twenty-one point eight percent of the questionnaires were returned with no forwarding address, therefore no response was obtained from these graduates. Sixty-one point two percent were not returned at all, and 17.0% were completed and returned. The 17.0% comprised the 45 subjects for the present investigation.

Procedure

The Psychology and Data Processing Departments supplied the names of those students who graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology from the students' records and computer files. The
Records Office supplied all academic information from the students' official transcripts, which listed undergraduate courses. The transcripts provided specific academic information, such as the number of credit hours and grade for any course labeled practicum, independent study, or teaching apprenticeship completed, the year of graduation, and the overall grade point average (GPA) upon graduation.

The Office of Institutional Research supplied questions from a questionnaire they had sent to other W.M.U. graduates in a similar study. Some of the questions were modified slightly to refer to the W.M.U. Psychology Department in particular. The information received from the questionnaires in the present investigation consisted of graduate school choice, employment choice, whether the graduate was male or female, and individual opinions on the undergraduate psychology program. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) included a cover letter which requested each individual to return to the researcher the form (after he/she had completed it) in the self-addressed, stamped envelope included in the questionnaire. The students' transcripts supplied the information which was compared to the information obtained from the questionnaires.

Training and Career Variables

The subjects were classified according to three variables based on the questionnaires and academic transcripts. The three variables were: (1) Whether students completed standard course credit only or additional applied training credit; (2) whether they enrolled in
psychology graduate school, non-psychology graduate school or did not enroll in graduate school at all; and (3) whether they were currently employed in either psychology related jobs or non-psychology related jobs.

Standard course credit included only psychology courses using regularly scheduled lectures with at least a portion of the final grade determined by tests, exams or some form of standard criterion and that may or may not have included some practica. Course credit was required as it applied toward the minimum number of credit hours (32) necessary to complete a major in psychology. The minimum course requirement also included an average of 45 applied training contact hours per course for at least four of the required courses. The basic standard course credit did not include courses that were labeled practicum, independent study, or teaching apprenticeships. The variable of standard course credit only was determined by the subjects' academic transcripts. Any subject who completed the minimum required credit hours and did not obtain a grade in any additional courses labeled practicum, independent study, or teaching apprenticeship was classified in this variable.

Additional applied training credit included all approved psychology elective course credit labeled practicum, independent study, and teaching apprenticeship. This course credit was not included in the minimum 32 required credit hours. The variable of additional applied training credit was also determined through the subjects' transcripts.
Psychology graduate training and other human services programs at the graduate level were categorized as psychology graduate school at all universities including Western Michigan University.

Psychology or human services careers included the application of services to individuals, groups, or organizations involving principles, methods, and procedures of understanding, predicting, and influencing behavior. These services included diagnosis, assessment related to diagnosis, prevention, improvement or treatment of mental or emotional disorders, disabilities or behavioral adjustment problems, through the use of a variety of verbal or behavioral means.

The graduate school and employment variables were determined by the subjects' responses on the questionnaires. Subjects were categorized as enrolling in psychology graduate school if they indicated attending or completion of a graduate program and circled one of the psychology related graduate programs listed on the questionnaire. Subjects were categorized as currently employed in a psychology related field based on the title or brief description of the job given by each subject. If there was any question of whether the employment choice was psychology related, the subject was categorized as choosing a non-psychology related field of employment. On the basis of informal information, management careers were classified as non-psychology because, at the time of the study, practically no student graduated with a bachelor's degree from the undergraduate program had enrolled in any course work in industrial psychology background.

No reliability checks were done because the categories were
sufficiently unambiguous and there was clearly no problem with reliability, though the categories were possibly arbitrary.

Chi-square tests were computed to determine the relationships between additional applied training courses and graduate school and employment choice.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Chi-square statistical tests show a positive, significant relation between graduate school choice and subsequent career choice, although there was no significant relation between additional applied undergraduate training and career choice. Additional tests also show no relation between career choice and sex and career choice and overall undergraduate grade point average.

Table 1 shows the relation between graduate school enrollment and career choice. The Chi-square obtained value of 9.74, with 2 degrees of freedom, is greater than the critical value of 9.21 at the .01 level; therefore suggesting that psychology graduate school was related to psychology employment.

Table 2 shows the lack of a relation between additional applied
undergraduate training and career choice. The Chi-square obtained

Comparison of Additional Applied Undergraduate Training with Employment Choice (Values Represent Number of Subjects)

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<th>Additional Applied Training</th>
<th>Minimum Course Requirement</th>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Non-Psychology</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
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degree of .28, with 1 degree of freedom, is less than the critical value of 9.21 at the .01 level; therefore suggesting that additional applied training was not related to psychology employment.

Table 3 shows the lack of a relation between the subject's sex and career choice. The Chi-Square obtained value of 1.16, with 1 degree of freedom, is less than the critical value of 9.21 at the
.01 level; therefore suggesting that the subject's sex was not related to psychology employment.

Finally, Table 4 represents the lack of relation between grade point average and career choice. The Chi-square obtained value of

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<th>Comparison of Grade Point Average with Employment Choice (Values Represent Number of Subjects)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Psychology Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Psychology Employment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3.23, with 3 degrees of freedom, is less than the critical value of 9.21 at the .01 level, therefore suggesting that grade point average was not related to psychology employment.

Unfortunately, the data were lost that would allow for the comparison between additional undergraduate training and graduate school choice.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present results showed a significant relation between psychology graduate school choice and psychology related employment choice, but they did not show a significant relation between additional applied training for undergraduate psychology students and later employment in psychology. This latter finding might seem to contradict previous findings (Caffrey, Berger, Cole, Marx, and Senn, 1977; Norton, 1793; Pinkus, 1973; Prerost, 1981) which suggested that undergraduate field training was instrumental in preparing students for a related graduate program or for employment in a related field.

Because of the contradiction of the present results with previous results, it seemed of value to examine other factors that have been previously studied and that may influence a student's decision. White (1982) attempted to isolate some of the background factors necessary for successful decision making and to determine which factors would be useful in predicting a student's ability to make educational and career decisions. The study consisted of two groups of students enrolled in a private college of medium-to-high selectivity. The two groups were formed on the basis of consistency and inconsistency of major choice from college entrance to graduation. White investigated the background factors, or potential career decision-making influencers, which included genetic endowment (the
physical abilities one is born with), environmental conditions (family and peer input, location of the college or university in relation to the location of living and work environments, etc.), instrumental learning experiences (learning experiences that involve rewards and punishments that directly affect behavior), and associative learning experiences (formal education that consists of conceptual learning) on the consistent and inconsistent groups. He concluded that the backgrounds of the consistent group showed significantly different decision-making determinants that the inconsistent group, that associative learning experiences had the most influence on educational and career decisions and environmental conditions exerted the least influence for the consistent group.

A number of studies attempted to isolate specific factors that may influence a student's career and graduate school decision. Pendar (1982) examined some of those influencing factors using students enrolled in psychology courses at a major university. The study consisted of an examination of a questionnaire completed by the students and the student records. The questionnaire consisted of questions about college choice, curriculum and career selection, and grade point average. The answers were cross-tabulated by the student's year in school, transfer status, sex, and age. Based on the results, Pendar discovered that the two most important factors students used to select a college were geographic location and course offerings. The results also indicated that friends were the greatest source of course planning information and parents and
friends were the major sources of information concerning decisions of college, curriculum and career selection.

Although Pendar's study dealt with factors relevant to undergraduate level selection it might also be relevant to graduate level selection. Undergraduate decisions of what students decide to do professionally and factors that may influence undergraduate decisions of potential career and undergraduate college selection may also be the same factors that affect the BA graduates' decision of graduate school and career choice.

Wheeler (1983) studied the similarities in the perceptions of college students when choosing an occupation in relation to psychic and economic returns expected, preparation costs, and availability of jobs. The study consisted of questionnaires randomly distributed to a pool of juniors and seniors majoring in business, education, and psychology. Their responses were measured in relation to 19 possible occupations the subjects planned to pursue after graduation, 15 potential psychic and economic rewards in an occupation, psychic and economic costs to prepare for entry into an occupation, and the perceived availability of jobs for an occupation. Wheeler concluded that the perceptions of total psychic and economic rewards and costs, salary, and availability of jobs were similar for all three majors. However, psychology and education majors chose occupations in the fields for which they were trained despite their perceptions of very few jobs being available; whereas the economic salary-to-cost ratio was more highly related to occupational choice.
for business majors.

All of the previous researchers emphasized the point that there were different factors which could influence a student's employment and graduate school choice. They expressed concern that the factors be identified which contribute to the development of decision-making skills (White, 1982). In the present investigation it was realized that a number of those factors were instrumental in the outcome of the results. The present study did consider the subjects' sex and grade point average, in addition to undergraduate training as possible influencing factors. The question then became what factor or factors actually influenced an undergraduate psychology student's later enrollment in psychology graduate school or choice of a psychology career despite his/her perception of few jobs being available in a psychology related field (Wheeler, 1983). Some of those factors were previously investigated and included peer or family influence and geographic location of the graduate program (Pendar, 1982) or undergraduate practicum training (Caffrey, Berger, Cole, Marx, and Senn, 1977; Norton, 1973; Pinkus, 1973; Prerost, 1981).

There was a certain amount of concern with the data of the previous research. Caffrey, Berger, Cole, Marx, and Senn, 1977; Norton, 1973; Pinkus, 1973; Prerost, 1981 placed a strong emphasis on the benefits of undergraduate practicum training and its effect on graduate school and career choice, but only one study (Prerost, 1981) presented actual data for comparison between students' participation in practicum training and no practicum training for
undergraduate psychology students. In Prerost's research, only 26% of the non-participating students entered human services employment or advanced education following graduation compared to 49% in the present research. This suggested that the regular undergraduate program in the present study might be more effective in encouraging students to continue in the human services field following graduation. On the other hand, in the Prerost study, an amazingly high percentage (96%) of the students who had participated in practicum training entered human services employment or advanced education as compared to 51% in the present study. This comparison would indicate that the field training in the Prerost study was more effective than in the present investigation or those students who participated were more highly motivated to continue their education or enter employment in the human services field than the students in the present research. Prerost did express concern that the practicum courses may have attracted the highly motivated and concerned student. Also, in relation to Prerost's study, a possible bias in the present research was the low return rate (17%) of the completed questionnaires which may have been self-selecting; those who entered graduate school or employment in psychology or the human services were more likely to reply.

Another factor might account for the lack of difference in the results in the present study; the undergraduate curriculum as it was in operation at Western Michigan University at the time of the study was in fact of a highly applied nature with the students doing an
average of 180 field training hours as part of the basic 32 credit hour undergraduate program. These courses were highly applied relative to typical undergraduate psychology courses. It is possible that if the W.M.U. curriculum was compared to a standard undergraduate curriculum with its high emphasis on scholarly or academic aspects, then such a comparison would find that W.M.U. would produce more people going into psychology in one form or another than the standard system, but that to add a few more credit hours of additional training to that basic 32 credit hours would not result in an increase in students entering graduate school or a career in psychology or the human services.

Although the results in the present investigation indicated no significant positive relation between additional applied undergraduate psychology training and career choice, the previous research did strongly support the use of practicum experience as correlating with subsequent graduate programs and careers. Therefore, similar research should continue studying the undergraduate practicum and its influence on undergraduate students' choice of careers or graduate schools along with serious consideration of other possible factors, such as family and peer influences that may affect a student's graduate school or career decision. This could be accomplished by including in a questionnaire similar to the one used in the present study such questions as what factors influenced the subjects' choice of graduate program or type of employment. These potential influencing factors should include such items as family or peer pressure,
financial issues, type and location of graduate program offered. Future research at Western Michigan University, in particular, should seriously consider the study of the current core structure of the undergraduate psychology curriculum which includes a high level of field training and the effect the basic curriculum has on students' career and graduate school decisions.
Dear Graduate:

The Psychology Department at Western Michigan University is interested in your reactions to the undergraduate psychology curriculum that you completed.

The enclosed questionnaire contains questions to obtain information about your educational and professional background, along with your opinion of the psychology program you studied. The information you provide will be strictly confidential in the event that the results are published. By returning the questionnaire you will also be giving consent to use this information, although your name and any other personal data will not be included.

We urge you to help us by completing the survey and returning it promptly to the Data Processing Department. Since we are evaluating the curriculum for future semesters, your response is very crucial, because the greater the response the more accurate the results, and the more realistic analysis of the Psychology Department's curriculum. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Nancy S. Hinga

Nancy S. Hinga

enclosure
Please complete and return your questionnaire promptly.

I. General information:

Please fill in the information below. Your responses will be kept confidential; all survey results will be reported in aggregate form.

1. Name: _______________________________________________________

2. Permanent Mailing Address: __________________________________
   __________________________________
   __________________________________

3. Social Security Number: _______________________________________

4. Sex: __________

5. Birth Year: _______________

6. Highest Degree Received: _____

7. Graduation Date: ___________________________________________

8. Curriculum: ________________________________________________

9. Undergraduate Psychology Curriculum: ________________________

Remember to include this page when you return your completed questionnaire. We have provided a postage paid envelope for your convenience.
II. Education:

10. What is the highest degree you eventually intend to complete?
   ____Bachelor's  ____Master's  ____Specialist  ____Doctoral

11. Have you enrolled in another degree program since graduating from WMU?
   ____yes (please answer questions 12-16)  ____no (please skip to #17)

If you have enrolled in another degree program since graduating from WMU, please indicate:

12. at what institution(s)?

13. in what field(s) of study?

14. for what degree(s)?

15. Which degree(s) have you completed?

16. In general, how well did WMU prepare you for your degree program(s)?
   ____very well  ____well  ____poorly  ____very poorly

III. Employment

17. After you received your degree from WMU, how did you learn of your first job?
   a.____I have not held a job since graduation (skip to #21)
   b.____I had the job before graduating
   c.____College placement office
   d.____Public or private employment agency
   e.____Professional organization or journal
   f.____Newspaper advertisement
   g.____Referral through faculty member or major department
   h.____Direct application to employer
   i.____Referral through friends or relatives
   j.____Other, please specify _______________________________________

18. To what extent was your first job after graduating related to the major/program you were enrolled in at WMU?
   ____not related  ____somewhat related  ____directly related

19. If this job was not related to your major/program, what was the principal reason? (check one)
   a.____Not applicable to me, my job was related to my major/program
   b.____I did not look for a job related to my major/program
   c.____I looked, but could not find a job related to my major/program
   d.____This job is better than those I could find which were related to my major/program
   e.____Other, please specify __________________________________________

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20. Please list in chronological order the positions you have held since graduating from WMU.

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<th>Major Responsibilities</th>
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IV. College Program:

Please rate your major at WMU on each item:

A = Extremely Satisfactory  B = Very Satisfactory
C = Somewhat Satisfactory    D = Not At All Satisfactory
E = Does Not Apply

21. Relevance to your current career goals

22. Departmental advising and guidance

23. Experience in Independent Study, Practicum, or Staff work (if applicable)

24. Level of rigor and scholarship

25. Flexibility/adaptability to student needs

26. Quality of instruction

27. Interaction with other students

28. Please add any additional comments you might like to provide.

Thank you very much for your cooperation in completing this questionnaire.
<table>
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<th>Student's Name &amp; Social Security #</th>
<th># of Practicum Hours</th>
<th>Practicum Grade Point</th>
<th># of Independent Study Hours</th>
<th>Independent Study Grade Point</th>
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<th># of Psy 398 Hours</th>
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