

Multifaceted class, multiple paths

Psychology programs are attracting growing numbers of female, ethnic-minority, older and international students. What do these trends mean for students, faculty and the field?

By Tori DeAngelis

Twenty years ago, women started entering the psychology field in record numbers, so that by 2005, they made up 71.6 percent of new doctorates in the field, according to APA statistics.

But in the last decade, another big shift has occurred: Students of a wide range of diversities are pouring into classrooms-including people of varying ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, ages and life stages, and countries of origin.

These trends have intersected with at least two emerging domains in the field: psychology as a discipline that strives to understand human behavior, and as a profession grounded in social justice, says Linda F. Campbell, PhD, professor and director of training at the University of Georgia's center for counseling and personal evaluation.

"Because of our professional and personal values, we tend to be welcoming of diversity," she notes. As one example-and thanks to strong recruitment and retention efforts by APA and other organizations-ethnic-minority students made up about 23.2 percent as of psychology graduate students in 2004-more than twice the percentage as in 1980, and slightly more than their percentage in the U.S. population.

At the same time, female students have been a particularly fast-growing population, according to APA statistics, and older students with families are a common presence on campus.

This influx of diversity is affecting all areas of the profession, says Div. 17 (Society of Counseling Psychology) president Linda Forrest, PhD, who heads the University of Oregon's counseling psychology and human services department.

"As we absorb the diverse experiences of our diverse student bodies, it changes the way we train, go about our research and think about service delivery," she notes.

ACADEMIC SHIFTS

In the classroom, demographic changes mean new student needs, Forrest says. Working students and those with families crave flexible schedules and part-time internships. Students with disabilities need appropriate accommodations. And students with multiple cultures and countries of origin seek both understanding and the chance to share their unique backgrounds with fellow students, faculty and clients.

In the lab, shifting student demographics mean that budding psychologists are studying new topics and researching them differently than in the past-for example, by incorporating more culturally relevant variables into research, choosing research questions and populations more in line with their own interests, and working more collaboratively with participants, says Cynthia Hudley, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

"This increase in new scholars from diverse backgrounds assures that research will better represent the full range of human experience, and thus strengthen the field of psychology," Hudley says.

CAREER FORECAST

Students' increasing heterogeneity, combined with trends outside the field, create new career concerns and opportunities, experts say.

On the "concern" side, women-especially those combining work and family-will have to work especially hard to advocate for good salaries and positions, says Joy Moel, PhD, who attended grad school while raising three children. Moel remembers a recent salary negotiation at which she thought to herself, "I'll take whatever I can get-I'm being offered so much more than what I've been paid for so long!"

But after her initial excitement, she took stock of how valuable she was, especially with her advanced education. What's more, starting salaries can set the tone for a career, she notes.

"When you think about the importance of that [salary] starting point, you have to think about protecting yourself, your family and the profession."

That reality, combined with a general trend in academia toward decreased job security, means that any student interested in academia will need to learn and practice good negotiation skills, says Jessica L. Kohout, PhD, director of APA's Center for Psychology Workforce Analysis and Research.

While these and other issues may produce nail-biting among some, students' diversity of backgrounds and interests has opened up tremendous opportunities as well, Campbell notes. Not only is there continued growth in niche areas

such as assessment, management psychology and technology, but psychologists are increasingly making inroads into other professions, she says.

At APA's Education Leadership Conference in September 2007, for example, psychologists and professionals from such areas as law, dentistry and primary care discussed the valuable roles psychologists play in those and other fields. Psychologist Betty Chewning, PhD, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a case in point: A faculty member in the university's School of Pharmacy, she is a principle investigator on several federal grants, including one on patient-provider partnerships to foster improved patient outcomes. Meanwhile, psychologist Louis Tassinari, PhD, teaches and studies environmental psychology as a professor of architecture at Texas A&M University.

In the social-justice realm—a particularly salient area for many of today's students—job opportunities likewise abound, Campbell notes. Examples include jobs in advocacy and public policy, both in government and in the private sector.

"We have the potential not only to shape the face of psychology in the future," says Campbell, "but the face of the country."

To Campbell, the combination of student diversity and new career arenas means that those willing to explore the options can reap major benefits.

"For some time, we've been telling students that they can do anything they want," she says. "But a newer message is, 'You can create any job you want.'"

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