

Psychopaths, Sociopaths, and Serial Killers: Engaging Undergraduate Students in Innovative Psychology Programming

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Abstract

Three programs were developed to increase undergraduate enrollment in psychology. In Program 1, one-credit-hour, media-intensive Weekend Seminars (WS) were offered without prerequisites. Modeled after professional congresses, these seminars included, “Psychopaths, Sociopaths, and Serial Killers,” “Sex, Drugs, and Rock n’ Roll,” “How To Take Over The World In One Easy Lesson,” and “Behavioral Addictions: Psychopathology or Moral Depravity?” Theoretical frameworks, symptoms, interventions, and practical information, e.g., “how to avoid being targeted by a serial killer” and “protecting children from pedophiles,” were presented. Group “problem-solving” tasks were included. Similar to professional congress experiences, students were provided coffee and snacks breaks, lunches, and other amenities. Student motivation for these courses included, “curiosity,” “need” for credit hours, and “interest” in psychology. In Program 2, the International Psychology Congress Program (IPCP) was developed enabling advanced psychology majors to earn three-credit-hours attending conferences. Cultural immersion opportunities were provided. Post-congress, students developed research proposals to operationalize in a follow-on course. Forty-five percent of students enrolled in the IPCP have attended graduate school in psychology or a related field; a majority of the remaining students took employment in the field. In Program 3, a “psychology and social justice” course was developed with students intervening to help refugee youth in Lebanon and Poland. This presentation assisted attendees in identifying topics of interest for students, create these courses, and assess their impact on student satisfaction and interest in psychology and the neurosciences. Programs are also identified as a platform for future research.

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Introduction

An undergraduate student's first exposure to the field of psychology is often through 100-Level, Introduction to Psychology coursework. By its nature, this coursework provides a broad overview of the field without a deep or profound exploration of those aspects of psychology students find most interesting. Several innovative undergraduate courses with high interest value were developed enabling a more profound exploration of psychology as a course of study, career option, platform for social justice intervention, and future research activities.

The Courses, Their Procedures, and Findings

Twenty-five iterations of the Weekend Seminar (WS) have been offered with six different courses of interest presented. For each iteration, fifteen faculty-student contact hours on one Friday afternoon/evening and all-day Saturday were accomplished in these media-intensive programs. Student learning was evaluated via computerized tests/quizzes administered through the Moodle platform assessing knowledge and the ability to apply learned information. Four-hundred fifty-six credit hours were earned by students between 2015-2024, the period of this review. An average enrollment of approximately 20 students was noted with at least two courses currently offered each semester. A majority of students enrolled in WS programming were non-psychology majors (77.8%). Psychology majors tended to reenroll in WS programming (on a different topic each time) 49.35% of the time while non-psychology majors reenrolled 17.51% of the time. Student motivation for course enrollment included interest in the topic (55.5%), accessing a "safety credit" (37.7%), and "need" for one credit hour to meet graduation requirements (35.3%). Surveys (5-point Likert-type scale) completed by the most recent 45 enrollees revealed that students found the topics to be "interesting" (4.67/5.00), learned "a lot" about the topic (4.71/5.00), and would "recommend the course" to other undergraduates (4.64/5.00). Students also reported that the "title" of the course, designed to spark interest, was important in their decision to enroll (4.54/5.00). Learning objectives including an introduction to the biopsychosocial model (4.29/5.00), symptoms of disorders/problems (4.71/5.00), and discussion of interventions (4.36/5.00) were met. A sample of thirty-nine students who chose not to enroll in the WS revealed that a sizeable percentage would not want to take a course on a weekend (82.1%), roughly three-fourths had not "heard" of the program (74.3%), and one-third did not find the topics offered to be "interesting" (33.3%). Funding for each iteration of the WS course was accomplished through student tuition payments and a course fee specifically designed to keep the program "budget neutral."

Forty-five students enrolled in the International Psychology Congress Program (IPCP) over its six iterations. Students attended congresses in Vienna, London/Brighton, Amsterdam, Berlin, Melbourne, and Prague and have engaged in cultural immersion activities in each locale including traditional meals and visits to First Nations reserves and historic sites such as Stonehenge. Forty-five percent of IPCP students subsequently enrolled in graduate school. Two iterations of the Social Justice (SJ) program have been completed under the direction of Dr. Cosette Fox, Ph.D. (CFox@hcc-nd.edu). Data on "growth mindset" has been gathered in the SJ program; this research has either already been published, is under review, or is in preparation for review.

Faculty Engagement Strategies

Engaging faculty to "work on weekends" or lead travel abroad was viewed as a challenge. Participation was facilitated by providing a one-credit hour "adjunct" course salary for each

Weekend Seminar iteration. Faculty were encouraged to create courses reflecting their “passions” and “interests.” Administratively, faculty “paperwork” was reduced through computerized assessment of students. Additional faculty paperwork “reduction” was accomplished by reducing administrative requirements for course approval. Following the initial approval of the Weekend Seminar program, faculty were allowed to develop new courses under this course title without having to submit lengthily formal documentation of the course design, goals, and topics. Faculty who led study abroad courses including the IPCP and SJ programs were paid a three-credit-hour adjunct salary and had all expenses covered including those associated with professional/medical continuing education (CME) for clinical faculty.

Funding

College administrators indicated that they would be most receptive to innovative programming if courses were “budget neutral.” Students enrolled in the Weekend Seminar series paid a \$50 course fee. This covered “amenities” provided to students including meals, snacks, coffee breaks, and supporting course materials. Given the international travel component of the IPCP and SJ programs, more funds were required to attain budget neutrality. While a majority of students self-funded a portion of their experiences, benefactor donations and financial assistance from the college based on FAFSA financial aid eligibility was provided to reduce costs to more than half of the students. Student tuition payments to the college for these courses covered faculty salaries. Budget neutrality has been accomplished across all iterations of the WS, IPCP, and SJ programs.

Moving Forward

Moving forward, the WS and SJ programs will be used as research platforms to gather data on psychological interventions. A “Positive Psychology” (PP) Weekend Seminar is scheduled. This course will assess the impact of a PP workshop format on student well-being and assist in determining if a modified PP program could be included in student orientation activities prior to the enrollment in the First Year. Future WS, IPCP, and SJ programming is being developed to engage students in these impactful experiences.

Conclusions

Engaging undergraduates in psychology programming is essential for the vitality of the field. Innovative programming can serve as a “lure” to students unsure if psychology is a course of study they would like to pursue. Innovative programming may also allow faculty to “stretch” their “creative legs” and develop programming they can enjoy based on their personal passions. Programs developed and ongoing at Holy Cross College at Notre Dame, Indiana USA have proven an attractive option for students who indicate that they acquire valuable knowledge regarding the field.

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