Career Paths in Psychology
Where Your Degree Can Take You
Second Edition

Edited by
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Academia
Writers of this book make one fact abundantly clear: Psychologists work in many different settings at many different occupations. However, virtually all were trained in colleges and universities, and therefore almost everyone in the field is familiar to some degree with psychology in an academic setting. Most students reading this book are also in an academic setting and so have some appreciation for what their professors do. However, my experience from talking with students over the past 35 years indicates that whereas they understand some of the prominent aspects of careers in academic settings, they do not know about parts of the profession that are less apparent from their own vantage point. I discuss some of these more hidden features in this chapter.

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Writing about the academic career in psychology is difficult because academia affords a number of different types of careers. The psychologist teaching in a community college, for example, may be a part-time professor who has another job outside academia. Professors in liberal arts colleges may devote much of their time to teaching, often three or four courses a semester. Whereas the teaching loads in community colleges and other liberal arts colleges may leave little time for research or other activities, faculty at larger universities with graduate programs (often called \textit{research universities}) are expected to conduct research and publish it in scholarly journals. Typically, faculty at these institutions teach one or two courses a semester at either the graduate or undergraduate level.

Although the careers in academic psychology are different in the various academic settings, all share certain features, such as teaching and counseling students. In this chapter, I cover the common features while touching on aspects of the job that vary among academic settings. I draw on my experiences in teaching at Purdue University, the University of Toronto, Rice University, and Washington University and my own education at Washington and Lee University and Yale University. All of the schools at which I have taught are research universities, but two (Purdue and Toronto) are public (i.e., supported by government) and two (Rice and Washington) are private (i.e., supported largely by privately raised funds). Enrollment at these schools varies widely, from around 33,000 students at Purdue (when I was there) to about 4,000 at Rice.

\section*{The Nature of the Academic Psychology Career}

The nature of one’s career in academia depends, as I have noted, partly on the kind of academic institution. The most obvious characteristic of a career in academia is teaching, the common thread at all institutions of higher learning. Anyone devoting his or her life to an academic career should have a love of teaching as well as a love of learning and a desire to instill that love of learning in others. Teaching, in its broadest sense, occurs on many levels and may take place in several settings. Besides teaching formal courses, professors interact with students in small seminars, private consultations, research meetings, and sometimes (depending on the school) settings outside the classroom, such as dining halls.
One of the most delightful benefits for faculty members of being in an academic setting is the opportunity to learn from students. Students new to psychology often have different and interesting viewpoints. Also, faculty learn new information when students pick novel topics for term papers or research papers or when they do an outstanding job reviewing what is known.

It is wrong (or, at best, only partly right) to think of a college professor as someone who learned about his or her field in graduate school and who then went out to teach that knowledge. Education only begins the process of learning, which continues throughout the career of teaching in academia. Professors must continually keep up with their fast-changing fields to keep their courses current. Of course, no one can master all aspects of every field one teaches, but being a professor causes one to keep up with at least the broad sweep—the main ideas and major new developments—in the topics one teaches.

In sum, the primary features of devoting oneself to an academic career are the love of learning and the desire to instill that love in others. But what does one do in academic settings besides teach? I turn to this issue next.

**Activities of College Professors**

What do professors do besides teach? Lots of things! They conduct research, write, and serve on committees, to mention a few activities. College professors are often criticized because, the way some outsiders see it, they teach so little. What people mean by that is that the number of hours professors actually spend in the classroom is relatively small when compared, say, with high school teachers' hours. However, this difference in time spent teaching does not mean that college professors are not in a demanding profession or that they do not work hard. They do. But most people outside the profession are unaware of the range of demands professors face. The illustrations in the following sections are somewhat personal because I do all these things, but all professors perform most of the same activities at some point in their careers.

**PREPARING COURSES**

Before a professor actually walks into a classroom, he or she has undertaken a huge amount of preparation. Preparing for a lecture that lasts an hour may take several hours of background reading, note taking,
preparation of slides, or other activities such as arranging a classroom demonstration. The professor must know what is in the assigned text but must also consult other books and research articles in preparing the lecture because the lecture usually goes far beyond the text material. Students sometimes complain about the workload or amount of reading in a course, but typically the professor is doing much more. College professors who are just beginning teaching often spend most of their time in course preparation. Beginning professors often teach large lecture courses, and preparing material for 40 or so lectures for each course over the period of a semester takes huge amounts of time. Even experienced professors who have been teaching for years must continually update their material. And if they decide to teach a course on a new topic, they must begin preparation from scratch. For professors who teach three or four courses a semester, course preparation may take virtually all their time in their early years in the profession.

Recent advances in technology have changed course preparation somewhat. Many publishers of college textbooks offer supplemental packages that include traditional aids (e.g., books of adjunct readings for the course, acetate transparencies) or the latest in video technology and other materials to help professors prepare. These aids can be wonderfully helpful in making large lecture courses more interesting, but in a way they increase the demands placed on the professor to learn more about these new technologies, to preview the materials, and to integrate them into the course.

TEACHING

Professors may teach in lecture courses, in small seminars that combine lecture with discussion, or in reading groups in which everyone has read the material and discusses it. Although the lecture method of teaching has been under attack for years, it is probably still the most common form of teaching. However, much has been written to instruct professors on converting standard (i.e., noninteractive) lectures into experiences in which the students participate more fully (e.g., small break-out discussions among groups, class exercises or experiments, demonstrations). Everyone reading this book knows that there are huge individual differences in teaching: Some people are gifted teachers because of some combination of personality, knowledge, eloquence, humor, and skill in presentation. But probably everyone can be a more effective teacher by working at it. (See Bernstein and Lucas’s [2004] chapter “Tips for Effective Teaching.”)

As I noted previously, the time professors spend in the classroom often appears to be limited. During much of my career, I have taught two courses a semester, usually one undergraduate and one graduate
course, so I spend about 6 hours a week in the classroom. However, I usually work 60 to 70 hours in a typical week because my time is occupied with all the other activities listed in this section.

**MAKING AND GRADING TESTS**

Composing and grading tests is part of teaching but is separate from course preparation and time spent in class. Depending on the number of courses taught, the number of students in the course, and the type of tests and assignments given, these activities can take large amounts of time. Multiple choice tests (and other “objective” tests, such as true–false or matching tests) are easy to grade, but they often require considerable time to compose. Designing essay and short-answer tests is often quicker, but then these tests take much longer to grade.

In my own case, I dislike giving only objective types of questions. Evidence indicates that these sorts of tests cause students to focus on learning isolated facts rather than drawing material together to see the larger picture and the overarching themes (e.g., Schmidt, 1983). So I prefer to give tests that require students to write essays to encourage them to look for interrelated themes when studying. When I teach introductory psychology, I give four tests composed of a mixture of essay and objective questions. In addition, all students write an essay on a book and take a cumulative final examination. In my other undergraduate course, which is on human memory, students take two 2-hour essay tests, write two essay papers, and take a cumulative (essay) final examination. The time required for test construction and grading for these two courses, which usually have enrollments of about 150 and 35 students, respectively, is not trivial; luckily, although I do some grading myself, I have teaching assistants in both courses who help with these chores. When I teach graduate courses, I usually require the students to write a few shorter essays on various topics during the course of the semester and then to write a long paper reviewing a body of research pertaining to any topic of the course that they find of interest. At the end of the paper, they are required to write a proposal for future research that would add to knowledge in the field.

**CONSULTING WITH STUDENTS**

Most professors enjoy meeting with students outside of class. Depending on the type of institution, students feel varying degrees of freedom to visit with faculty and to talk about problems in a course, ask for advice about courses or careers, learn more about the material, or discuss ideas. For universities with graduate programs, a considerable amount of faculty time is devoted to advising graduate students on
their research and discussing research with them. I estimate that I spend 4 to 5 hours a week consulting with graduate students and undergraduate students about their research projects. In addition, once a week I hold a lab meeting that includes both students working directly with me and others who also want to attend (even though they primarily work with another professor). The lab meeting functions like an informal course, but with topics shifting across a range of topics from week to week.

**CONDUCTING RESEARCH**

Many faculty members conduct psychological research. This activity is especially common in research universities, but psychologists in all types of schools have programs of interesting and important research. Planning this research takes time, although it usually occurs in the natural course of other activities, such as consulting with students, reading articles, and writing proposals for research. Research may seem a mysterious process at first, but it is the lifeblood of every academic discipline because the discoveries and advances in every field all come from new research. Scientists know the state of knowledge in their fields, and their curiosity about the unexplained leads them to push forward the frontiers of knowledge. The motivations for future research are many—exploring unexplained past findings, testing implications of theories to see if they hold true, seeing if findings obtained in one setting generalize to another, and many others. The researcher usually works from a theory to generate hypotheses and then collects data to evaluate the hypotheses. When students first come into a field, they often wonder about the source of all the ideas that generate the research they are reading about and about whether they will be able to generate their own ideas. Later, after being immersed in the field, most researchers lament the lack of time and resources to conduct all the research they would like to do.

When students first enter graduate school, a professor often guides them in their initial research projects. No one expects students just beginning in a field to design and conduct cutting-edge research because the process of becoming a researcher is a gradual one. Collaboration is critical as the student learns to conduct research. Typically, students who are beginning to work with me will take on part of a project, which might already be ongoing, to get their feet wet and to immerse themselves in the problems and procedures of the field. However, throughout the 4 or 5 years that I work with the student, he or she gradually becomes more independent and begins designing, conducting, and writing about research, needing less consultation with me.
Students often learn about conducting research in one-on-one meetings with their major professors. Students who work with me meet in our weekly lab meeting. Sometimes a student will present his or her research or plans for future research, but often I select a recent research article or chapter for all of us to read and to discuss. Many ideas for future research come out of these meetings. (I cover other aspects of research elsewhere in this chapter.)

WRITING LETTERS OF REFERENCE

Surely, you might think, this activity does not deserve a separate listing. Yes, it does. During certain times of the year, writing letters of reference takes a great deal of time. Undergraduate students need letters of reference for applications to graduate school and for jobs. Graduate students need employment letters of reference, perhaps for 20 or more applications. Former students and colleagues in the field need letters for jobs to which they apply. Also, as one becomes more senior in the field, other universities request letters about candidates being considered for promotion and tenure. (Tenure is the award of lifetime job security to faculty so that they may investigate any topic freely, without fear of reprisal for investigating taboo topics.) Often these requests are accompanied by a selection of the candidate’s relevant writings, a statement of his or her research accomplishments and plans, and curriculum vitae. Processing all this information before writing the letter can take several hours. I estimate that in a given year I write letters of reference for 10 or so students and colleagues and for 5 to 7 seven candidates for promotion at other universities. All these letters take time, especially during the fall and winter. Writing letters of reference is seasonal labor.

ATTENDING FACULTY MEETINGS AND COMMITTEE MEETINGS

A university is, among other things, a large organization with a hierarchical structure. Organizations need the various groups that deal with particular matters to run smoothly. Within the typical psychology department, there may be

- a space committee to assign research space to people,
- a committee for subject use to oversee proposals for testing human and animal subjects,
- an animal care committee to oversee the care and housing of animals,
- a promotion and tenure committee composed of senior professors,
a graduate committee to oversee the graduate program, and
an undergraduate committee to perform the same service for the
undergraduate program.

Of course, an individual professor might be assigned to only one or
two of these committees, but the assignments do take time. In addition,
there are general faculty meetings of the department and of the university faculty as a whole.

There are also committee meetings for students. In undergraduate
programs with honors degrees, a professor may be a part of a two- or
three-member committee that advises and examines the research of
an honors student. In universities with graduate programs, each student
typically has a committee both for the master’s degree and for the PhD.
Professors may meet with students to discuss the proposal that deals
with the research the student is planning and how it is to be carried
out. Then, eventually, faculty must read the thesis or dissertation that
the student has written, and the student must defend it at another
meeting. Some universities also require preliminary or qualifying ex-
aminations of students before they embark on the PhD, which necessi-
tates faculty attendance at other committee meetings.

There are other committee meetings in addition to those I have
listed. Professors may need to staff search committees when their de-
partment is hiring a new faculty member; these take a large amount
of time, first to review the numerous applications, then to interview
three or four candidates, and then to decide whom to recommend for
the position. Professors may also be involved with any of the other
committees that exist for the entire university, such as search commit-
tees for a new dean, provost, or president. Most universities have still
other committees to advise on such matters as athletics and admissions.
At certain times during the academic year, committee work can require
considerable time. Sometimes it is not fascinating work, but it is critical
to the overall good of the department and the university.

Serving on professional committees can also take large chunks of
time. Every national and regional organization of psychologists has a
program committee, an executive committee, and often many other
committees. University psychologists are frequently asked to serve on
these committees.

**COMMUNICATING WITH OTHER SCHOLARS WITH SIMILAR INTERESTS**

One curious fact about universities is that individual faculty members
may be intensely interested in one topic, whether it is the history of
ancient Rome, the poetry of Wordsworth, the stars of the Orion nebula,
or how people form and change beliefs and attitudes. Often no one with your particular scholarly interest exists at your university, and yet you want to maintain contact with others in the specific field to share ideas and to learn of late-breaking developments. A century ago, scholarly communication was largely confined to reading others’ books and articles, when they appeared, or writing letters. Communication is much faster now, and e-mail permits people to stay in constant contact and to learn of new developments almost instantaneously, either through informal contact or through formal bulletin boards. Many professors are now finding themselves glued to their computers, communicating with others with like interests. Many research collaborations blossom by e-mail; this mode of communication can especially aid professors at smaller colleges and universities by allowing them to communicate with almost anyone in the field. Although fascinating, this activity takes time, and it seems likely to become increasingly important.

ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

Professional meetings are another activity that permits academics to keep pace with their fields. People go to professional meetings to present their own research findings by giving papers or displaying posters and to hear about cutting-edge research by many others in their field. In psychology, there are national meetings of large organizations like the American Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Science, of regional groups (e.g., the Midwestern Psychological Association), and of more specialized groups interested in particular topics (e.g., the Society for Research in Child Development). Years ago, the big national meetings dominated the scene, but now many professors choose to go to more specialized meetings concerned with their area of interest instead of or in addition to the large conventions. The meetings usually last 2 to 3 days. Attendance at such meetings is optional; some professors go to many, and others go to practically none. Attending at least some meetings is a good idea because it allows academics to become acquainted with people with interests similar to their own. Networking is important in academia, as in other spheres of life.

WRITING

For psychologists active in research, technical writing is a critical skill, one that must continually be honed. The greatest research ever conducted would never have been known if it had not been effectively communicated. Psychologists in research universities must be skilled in writing research articles to communicate their findings clearly. There
are also opportunities to write chapters for scholarly books (like this one), and some write monographs (treatises written by one author, usually on specialized areas of learning) to communicate their research to interested scholars. Technical and scholarly writing can be difficult skills to learn, but several useful guides exist (see Bem, 2004; Sternberg, 2003). In addition, researchers seeking support for their research usually write grant proposals to federal agencies and to foundations.

Some professors write textbooks in their areas of interest (e.g., developmental or social psychology) or general textbooks (e.g., on research methods or introductory psychology). Writing textbooks can be lucrative and is also a critical part of the educational process. An outstanding teacher at one university, no matter how brilliant, has a limited impact: He or she will affect only the students attending those classes at that campus. But a professor who writes an outstanding textbook can literally help teach an entire generation of students about a given topic and entice those students further into this field of study. It is curious that textbook writing is often not professionally rewarded within university settings; colleagues and administrators do not see this kind of publication as the scholarly equal of other kinds of works (Roediger, 2004). However, with the great emphasis on the importance of teaching now reinvigorating universities, perhaps this attitude will be relaxed. After all, a textbook writer is a teacher of thousands of students, and the text is the main course contact for many students. In my own case, I have coauthored two textbooks—Research Methods in Psychology (Elmes, Kantowitz, & Roediger, 2006) and Experimental Psychology: Understanding Psychological Research (Kantowitz, Roediger, & Elmes, 2005)—that have both gone through eight editions and have been used in courses for several generations of students. In addition to the satisfaction I have obtained from having these books used widely over the past 25 years and from educating many students, I have learned much about psychology while researching material for the books.

REVIEWING AND EDITING

Another task in academia that can take significant amounts of time is the evaluation of scholarly publications. Publishing in scholarly journals occurs by a process of peer review. If I submit an article for publication to a journal, the editor sends it to several experts in the field of inquiry (the peers), who are asked to read the article and to write evaluations of the research, answering such questions as, Does the paper deserve to be published? Does it make a significant contribution to knowledge?
Serving as a referee on an article entails considerable work. Every manuscript deserves a careful and thoughtful reading and a fair and unbiased review. Reviewing a manuscript properly can take hours, and some researchers are called on by several journals and therefore get many manuscripts to review. This activity can place a large burden on already overworked scholars, but there are rewards. A person learns about the latest findings in his or her field by reviewing manuscripts. In some cases (usually after a trial period during which the editor of the journal finds the person’s reviewing especially good and insightful), reviewers become consulting editors for a journal. Psychologists who serve as editors or associate editors of journals make the final decisions about the publishability of articles in that journal. Some journals receive hundreds of manuscripts a year, which means that editors must find time to read the articles, read the reviews of consultants, and then write letters of acceptance or rejection to the authors. The editorial process is critical in every field and requires great amounts of time from editors and reviewers.

Other types of reviewing may be required of the academic psychologist. For instance, textbooks are reviewed by many teachers both before they are published and during the revision process. In addition, many scholars evaluate books in book reviews published in scholarly journals or in the popular press.

CONSULTING

Some psychology professors consult with organizations in industry or the legal profession about their areas of interest. This is not an activity I participate in very often, but many others do. Human factors psychologists may consult on the design of equipment to make the product easier to use. Industrial/organizational psychologists may consult with companies on personnel selection or on ways to improve the morale of the organization. Clinical and counseling psychologists in academia may have a small private practice. Indeed, virtually every area of psychology has something to offer some industry or occupation. Psychologists in academia often step outside the academy to offer advice on more practical matters of the world.

PERFORMING COMMUNITY SERVICE

Psychologists may also be called on for various kinds of community service. For example, they may be asked to educate the general public through lectures to civic and religious groups. In addition, they may work with community groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or a local
crisis center, on various social or personal problems. Some psychologists appear on radio and television programs to explain psychological issues to wider audiences. Academics differ widely in how much time they spend in community service, but it can be rewarding because the teaching involved extends the traditional forums.

**SUMMARY OF COLLEGE PROFESSORS’ ACTIVITIES**

The dozen or so activities listed in this section include most of the activities in which psychologists in a psychology department might be involved. Of course, the list is not exhaustive. Professors can and do participate in other activities, but this sample constitutes a reasonable range of the usual activities. After reading the foregoing account, your opinion might have swung from “College professors don’t do much; they only teach a few hours a week” to “How can anyone do all these things?” Keep in mind that this section includes activities that occur over the course of a year; not all are done every day. One important feature of being a professor is that there is considerable time (i.e., summers and holidays) when teaching requirements are reduced or absent altogether. Yet these are not times of relaxation for professors. Most professors work as hard or harder during the summer months and vacations, but they work on different activities from those that occupy them when classes are in session: writing research reports, conducting research, attending meetings, preparing courses for the next year, among others.

*Academic Settings*

Psychology departments appear in all kinds of institutions of higher education. Almost every city or town of any size has a community college to—as the name implies—serve the members of the community. Professors in these settings usually devote most of their time to teaching (rather than research). There are also hundreds of relatively small private and public colleges and universities in the United States that offer undergraduate education in psychology culminating in a BA or BS degree. Each of these colleges and universities has a psychology department. Larger public and private schools provide both graduate and undergraduate education in psychology, so usually they have larger departments with faculty who specialize in various fields in psychology.
Students aspiring to an academic career in psychology may seek a position in any of these types of schools or in others, such as the independent schools in clinical psychology that give graduate degrees. Each type of school has its benefits, and all can be very attractive places to work. For example, community colleges often have adult students who have worked and experienced more of life before they decided to return and further their education. Often these students are very eager to learn and appreciate the opportunity to learn in a way that 18- to 21-year-old undergraduates may not. Other professors love teaching in small liberal arts colleges. The student–faculty ratio is often low, which promotes good interactions with students. Similarly, faculty at larger schools or research universities may enjoy interacting with graduate students, conducting research, and publishing in scholarly journals. The demands and rewards of the various academic settings are different, and some may appeal more to one type of person than to another. If you are considering a career in academia, you should carefully consider which type of setting might suit you best.

Preparing for the Academic Career

The standard preparation for a career in a psychology department is usually fairly straightforward. Typically, a person should have an undergraduate degree in psychology or a degree in some related field such as biology, anthropology, or neuroscience and a considerable amount of psychology coursework. Next, a student interested in an academic career in psychology should apply to graduate school. Students do not apply to graduate school in the general area of psychology, but rather to a specialized field in which they are interested (e.g., cognitive psychology, social psychology, clinical psychology). If you intend to pursue a graduate degree in psychology, you should find out from your advisors and from other sources which schools have good programs in your area of interest and then apply only to those schools.

Graduate school training usually takes from 4 to 6 years, although longer periods are not unheard of, depending on what other duties a student may have (e.g., heavy teaching requirements, a part-time job for financial support). Typically, students receive a master’s degree in 2 or 3 years and then begin working on a PhD. Students receiving a PhD in clinical psychology need to complete an internship if they want to be licensed to practice, which most do. Students receiving PhDs in
other areas may take a postdoctoral fellowship following completion of their degree to further their research training.

While in graduate school, the student learns about the subject matter of psychology in general and his or her field in particular. Doing coursework, reading, attending talks and colloquia, and participating in discussions with advisors and other faculty are the usual means of learning. Students usually receive their research training through an apprentice system in which they work closely with one or more faculty members to learn how to conduct research. Many other professional aspects of psychology are learned almost by osmosis (or observational learning) and from watching how successful people in the profession operate. Two books that help people prepare for academia are The Compleat Academic: A Career Guide (Darley, Zanna, & Roediger, 2004) and Psychology 101½: The Unspoken Rules for Success in Academia (Sternberg, 2004). Again, graduate education in a field should be considered only the beginning. Psychologists continue learning their entire lifetimes, and in academia they do so from continual course preparation, students, research, reading, and professional meetings.

My Interest in Psychology: How Did I Choose This Career?

The story of how one comes to choose a career in academic psychology is different for everyone. But because you (or at least the editor of this volume) asked, my story starts in high school. I attended Riverside Military Academy, which had two campuses at that time. In the fall and spring we were in Gainesville, Georgia, but from January to March we were in Hollywood, Florida, which is located between Miami and Fort Lauderdale. I suspect that everyone is interested to some degree in human behavior, in what makes people tick. Being in a military school for my tender high school years increased my curiosity because of experiences that I need not relate here. (Strange things happen in military schools, and the conditions, which are harder than those in other high schools, can make life interesting. Some of these conditions can be glimpsed in Pat Conroy’s [1980] The Lords of Discipline, although my experiences were not as severe as those recounted in that novel.)
During January or February of 1964, my guidance counselor, a man named Jerry Sullivan, approached me with a letter and packet of material from Stetson University in DeLand, Florida. That university offered a special program for selected high school juniors from Florida: They could enroll at Stetson in summer school between their junior and senior years in high school, and if they did well in three regular college courses, they could skip their senior year in high school and go right on to college at Stetson. Stetson apparently wanted to capture some of Florida’s bright high school students rather than have them head north to attend other private colleges, so they tried to attract them with this program. I liked the idea of spending the summer at college, my parents agreed to foot the bill, and off I went.

I had to take English and mathematics and was given one elective. I chose psychology, knowing nothing about it except that it sounded vaguely interesting and different. I loved it. I had a fine professor (a Dr. Jones), and we used a good book, which I still have: *Scientific Principles of Psychology* by Lewis (1963). Although we were assigned only half the book, I read the whole thing and thought all the material was fascinating. I recall being especially struck and enlightened by material on classical and operant conditioning—here was how to control behavior!—and about the measurement of intelligence. Wonderful knowledge was available in this field, and I had known nothing about it before this course. In addition, even though the book was in its second printing, it was filled with small errors. When students bought the book, they were given three pages of errata and had to piece together the correct information from the misprints in the book. Through this experience, I learned that the printed word in books was not immutable truth. Someone actually wrote these books, and he or she, and the publisher, made errors. (Yes, I should have known that, but I didn’t.) I got As in English and psychology that summer and a B in mathematics—the story of my life. I was admitted to Stetson, but (after long thought) went back to Riverside.

The next year I faced the question of where to go to college. Again, psychology intervened in an important way. I had received an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, passed the physical and mental examinations, and was admitted. Did I really want to go? The Vietnam War was just heating up in 1965, but this did not much permeate my thinking. Instead, I looked at the psychology offerings in the various college catalogs I had because I thought I wanted to study psychology. At West Point the offerings were slim; as I recall it now, the closest courses to psychology were those such as military science and hygiene. I decided against West Point and went to Washington and Lee University.
My freshman year I was required to take many courses and could not work psychology in, but I did take a course in my sophomore year (from Joseph Thompson) and continued on that path by taking almost all the courses available in psychology (from David Elmes and William Hinton, as well as Thompson). Elmes got me interested in research, and I spent several summers there conducting research. I was also near to completing a major in sociology and anthropology. There was no course in social psychology at Washington and Lee during my era, but one of my professors told me that a great textbook in this area was Social Psychology by Roger Brown (1965). I read it and decided to go to graduate school in this area, despite my relative ignorance of the topic. (Although I also was admitted to graduate school in two anthropology departments, social psychology seemed a good blend of my interests in sociology, anthropology, and psychology.) It is surprising (in retrospect) that my lack of credentials or research experience in social psychology did not prevent me from being admitted to the social psychology graduate program at Yale, but I was and so off I went. However, I switched into the cognitive psychology program during my 1st year there.

So that is how I wound up in psychology. It is more than you wanted to know, perhaps, but I imagine that every psychologist has a story like it: What we wind up doing is determined in large part by the various accidents of life.

Financial Compensation

I write in July 2005. The range of salaries for full-time university professors in psychology is quite great. For those interested in looking into the salary ranges of psychologists, the American Psychological Association publishes figures based on surveys of its membership. Salary differences occur between types of schools, geographic regions, small-town versus large-city location, and the various specialty areas within psychology. The 2004–2005 figures are shown in Table 1.1 and are from a report by the Research Office of the American Psychological Association (Wicherski, Frincke, & Kohout, 2006); the mean salary for all ranks at universities with doctoral programs was $65,539 for that year.

Psychology professors will never be accused of entering their profession to become rich. Professors can usually live comfortably, but not opulently. However, professors can augment their academic salaries
### Table 1.1

2005–2006 Salaries for Full-Time Faculty in U.S. Doctoral Departments of Psychology by Rank and Years in Rank

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**Note.** Included in this table are only those faculty who are full time, who hold the doctoral degree, and who are in departments of psychology that award the doctoral degree (e.g., psychology departments, educational psychology departments, and schools of professional psychology). All salaries are 9–10-month salaries. No statistics are provided where the N of faculty is less than 10. From *Faculty Salaries in Graduate Departments of Psychology* (p. 15), by M. Wicherski, J. Frincke, and J. Kohout, 2006, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Copyright 2005 by the American Psychological Association.

by consulting, writing textbooks, reviewing textbooks for publishers, obtaining research grants (which pay summer salaries), and doing extra teaching (e.g., during summer sessions or at night). In addition, most colleges and universities offer good benefit packages in the form of health care and the like, as well as good retirement programs. So although no one is likely to become extraordinarily wealthy by teaching in a college or university, professors are usually able to afford a comfortable lifestyle.
Advantages and Disadvantages of the Career

Some people contemplating a career in academia consider the range of salaries the major drawback. A person could probably make more money over his or her lifetime by becoming a physician, lawyer, or engineer or by obtaining a master’s degree in business administration and going into business. If you definitely have personal wealth as the major goal in life, then an academic career may not be appropriate for you. But most professors have other goals in mind. The benefits of an academic career are many, but they have more to do with the quality and style of life and less to do with money. First, there is considerable freedom and flexibility in arranging one’s time. Besides giving classes and attending some mandatory meetings, one is often free to manage one’s time as needed, so long as the work gets done. I write this section of this chapter after 11:00 p.m. However, I am free during the day to attend to personal matters, if need be. I sometimes play squash during my lunch hour, which is stretched to more like an hour and a half. Unlike the working conditions in other large organizations, no one is paying much attention to my comings and goings, as long as I get my work done. I do much of my writing at home, in fact. Academic positions offer great freedom in arranging what one does and when and where one chooses to do it. In addition, no one tells me what research I should be doing, what books and articles I should be reading or writing, and (within some limits) what courses I have to teach. It is rare in the world of work to be permitted to decide what you want to do and then have someone pay you to do it.

Another advantage of a university atmosphere is continued education. Professors in psychology often know professors in other disciplines and can discuss interesting topics in, say, anthropology or astronomy or history. Universities are abuzz with activities like colloquia, concerts, plays, sporting events, public addresses, and debates. There is always something interesting happening, and the difficulty is usually in being able to go to events and still get one’s work done. Professors usually love to interact and to work with students. (If they don’t, they are in the wrong field.) The best students are lively, probing, challenging, and fun. They keep the faculty informed and teach the faculty new things as they are being taught by the faculty. The faculty member ages, but
the student body stays at about the same age, so students help keep
the faculty young, to some degree.

The detriments of being a professor are, in my opinion, not great.
Some faculty complain about bureaucracy, but every large organization
has a bureaucracy. Faculty politics and political bickering can sometimes
break out and, in some cases, can achieve legendary proportions. (A
famous academic law is Sayre’s Third Law of Politics: “Academic politics
are most bitter, because the stakes are so small.”)

The life of a college professor is, in my opinion, a wonderful one.
I have never for a moment regretted my career choice. I never want
to retire, although of course I may change my mind in 15 more years.

Attributes Needed for
Success in the Career

Some of the required attributes for success in the academic psychology
career are obvious. A certain level of verbal and mathematical intelligence is required. However, beyond some required level of intelligence, sheer IQ probably does not account for much in academia (or in any
other demanding job). Graduate schools have already selected for intelligence because a person must have good grades in college and reasonably good scores on standardized tests to be admitted to graduate school.
And several factors in the 4 to 7 years in a graduate school program
further eliminate people along the way, for better or for worse. Many
people who enter doctoral programs drop out before obtaining the PhD.
Anyone who receives a PhD has the intelligence to be a psychologist in academia or elsewhere.

Besides intelligence, what else matters? As the editor of this volume
has maintained (Sternberg, 1988), there are other types of intelligence,
too. Practical intelligence (i.e., “street smarts”), social intelligence, and
what is informally called “common sense” can all make an important
difference. So can the desire to learn, creativity, and communication
skills. All of these help and the stereotype of the brilliant but absent-
mined professor did not arise from nothing. Universities do seem to
acquire more than their fair share of eccentrics, who excel in their
fields but seem barely able to cope with life outside. That helps make
universities interesting places, even if the presence of a few unusual
people does sometimes strain university administrations that try to
manage faculty, who, at the best of times, are an independent and
sometimes fractious lot. Faculty are often resistant to change within
the university—try changing the required curriculum for students to see this quality come out—even while they profess to like change as a general principle.

If I had to put my finger on two characteristics that predict academic success, the two would be achievement motivation (how much you really want to do this and how hard you are willing to work) and persistence (whether you will keep coming back even if you have suffered setbacks and rejection). Most of the really successful academics have these qualities, in my opinion, although I cannot point to empirical studies to show this.

Range of Opportunities for Employment

It is no secret that the academic job market is relatively poor today. Although there are about 4,000 junior colleges, colleges, and universities in the United States, the 150 to 200 research universities that produce most of the PhD students still produce them in greater numbers than the academic job market requires. The reasons for this state of affairs are complex. On the supply side, graduate departments have not much reduced the number of graduate students they admit, even though everyone recognizes that the job market in academia is weak. This may be because faculty at research universities enjoy working with graduate students and simply seek students interested in conducting research with them. In addition, many universities (especially large state universities) need graduate students to help teach undergraduates, either in the capacity of teaching assistants or as undergraduate instructors. So the fact that there are fewer jobs for doctoral-level graduates does not necessarily serve as a disincentive to the admission of new graduate students at most universities.

Why aren’t there more opportunities to obtain positions? Again, the causes are complex. Just 25 years ago predictions were made that there would be an undersupply of candidates for professor positions in the 1990s and into the new century. However, the federal government has banned compulsory retirement at age 70 (as age discrimination) in universities, so some professors are staying on, which prevents openings for younger people just out of graduate school. State governments, which support state universities, colleges, and community colleges, have generally reduced aid to higher education. Many private colleges and universities feel similar financial pressures. Consequently, given that few universities are growing significantly—many are not
even replacing faculty who leave—and with fewer professors retiring (or retiring later), the result is that the many students receiving PhDs are chasing too few jobs in academia.

That is the bad news. The good news is that there are still many jobs available in higher education. These differ across the specialty areas in psychology and change from year to year. But for those students who establish outstanding records in graduate school, job opportunities are available. In addition, in many fields in psychology, it is possible and even desirable to seek an appointment as a postdoctoral fellow after receiving a PhD to continue conducting research before entering the job market and embarking on a career. Taking a 2- to 3-year postdoctoral fellowship permits a young psychologist to gain additional valuable research experience (usually in a different environment from that in which he or she received the PhD), to build a stronger publication record, and therefore to be in a much more favorable position when he or she enters the job market later (see McDermott & Braver, 2004, for a discussion of postdoctoral fellowships in academia).

The other bit of good news about receiving a PhD in psychology (rather than, say, English or history) is that a wide range of job opportunities exists outside academia. The other chapters in this volume attest to the range of possibilities for a career in psychology outside of an academic setting. Good advice for graduate students in this day and age is to take a wide variety of courses in graduate school and to keep a broad perspective on career opportunities. Many exciting possibilities exist outside university teaching and research.

_A Day in the Life_

Contributors to this volume were asked to write about a typical day in their lives. One problem with this requirement for me is that no day is really typical. Given the many different activities a college professor engages in, my activities also differ dramatically from day to day. I wrote this chapter for the first edition in 1995, and I am leaving this section as I wrote it then, while teaching at Rice University.

I am up at 6:30 a.m. this Wednesday morning and, with no more than the usual commotion and bother, leave with my children for their school at 7:35 a.m. I get them deposited and make it to my office by 8:00 a.m.

I have a lecture at 9:00 a.m. for my introductory psychology course, for which I must first prepare. Fortunately, the lecture is on visual
illusions and the constructive nature of perception. I like to think it is one of my best lectures, but I review my notes, because it has been 2 years since I last gave this version of the lecture, and I go over some 20 slides that I will use. I add two new ones that I have collected. I finish preparing for class in half an hour and decide to see what new messages have come overnight by e-mail. (Telephoning and correspondence by regular mail is becoming obsolete for me and others in academia; most important news is delivered via e-mail.) I read and respond to most of the 13 new messages that have appeared before I leave for class.

The lecture seems to go successfully, and several students ask questions during and after class. On the way back from class, I pick up my mail. I receive considerable mail from a journal that I edit—*Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, published by the Psychonomic Society—as well as other kinds of mail. I sort the journal mail and discover several reviews of manuscripts and one new manuscript that has been submitted. I go to the journal office and talk about various matters with the secretary for the journal, and then I examine the new submission, which looks quite promising. I assign the manuscript reviewers who will evaluate it for the journal and provide advice that will help me decide on its acceptability. I get back to my office at 10:45 a.m. and finish my e-mail correspondence.

It is now shortly after 11:00 a.m., and I realize that the meeting of my lab group is looming at noon. We are to discuss the draft of a manuscript by Endel Tulving that is being submitted to a journal. I had wanted to read it and thought it would be good for my graduate students to read, too. Now the meeting is less than an hour away, and I have not finished the manuscript. So off I go to a hiding place in the basement (it has no telephone), which I use when I need to read in a quiet environment. (There are too many interruptions in my office.) I finish the manuscript, wolf down some lunch, and go off to my noon meeting. The session is quite lively, with some students suggesting items for further research. We spend some time analyzing statements or passages that seem ambiguous or unclear. One student, in particular, picks up what seems to be a weak point in the logic. I raise some points of my own, which the group discusses. I am jotting down notes, because I promised Dr. Tulving I would respond with comments based on the group’s discussion.

After the lab meeting, I have an appointment with a student to discuss her master’s thesis. That lasts about 20 minutes, so it is now 1:20 p.m., and I begin to prepare the afternoon lecture for my course on human memory. We are discussing the issues of the malleability of memory and of eyewitness testimony and the possibility of false memories occurring in therapy. The students are reading *The Myth of*
Repressed Memory by Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham (1994) at this point in the course, and they seem to be enjoying it. I am discussing evidence for various memory illusions in class. However, I need to prepare some slides to display some recent results, so this chore occupies me until my class begins. After the lecture, two students come by to ask (rather nervously) about the nature of the test to be given the following week. They ask questions about material in one of the textbooks in paralyzing depth, much more than I would ever expect on the test, and we cover the intricate topics they have asked about. I suspect that they have little to worry about if they know the material in such detail, but I keep my suspicions to myself.

When the afternoon mail, which includes two journals, arrives, I scan the journals’ contents and zip through one article that is of particular interest to me. Then it is 4:00 p.m. and time for me to meet with a PhD student about his dissertation. He has some of the first results of a test of nearly 700 subjects in a large-scale project. He lays out the preliminary findings, and the news is exceedingly good: The part of the research that had to work out a certain way for the rest to make an interesting contribution did come out as expected. He is very encouraged, and so am I. He leaves to embark on the additional analyses.

Now it is 4:30 p.m. and I deal with half a dozen e-mail messages that arrived during the day. Finally, I turn to a manuscript that I need to evaluate for my journal. The reviews of the manuscript are mixed, so it looks as if a difficult decision will be required. I read until 5:20 p.m. and head for home. That night, after the children are safely asleep, I finish the manuscript and dictate a letter.

This is a reasonably typical weekday, which includes about 10 to 11 hours of work. However, most of my teaching is confined to Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, so on Tuesdays and Thursdays I work more at my own research, writing, and editing. The activities those days would be quite different.

Conclusion

The life of a college professor may not be rich and glamorous, but it has its own rewards: being a part of the continual search for knowledge; being surrounded by young, inquisitive minds; being in an academic setting with people interested in every imaginable topic; and having a great degree of personal freedom and autonomy, among others. Most
professors I know would not trade their occupations for any other. Indeed, most do not think of themselves as having a "job" in the traditional sense. They are doing what they most want to do and getting paid for it, which is a happy bargain.

References


