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Best Practices for Teaching Beginnings and Endings in the Psychology Major

Research, Cases, and Recommendations

Dana S. Dunn
Bernard C. Beins
Maureen A. McCarthy
G. William Hill, IV

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Edited by

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

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Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
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Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Visit the companion Web site at www.oup.com/us/dunn.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Best practices for teaching beginnings and endings in the psychology
major / edited by Dana S. Dunn . . . [et al].
p. cm.
Based on a conference held in Oct. 2007.
Includes index.
ISBN 978-0-19-537821-4 1. Psychology—Study and teaching
(Higher)—United States—Congresses. 2. Psychologists—Training of—United
States—Congresses. I. Dunn, Dana.
BF80.7.U6B47 2010
150.71'173—dc22
2009021111

ISBN: 978-0-19-537821-4

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For our colleagues and students: May they always have strong
beginnings and happy endings

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Foreword

C. James Goodwin

Western Carolina University

There is no special reason that the October 2007 Best Practices conference titled “Beginnings and Endings” should have reminded me of my doctoral dissertation, completed long ago during a time of disco, bad hair, and Watergate. But it did. I spent a year and slogged through five different experiments teasing out the effects of practice on the “serial position effect of free recall,” surprising no one with the results. It did eventually get published (you could look it up!), but it had no effect on the subsequent history of memory research. Of course, everyone knows the important message of the serial position effect—beginnings and endings, even in single-trial free recall, matter. The Best Practices conference on how we start and end the psychology major drove this “it matters” point home. If you missed the conference, or if you went but the effects of time have taken their inevitable toll on your memory, this book will either show you or remind you of the importance of how we start our young students on the road to being a successful psychology major and how we help them finish the journey (I initially just wrote “polish them off at the end,” but aside from the issue of a mixed metaphor, it somehow sounded dire).

Beginnings

It used to be that everyone who wound up being a psychology major started the process by taking a general psychology course. That is still true in many

places and the recruitment function of Psych 100 always will be an important way in which we attract bright students and convince them that psychology is for them. Having taught the course since disco days, my best rewards have *not* come from that rare student who actually understood negative reinforcement. Rather, it was during those occasional times when a bright biology major took my course and decided to switch to psychology.

In recent years, however, a movement has developed among psychology departments to go beyond hoping that the introductory course would sufficiently introduce students to the psychology major. Instead, thoughtful teachers and departments have taken a more proactive approach and either developed specific programs or courses for introducing the student to the psychology major or more finely tuned the department's existing efforts (e.g., the nature of early advising of majors and potential majors). One goal is to never again have to figure out what to say to those seniors who wander into our office in March of their senior year and, looking puzzled, ask, "So what's this about graduate school?"

The intent of these "beginnings" efforts is clearly metacognitive—it is to make psychology majors more consciously aware of a number of things:

1. what they are getting themselves into → yes this is a science, you'll be taking stat and methods, graduate schools are more likely to require these courses than any other ones in the psychology curriculum, get used to it.
2. typical misconceptions → just because everyone likes to tell you their problems and thinks you're a "good listener" does not mean you'll get into a clinical graduate program and become the next Dr. Phil (one Dr. Phil is plenty, thanks).
3. the advantages of being a psychology major, even if they won't be going to graduate school (which, of course, is true of the vast majority of psych majors) → this major includes all the advantages of a strong liberal arts degree, plus you'll be able to evaluate empirical data *better* than your English major buddy.
4. how best to plan for their immediate futures as a psychology major for the next 3 or 4 years → don't wait for senior year to take stat and methods; they are the foundation for all else, and by taking them early, you will have a better chance of becoming involved in some professor's research (and get yourself free rides to neat conferences).

5. how best to plan for their distant futures, perhaps as a professional psychologist of one type or another → there are dozens of fascinating things for psychologists to do besides psychotherapy.

So beginnings are important, and psychology departments are increasingly taking deliberate steps to get students off to a good start. The conference was, and this book is, full of good ideas about how to accomplish what an old memory researcher would think of as a primacy effect.

Endings

The manner by which we end the education of our psychology majors matters just as much as how we start them out. In fact, maybe “recency” matters even more (in free recall, recency is always greater than primacy, but only for practiced subjects—my dissertation again!—you could look it up!). For our psychology majors, from these final experiences with us, we launch them into the world of work or into graduate school. Endings are usually conceived of by psychology departments as “capstone” courses. The term invokes a construction metaphor, the “finishing stone” of some building, according to my online dictionary. Capstone courses have a longer history than specialty courses (i.e., non-intro psych) designed to begin the major. They are diverse, and their variety—from a senior seminar on contemporary issues in psychology, to a history of psychology course, to an independent research project—was well represented at the conference and is reflected nicely in the chapters in this book. The form of the course matters less than the fact that one exists in a psychology curriculum. The presence of a capstone means that the department has given some thought to the question of how to achieve closure in the curriculum.

I believe you will find this book extremely useful. If you are in a department that does not do much to start their students on the metacognitive path to success as a psychology major or/and doesn't have a clear idea about how the curriculum ought to conclude, I am confident you will find ideas in here that will help strengthen your program. If you are already doing things at both the start and end of your curriculum, the book will give you some food for thought about how to improve those efforts. Beginnings (primacy) and endings (recency) matter. You could look it up!

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Contents

Contributor List *xv*

About the Editors *xxi*

Preface *xxv*

Acknowledgments *xxxix*

- I** Undergraduate Education in Psychology: All's Well That Begins and Ends Well *3*
Dana S. Dunn, Bernard C. Beins, Maureen A. McCarthy, and G. William Hill, IV

Part I Beginnings

- 2** Addressing the Multiple Demands of Teaching Introductory Psychology *15*
Michael L. Stolfoff
- 3** Reading From the Same Page: Building an Integrated Curriculum *31*
Brian T. Lober, Karri B. Verno, Francis W. Craig, and Peter A. Keller
- 4** Advising in the Classroom: A Career Exploration Class for Psychology Majors *49*
Drew C. Appleby
- 5** Building a Psychology Orientation Course: Common Themes and Exercises *69*
Brian T. Lober and R. Eric Landrum

- 6** Engaging Students in Psychology: Building on First-Year Programs and Seminars 93
Regan A. R. Gurung and Georjeanna Wilson-Doenges
- 7** Learning Communities as an Innovative Beginning to the Psychology Major: A Tale of Two Campuses 107
Kenneth E. Barron, Kim K. Buch, Jeffrey T. Andre, and Sue Spaulding
- 8** Displacing *Wikipedia*: Information Literacy for First-Year Students 125
Charles M. Harris and S. Lynn Cameron
- 9** Crafting and Implementing a Career Development Course in Psychology 137
Eric A. Goedereis and Stanley H. Cohen

Part II Endings

- 10** The Capstone Course in Psychology as Liberal Education Opportunity 155
Dana S. Dunn and Maureen A. McCarthy
- 11** History of Psychology as a Capstone Course 171
Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr.
- 12** Research Teams: Developing a Capstone Experience With Programmatic Research 187
Bernard C. Beins and Phil D. Wann
- 13** Honors Thesis as a Capstone: A Possible Perfect Ending 205
Sherry L. Serdikoff
- 14** The Capstone Research Course: A Case Study in the Evolution of Educational Efficacy 217
Wayne S. Messer and David B. Porter
- 15** Ten Things I Hate About My Capstone Course—And a Few Ways to Fix Them 237
Tracy E. Zinn, Monica J. Reis-Bergan, and Suzanne C. Baker
- 16** Writing for Psychology Majors as a Developmental Process 253
Bernard C. Beins, Randolph A. Smith, and Dana S. Dunn

- 17** Capping the Undergraduate Experience: Making Learning Come Alive Through Fieldwork 279
Joann H. Grayson
- 18** Helping Undergraduates Transition to the Workplace: Four Discussion Starters 299
Paul Hettich
- 19** Helping Undergraduates Make the Transition to Graduate School 319
Brennan D. Cox, Kristin L. Cullen, William Buskist, and Victor A. Benassi
- 20** Teaching Psychology's Endings: The Simple Gifts of a Reflective Close 331
Neil Lutsky

Part III Coda

- 21** Developing Scientific Reasoning Skills in Beginning and Ending Students 349
Suzanne C. Baker, Maureen A. McCarthy, Jane S. Halonen, Dana S. Dunn, and G. William Hill, IV

Name Index 365

Subject Index 373

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Contributor List

Jeffrey T. Andre

Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Drew C. Appleby

Professor
Department of Psychology
Indiana University-Purdue University
Indianapolis, IN

Suzanne C. Baker

Professor and Assistant Department Head
Department of Psychology
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Kenneth E. Barron

Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Bernard C. Beins

Chair and Professor
Department of Psychology
Ithaca College
Ithaca, NY

Victor A. Benassi

Faculty Director
Center for Teaching Excellence
Professor
Department of Psychology
University of New Hampshire
Durham, NH

Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr.

Professor
Department of Psychology
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX

Kim K. Buch

Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
University of North Carolina-Charlotte
Charlotte, NC

William Buskist

Professor
Department of Psychology
Auburn University
Auburn, AL

S. Lynn Cameron

Coordinator of Library Instruction
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Stanley H. Cohen

Professor Emeritus
Department of Psychology
West Virginia University
Morgantown, WV

Brennan D. Cox

Doctoral Student
Department of Psychology
Auburn University
Auburn, AL

Francis W. Craig

Professor
Department of Psychology
Mansfield University
Mansfield, PA

Kristin L. Cullen

Doctoral Student
Department of Psychology
Auburn University
Auburn, AL

Dana S. Dunn

Professor
Department of Psychology
Moravian College
Bethlehem, PA

Eric A. Goedereis

Assistant Professor
Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences
Webster University
St. Louis, MO

C. James Goodwin

Department of Psychology
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC

Joann H. Grayson

Professor
Department of Psychology
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Regan A. R. Gurung

Chair, Human Development
Professor, Department of Psychology
University of Wisconsin, Green Bay
Green Bay, WI

Jane S. Halonen

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
University of West Florida
Pensacola, FL

Charles M. Harris

Professor
Department of Psychology
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Paul Hettich

Professor Emeritus
DePaul University
Chicago, IL

G. William Hill, IV

Professor
Department of Psychology
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, GA

Peter A. Keller

Provost
Division of Academic Affairs
Mansfield University
Mansfield, PA

R. Eric Landrum

Professor
Department of Psychology
Boise State University
Boise, ID

Brian T. Loher

Professor
Department of Psychology
Mansfield University
Mansfield, PA

Neil Lutsky

William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Psychology
Department of Psychology
Carleton College
Northfield, MN

Maureen A. McCarthy

Professor
Department of Psychology
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, GA

Wayne S. Messer

Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
Berea College
Berea, KY

David B. Porter

Professor
Department of Psychology
Berea College
Berea, KY

Monica J. Reis-Bergan

Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Sherry L. Serdikoff

Professor
Department of Psychology
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Randolph A. Smith

Professor and Chair
Department of Psychology
Lamar University
Beaumont, TX

Sue Spaulding

Lecturer

Department of Psychology

University of North Carolina-Charlotte

Charlotte, NC

Michael L. Stoloff

Professor and Head

Department of Psychology

James Madison University

Harrisonburg, VA

Karri B. Verno

Assistant Professor

Department of Psychology

Mansfield University

Mansfield, PA

Phil D. Wann

Professor and Chair

Department of Psychology

Missouri Western State University

St. Joseph, MO

Georjeanna Wilson-Doenges

Associate Professor and Chair

Department of Psychology

University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

Green Bay, WI

Tracy E. Zinn

Associate Professor

Department of Psychology

James Madison University

Harrisonburg, VA

About the Editors

Dana S. Dunn, a social psychologist, is professor of psychology and director of the Learning in Common Curriculum at Moravian College, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He received his PhD from the University of Virginia, having graduated previously with a BA in psychology from Carnegie Mellon University. A Fellow of the American Psychological Association, Dunn served as president of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in 2010. Former Chair of Moravian's Department of Psychology, Dunn writes frequently about his areas of research interest: the teaching of psychology, social psychology, and rehabilitation psychology. Dunn is the author of five previous books—*Research Methods for Social Psychology*, *The Practical Researcher: A Student Guide to Conducting Psychological Research*, *Statistics and Data Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences*, *A Short Guide to Writing about Psychology*, and *Psychology Applied to Modern Life* (with Wayne Weiten, Margaret Lloyd, and Elizabeth Y. Hammer)—and the co-editor of four others—*Measuring Up: Educational Assessment Challenges and Practices for Psychology* (with Chandra M. Mehrotra and Jane S. Halonen), *Best Practices for Teaching Introduction to Psychology* (with Stephen L. Chew), *Best Practices for Teaching Statistics and Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences* (with Randolph Smith and Bernard C. Beins), and *Teaching Critical Thinking in Psychology: A Handbook of Best Practices* (with Jane S. Halonen and Randolph Smith).

Bernard C. Beins, an experimental psychologist, is Chair and Professor of Psychology at Ithaca College. He earned his bachelor's degree in psychology at Miami (Ohio) University and his doctorate at the City University of New York. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and of the Association for Psychological Science and served as president of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in 2004. Beins has written two editions of *Research Methods: A Tool for Life* and co-authored (with Agatha Beins) *Effective Writing in Psychology: Papers, Posters, and Presentations*. In addition, he has co-edited *Best Practices for Teaching Statistics and Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences* (with Dana Dunn and Randolph Smith), *Promoting the Undergraduate Research Experience in Psychology* (an e-book with Richard Miller, Robert Rycek, Emily Balcetis, Steve Barney, Susan Burns, Roy Smith, and Mark Ware), *Teaching Psychology in Autobiography: Perspectives from Exemplary Psychology Teachers* (an e-book with Trisha Benson, Caroline Burke, Ana Amstadter, Ryan Siney, Vincent Hevern, and William Buskist), *Teaching Psychology in Autobiography: Perspectives from Exemplary Psychology Teachers, vol. 2* (an e-book with Jessica Irons, Caroline Burke, William Buskist, Vincent Hevern, and John Williams), *Preparing the New Psychology Professoriate: Helping Graduate Students Become Competent Teachers* (an e-book with William Buskist and Vincent Hevern), and the *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* (with Susan Gall and Alan Feldman). In addition, during his career, his students have given over 75 presentations at research conferences.

Maureen A. McCarthy, a quantitative psychologist, is a professor of psychology at Kennesaw State University and served as president of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in 2008. Former Associate Executive Director of the APA Precollege and Undergraduate Programs, McCarthy writes about program evaluation, assessment, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Together with Dunn, Baker, Halonen, and Hill, McCarthy authored the seminal article "Quality Benchmarks in Undergraduate Programs," published in the *American Psychologist*.

G. William (Bill) Hill, IV, an experimental psychologist, earned his PhD at the University of Georgia. He is a professor of psychology at Kennesaw State University and director of the Kennesaw Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. A Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA) and past president of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, he also received the 2004 American Psychological Foundation Charles L. Brewer Distinguished

Teaching Award. His professional activities and research have primarily revolved around teaching-related issues such as grading practices and strategies, incorporating cross-cultural issues into the psychology curriculum, and program assessment. In 2001–2002, he was a member of the APA Board of Educational Affairs task force that developed expected learning outcomes for the undergraduate major in psychology as well as an accompanying online *Assessment CyberGuide*. In 1989 he founded, and continues to coordinate, the annual Southeastern Conference on the Teaching of Psychology. During his term as the STP Director of Programming, he coordinated the first seven annual "Best Practice" in teaching psychology conferences, including the conference on which this book is based.

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Preface

We and our authors cover two timely and interconnected issues in psychology pedagogy in this book: What are the most effective ways to introduce the psychology major to undergraduates? Four years—and many psychology courses—later, what are the most effective practices for helping students apply their disciplinary knowledge in capstone experiences and post-graduate life? Providing the right beginnings and endings in psychology education is increasingly a concern for teachers, department chairs, program directors, and even deans. Orientation courses and capstone courses are now routine topics in conference and listserv discussions. Further, both courses have become increasingly important as sources for gathering pre- and post-course work assessment data for demonstrating degree learning outcomes (e.g., Halpern, 2004).

Psychology teachers (and their students) benefit from innovative and effective strategies for starting off the major. The strategies found in this book will help educators examine issues related to teaching the introductory course or a careers course and develop a psychology-specific orientation program. Currently, the books available on this topic are written for a student, which is laudable, except that these books provide little guidance for teachers who are interested in developing a course or courses that familiarize students with opportunities that open up to them by majoring in psychology (e.g., Kuther, 2005; Landrum & Davis, 2006; Sternberg, 2007).

What about advice on how best to design courses for bringing closure to the major? Such courses include capstone experiences designed to fit the needs of a department, its pedagogical philosophy, or even the educational agenda of the larger institution wherein the department resides. Senior seminars, research-intensive experiences (for solo students or research teams), the history and systems course, or courses designed around applied/internship experiences fit here, too. In addition, many psychology programs are also focusing on the capstone course both as a culminating experience and as a primary venue for gathering assessment data on student achievement of learning outcomes. Despite the aforementioned interest in the topic, there are no books that address these issues in contemporary terms, and only a few articles do so (Ault & Multhaup, 2003; Gibson, Kahn, & Mathie, 1994; Sullivan & Thomas, 2007; Weis, 2004; Zechmeister & Reich, 1994).

We believe that our book fills these two resource voids quite well. We recruited well-regarded teachers of psychology with expertise in course development for both the beginnings and the endings in the psychology major. These authors approached their task with a practical purpose, writing chapters containing guidance, clear examples, and concrete suggestions for improving the teaching and learning activities at the start and finish of the psychology major. We are happy to report that our authors also made serious efforts to connect their teaching and pedagogy ideas to assessment initiatives, as is now routinely advocated in psychology education (e.g., Dunn, Mehrotra, & Halonen, 2004; Halonen et al., 2003; see also Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, & Hill, 2007).

Our book has several outstanding features that will make it appealing for teachers of psychology. Chapters in this book discuss a variety of timely issues concerning the best way to begin and end a student's education in psychology at the undergraduate level, including

- *Orientation and advising.* The chapters offer thoughtful guidance regarding ways to help students become acclimated to the psychology major via advising and orientation courses.
- *Mentoring relationships.* We present ways to foster close ties between students and faculty at the start of college so that student learning about psychology can be deep and directed rather than superficial and haphazard.
- *Developmentally appropriate practices.* The writers discuss application of developmental knowledge (i.e., first-year students

are qualitatively different from sophomores, sophomores from juniors) to course design and pedagogical practice as important.

- *Learning communities.* We discuss the use of learning communities as a means to introduce psychology to interested students and potential majors.
- *Active learning exercises.* We provide effective practices and strategies for helping students become engaged by the discipline both in and outside the classroom.
- *Capstone opportunities and issues.* We present capstone experiences in psychology that reflect departmental philosophies, take into account resources, and play to teacher strengths.
- *Alternative capstone experiences.* Some authors introduce innovations to make stand-alone courses (e.g., history of psychology) or particular student experiences (e.g., participating in a research team, writing an honors thesis, doing a field project) fulfill the roles and needs of the capstone course.
- *Planning endings in the major.* We identify the advantages and common pitfalls associated with creating a final course experience in the curriculum.
- *Assessment.* Several chapters place emphasis on considering, collecting, and using assessable information when developing courses for the start and finish of students' education in psychology.
- *Future employment.* The chapters offer readers concrete advice on counseling psychology graduates about how to use what they have learned in course work in the workplace.
- *Scientific reasoning across the major.* A closing chapter encourages use of a rubric for scientific reasoning to improve beginning and ending experiences in the psychology major.

Who will benefit most from reading and using the strategies presented in this book? Our primary audience consists of college-level psychology teachers, department chairs or heads, and other psychology program administrators; this group wants to fine-tune its efforts at orienting students to their institution by helping them plan for their futures after graduation 4 years later (or after 2 years in the case of community colleges). This book will also draw colleagues who are interested in using pedagogically sound designs for capstone experiences and who want to assist students in understanding the interconnections of their

course work; it will also attract those who want to assess student learning outcomes in the psychology major. High school teachers of psychology may find the ideas and issues presented in the book helpful when it comes to rethinking and redesigning aspects of their courses. We imagine some teachers in related social science disciplines, for example, in sociology, may also be interested in the book.

We believe that the ideas in this book will provide the basis for innovation in psychology departments in higher education. The suggestions that readers will see in this volume reflect the work of individuals and departments in the forefront of emerging ideas in the teaching of psychology. By following the guidance provided here, readers can benefit from the successes of psychology teachers across the country and use the information to guide the development of their own programs. As such, students everywhere will benefit from the zeal and commitment of the psychology teachers who help them begin and end their undergraduate psychology education.

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Acknowledgments

Collaborating can be a pleasure, especially when your collaborators are also your good friends and confidants. We four know each other well; we enjoy the all-too-rare times we are all together in one place, just as we genuinely like the frequent e-mails and occasional phone conversations about “the project.” It helps, too, when you genuinely want to improve the teaching and learning process in our ever-growing discipline. All of us read and commented on the contributions found in this book. We are very pleased to have worked with such an array of committed teachers who, like ourselves, worry about conveying the maximum amount of advice and guidance in as few pages as possible. This is our first publishing venture with Oxford University Press and we hope that it will not be the last. Our editor, Abby Gross, has been helpful and given us the time to complete the project. During the production process, we were pleased to work with Suwathiga Velayutham. Finally, we thank those colleagues who reviewed our proposal: Elizabeth Yost Hammer, Robert Reeves, Peter Giordano, Bryan Saville, and Randolph Smith.

We are especially grateful to our friends and colleagues at Kennesaw State University’s Department of Psychology and Kennesaw’s renowned Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). KSU provides a wonderful place where serious teachers of psychology can meet and discuss current topics that advance the teaching, learning, and development of students as well as faculty.

We are also very thankful for the leadership of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology who, with the KSU, have developed and funded the many successful “Best Practices” conferences that led to this and earlier books on pedagogy in psychology. We also want to thank our friends at the National Institute for the Teaching of Psychology (NIToP), especially Doug Bernstein, for the generous support directed toward enhancing teaching and learning in psychology.

Without the love and support of his family—Sarah, Jake, and Hannah—Dana would accomplish little. He is grateful for the freedom and understanding they offer for his work. Moravian College provided Dana with the necessary resources to plan and complete this book, including a Faculty Development and Research Committee Stipend for Summer 2008. Maureen is grateful for the opportunity to work with some of the best colleagues in the teaching community—Dana, Barney, and Bill. Barney thanks his family—Linda, Agatha, and Simon—for the support they provide in ways they don’t even know about and wants to point out that, without them, these endeavors would not matter nearly as much as they do. Bill is grateful for the support and encouragement of his friends and colleagues in the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, a community of dedicated teachers who have made a tremendous difference in the teaching of psychology.

Dana S. Dunn, Bethlehem, PA
Bernard C. Beins, Ithaca, NY
Maureen A. McCarthy, Kennesaw, GA
G. William Hill, IV, Kennesaw, GA

Best Practices for Teaching Beginnings and Endings in the Psychology Major

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I Undergraduate Education in Psychology

All's Well That Begins and Ends Well

Dana S. Dunn, Bernard C. Beins, Maureen A. McCarthy, and G. William Hill, IV

One of the editors of this volume recalls his first day at college. After moving into his dormitory and seeing his parents off, he wandered about the campus with his roommate. Shortly thereafter he experienced a nagging epiphany: He realized he had no idea where anything was on the campus and that he knew precious little about the university. He had accepted the offer of admission virtually sight unseen, deciding to matriculate there without having much sense of the institution's layout or physical plant, let alone its curriculum. Although he knew the school's reputation was quite good, what did he really know about the university before arriving? Had he made the right choice? What was he going to study as a first-year student? Was psychology the right major? If he pursued psychology (and he did), what lay ahead in the future? His experience, the soul-searching and the questions, is by no means unique.

Psychology is a popular major. Yet even after they declare a major, many students feel similarly adrift. Indeed, for many students, deciding to major in psychology is only half the battle. In the short term, they wonder what their choice will mean in terms of course selection: Are statistics and research methods really necessary? If I want to work with people, why does psychology demand so much research and writing? Across the next 3 or so years, they wonder how their choice of major will shape their future lives. Is graduate

school necessary? What sorts of careers can and do psychology majors pursue? Will all of the discipline-related tools and skills be transferable from course and campus to office and field? These are important questions, and students need—deserve—helpful, educationally sound answers sooner rather than later.

For their part, psychology faculty members take their teaching responsibilities very seriously and they want to present the discipline as providing a wide variety of opportunities for interested and motivated majors. Yet psychology teachers often focus on presenting their specialty area in the context of one class (e.g., cognitive psychology, social psychology, industrial/organizational psychology) or a cluster of courses they regularly teach (e.g., infancy, childhood, adolescence). Unless they have an administrative role as a department chair or program director, they are less likely to consider the “big picture” of being a psychology major that students face. A key aspect of this big picture is creating coherence between beginnings and endings, that is, both the early work in the major and the critical last courses (Dunn et al., 2010). We and our author colleagues conceived this book to provide perspective on how to help students have a strong start in psychology as well as a balanced finish.

Why Best Practices for Beginnings and Endings in Psychology?

We developed the concept for this book to reflect and respond to important concerns raised by colleagues who routinely teach undergraduates: What can be done early in the psychology major to help students learn better as they progress through it? What can be done later in the major, prior to graduation, so that students have an opportunity to integrate and synthesize the discipline-based knowledge they have acquired? We viewed these and related questions as a call for considering developmentally appropriate activities that build upon one another, thereby informing teaching and learning from the beginning to the end of the psychology program. As our chapter title suggests, we believe that a good start predicts a great educational finish.

This handbook has three main sections. The first section deals with foundational issues in the psychology major, that is, “Beginnings,” such as helping novice students become oriented to the psychology major and identifying the appropriate learning outcomes that will help them to succeed. Besides such traditional topics, newer ones, such as the advent of learning communities at

many colleges and universities are also considered. The book's next section, "Endings," profiles various ways to properly close the learning experience in the major, such as different conceptions of capstone courses, gaining experience on a research team, or doing fieldwork. True closure from the college experience is also considered by way of helping undergraduates make the transition to the workplace. The third and final section of the book, "Coda," contains one chapter that offers a framework for helping students develop and refine their scientific reasoning skills over the course of their careers as psychology majors. We now consider the contents of each of these three sections in greater detail.

Beginnings

So-called millennial students pose particular challenges for higher education, particularly where academic support and intellectual guidance are concerned. Many faculty routinely comment on the lack of preparation they find in recent cohorts of students. Psychology students are no different from their peers: Some matriculate to college with a serious work ethic and concrete plans while others struggle with the foreign demands of higher education, self-reliance, and the pressures of planning for the future. Perhaps now more than ever, helping students start the psychology major by providing solid support and opportunities to seek guidance as they plan for their college years and beyond is a good idea. In this first section of the book, our contributors provide psychology teachers and program chairs with ideas about how best to familiarize students to the discipline and their institution's psychology curriculum.

Teaching introductory psychology is a challenge, especially now, when both textbooks on the topic and research in the discipline continue to grow almost exponentially. How can one course satisfy the demands of a general or liberal education course elective while still providing would-be majors with the information they need for upper level courses in the psychology department's curriculum? Michael Stoloff (James Madison University) discusses the particular demands introductory psychology teachers face and suggests some approaches for making the course a manageable and meaningful arena for student learning. Developing learning objectives, organizing the course material, and perhaps the biggest hurdle, effectively teaching first-year students, are key issues Stoloff considers. The practical guidance he offers will help novice and experienced teachers of this important beginning course improve the ways they structure and teach the course.

Introductory psychology is a foundational course, but how should psychology programs coordinate other “beginning” and “ending” experiences within the larger curriculum? A group of colleagues from Mansfield University—Brian Loher, Karri Verno, Francis W. Craig, and Peter A. Keller—focus on how best to integrate an orientation course and a capstone effort into a curriculum. The reasons for doing so are really twofold: New students often need firm guidance as they make the transition from high school to college or university life. A solid orientation to psychology as their chosen major can set them up for the rest of their work therein, creating realistic educational expectations in the process. As their undergraduate education winds down, an effective capstone experience can prepare them for the next phase of their lives, whether it is a subsequent transition to graduate education or a direct move into the world of work. As the authors suggest, the ideal circumstance is one in which psychology faculty agree with the precepts of the courses and plan accordingly so that orientation and capstone experiences, respectively, share important qualities no matter who is teaching the class.

Drew Appleby (Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis) also believes that a good orientation can prepare students for the future—however, the future he focuses on is connected to career exploration in the context of an orientation to the psychology major course. Appleby describes an intriguing career exploration course designed to help junior- or senior-level psychology majors understand their choice of major, possible future careers, and themselves. How can such a broad set of goals be achieved in one course? Appleby cleverly devised an exercise in which students craft a book about themselves, their career aspirations, and the strategies they intend to use to achieve their goals in the future. The exercise is a terrific example of self-assessment, one that both motivates students and steers them toward thoughtful decisions regarding post-graduate life.

Creating an ideal orientation experience for undergraduates is also a primary concern for authors Brian Loher (Mansfield University) and Eric Landrum (Boise State University), the authors of chapter 5. Their main goal is to counter media-based images and myths about what psychologists do by providing accurate career information. To counter popular views, Loher and Landrum present some classroom exercises. They also provide some savvy advice on the administrative issues involved in launching and establishing an orientation course for first-year students interested in becoming psychology majors.

General orientation courses are designed to provide all students with a positive transition to the college experience. These interdisciplinary courses

may also serve as an entry into the major. Regan Gurung (University of Wisconsin-Green Bay) and Georjeanna Wilson-Doenges (University of Wisconsin-Green Bay) describe a psychology-focused seminar course and data supporting first-year programs as beneficial to student engagement. They also offer specific recommendations for using first-year courses as an entry point for the major.

In the early 1990s learning communities, or cohort-based course scheduling, gained popularity in U.S. colleges and universities. A collaborative team, from two different schools, offer insights into their respective learning communities as an entry point for the psychology major. Kim Buch and Sue Spalding (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) describe a discipline-based, psychology learning community (PLC) and they provide data that offer support for retaining students. Kenneth Barron and Jeffery Andre (James Madison University) describe their residential discipline-based learning community. Together they offer interesting perspectives on how a learning community can serve as an entry point for the major and they suggest that the learning community may strengthen the capstone experience.

The APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Major in Psychology stipulate that students graduating with a degree in psychology should possess information literacy skills. Charles Harris and Lynn Cameron (James Madison University) examine student approaches to obtaining information—specifically Wikipedia as a reputable resource. Their curricular approach provides students with skills for evaluating credibility of resources. They offer specific learning modules that can easily be used to strengthen information literacy.

Eric Goederis and Stanley Cohen provide specific recommendations for crafting an orientation to the major course. They describe the West Virginia University course—career exploration, career information, and program planning—as a vehicle for efficiently moving students through the major. The WVU model serves as a blueprint for programs that use a comprehensive psychology careers course as an entry point for the major.

Endings

Education in psychology is often like a funnel: Early academic experiences are broad, but as a student progresses through the major, the focus narrows and becomes more topically specialized. Should the expected outcome of an undergraduate education in psychology be represented by one or more

specialized courses? Isn't such specialization best saved for graduate education in the discipline? The consensus of many teachers is that specialization is fine as long as the course work and skills acquired earlier in the major are brought together in some culminating intellectual experience. This and related philosophies accounts for the increasing appeal of so-called capstone courses. Knowledge acquired in the psychology major can be integrated into a meaningful academic experience in other ways besides a formal capstone course. Several authors in this section of the book suggest competing alternatives, including a history of psychology course, fieldwork, career courses, and research opportunities.

Dana Dunn (Moravian College) and Maureen McCarthy (Kennesaw State University) provide context for the endings section of this book. They provide a rationale for the capstone experience as an essential component of the undergraduate major in psychology. They also provide an overview of capstone courses that are typically offered by departments. Ultimately, Dunn and McCarthy provide the theoretical foundations for such a course and they conclude with recommendations for how the capstone can be used as a summative assessment of the major.

The history of psychology course represents one of the best ways for psychology programs to address the clear need for capstone experiences in the psychology major. On the other hand, the history course can also serve as a thoughtful, rich, and organizing framework for orienting students to the discipline. Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr. (Texas A&M University) gives a brief overview of the history course in psychology and then proceeds to offer a compelling rationale for teaching and treating the history course as either a starting or an ending point for undergraduate education in psychology. This course flexibility means that the history of psychology class may be an ideal way for departments to expand the intellectual rigor of their curricula while improving the breadth and depth of student learning in the major.

Bernard Beins (Ithaca College) and Phil Wann (Missouri Western State University) remind us that empirical research done in the context of controlled settings is what sets psychology apart from both the humanities and many of the other social sciences. Despite the fact that many undergraduate curricula are predicated on the idea that psychology is a science, not all departments or programs are able to offer students the opportunity to conduct an experimental research project from start to finish. There are many legitimate reasons that prevent departments from ensuring that all students perform some discipline-related empirical work. To address this problem, Beins and Wann provide

detailed guidance for creating research teams within courses or departments. Besides exposing students to the rigors of psychological research, another benefit of the team approach is that faculty members can keep their methodological skills fresh even if their careers lead them to less-research intensive institutions.

Sherry Serdikoff (James Madison University) has documented the use of the senior thesis as the capstone experience for students. She describes the process that students undergo to create and complete an empirical research project and the outcomes that follow. Further, she points out that the senior thesis can provide information about the extent to which such a project fosters attainment of the goals and outcomes that a department has established.

Wayne Messer and David Porter (both of Berea College) also identify the capstone experience in their department as the culmination of the research focus that psychologists value. Half of the student experience in their psychology program involves research-based courses. As such, it seems fitting to apply the skills developed in such courses to demonstrate the students' proficiency as empiricists. In their chapter, they outline the benefits and goals associated with research as a capstone experience. Because offering this experience to all majors is time- and resource-intensive, they offer suggestions for dealing with common problems that occur in creating and conducting research. Finally, they provide a sense of student reactions as indicated in the undergraduates' reflections on the capstone experience.

One of the main reasons that capstone courses are not (yet) universal offerings is because they are by no means easy to develop or teach effectively. Three colleagues who teach at James Madison University—Tracy Zinn, Monica Reis-Bergan, and Suzanne Baker—adopt a tongue-in-cheek approach to the challenge of the capstone course. By reviewing some pressure points associated with teaching a capstone course in psychology, the three authors are able to offer helpful and considered solutions to the common pitfalls linked to this important course offering. Further, they counter the challenges posed by capstones by discussing several qualities they believe will make readers want to develop and teach this final course in the psychology major.

What are best methods for ensuring that students learn to write effectively and well? How should writing be taught in the variety of courses found in the typical psychology program's curriculum? Bernard Beins (Ithaca College), Randolph Smith (Lamar University), and Dana Dunn (Moravian College) discuss how writing assignments can vary depending upon whether a course is pitched to a beginning, intermediate, or advanced-level student. Besides the