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Ppsychology is consistently one of the top undergraduate majors. Why? Most people would like to understand human behavior, what makes people tick. Moreover, the psychology major offers opportunities to develop a host

of transferrable skills. What can you expect as a psychology major? This chapter examines what a psychology major entails and, more important, how to steer your own education and obtain experiences to prepare you for your career after college.

Psychological Literacy and Your Career

Psychology majors learn a distinct set of transferrable skills that fall under the umbrella of psychological literacy. Recall from Chapter 1 that psychological literacy is the ability to apply psychological knowledge in everyday life to improve lives, their own and others' (American Psychological Association, 2013; Cranney et al., 2012; McGovern et al., 2010). Psychological literacy includes basic knowledge about psychology that students are often tested on in classes as well as the ability to apply psychological principles in everyday settings, such as at home, work, and in the community. These are the competencies that most people ascribe to psychology majors; however, psychology students learn many more useful transferrable skills.

Today's workplace calls for employees who are skilled processors and manipulators of information. Information gathering, the ability to find useful information, is the first step toward making decisions and solving problems. All majors provide opportunities to practice information gathering or acquisition, but psychology students are specifically trained in the next step: evaluation and synthesis. Evaluating the credibility of sources and synthesizing information from multiple sources into a coherent and persuasive argument relies on critical thinking and analysis skills. Psychology students practice this process because they are exposed to multiple perspectives on behavior. Students learn how to weigh multiple points of view, compare and contrast evidence, and make reasoned decisions—valuable skills in today's complex world.

Psychological literacy includes the ability to pose questions and devise procedures to gather new information about human behavior. Undergraduate students in psychology gain a basic understanding of research methodology and statistics and learn how to interpret data summaries. These skills in question asking and answering, also known as problem solving, are applicable to everyday problems encountered in the workplace and make psychology graduates unique among liberal arts graduates.

Students who are psychologically literate apply psychological knowledge to understand the world around them but also to understand themselves. Psychologically literate students have interpersonal skills that enable them to work well with others and to be effective communicators because they are trained to be sensitive to issues of culture, race, class, and ethnicity. Notably, however, psychology students have opportunities to develop intrapersonal awareness, or self-knowledge. They can monitor and manage their own behavior, which is critical in succeeding in academic and interpersonal tasks. Self-awareness, self-monitoring, emotional regulation, and self-motivation are skills useful in all areas of life.

We hope it is apparent that the psychology major is quite useful, with its blend of liberal arts and science. However, students cannot rest on their laurels. Regardless of your major, obtaining a job and entering a career require preparation and planning, and this is especially true in difficult economies. To enhance your marketability and help your psychology education work for you, you must plan your career goals, match your skills to your goals, and develop and refine your skills (review Chapter 1). Next, we examine what coursework you can expect as a psychology major.

Psychology Curricula

Every college major at your institution likely has three sets of requirements: (1) general education requirements that all students must complete to obtain a well-rounded education, (2) elective courses that provide opportunities to learn about a variety of topics or complete a minor, and (3) required courses to complete the major. The specific requirements for a psychology major will vary by department and institution, but most psychology departments model their curricula on the American Psychological Association (2013) goals for education.

American Psychological Association Goals for Psychology Education

The American Psychological Association (2013) has outlined five broad goals for psychology education.

Goal 1: Knowledge Base in Psychology

- 1.1 Describe key concepts, principles, and overarching themes in psychology
- 1.2 Develop a working knowledge of psychology's content domains
- 1.3 Describe applications of psychology

Goal 2: Scientific Inquiry and Critical Thinking

- 2.1 Use scientific reasoning to interpret psychological phenomena
- 2.2 Demonstrate psychology information literacy
- 2.3 Engage in innovative and integrative thinking and problem solving
- 2.4 Interpret, design, and conduct basic psychological research
- 2.5 Incorporate sociocultural factors in scientific inquiry

Goal 3: Ethical and Social Responsibility in a Diverse World

- 3.1 Apply ethical standards to evaluate psychological science and practice
- 3.2 Build and enhance interpersonal relationships
- 3.3 Adopt values that build community at local, national, and global levels

Goal 4: Communication

- 4.1 Demonstrate effective writing for different purposes
- 4.2 Exhibit effective presentation skills for different purposes
- 4.3 Interact effectively with others

Goal 5: Professional Development

- 5.1 Apply psychological content and skills to career goals
- 5.2 Exhibit self-efficacy and self-regulation
- 5.3 Refine project-management skills
- 5.4 Enhance teamwork capacity
- 5.5 Develop meaningful professional direction for life after graduation

Do you notice a correspondence among the APA goals, characteristics of psychological literacy, and the competencies developed with a psychology major, described in Chapter 1? Most psychology departments model their programs after the APA goals, with the intention of promoting psychological literacy. Psychology students develop lifelong skills that are relevant to their personal and professional lives. Psychology departments implement these goals through required coursework and other experiences.

Psychology Coursework

As a psychology major, you can expect to learn about human behavior and the methods that psychologists use to study human behavior. Specific requirements may vary by university; however, you can expect to complete the following.

Introductory Psychology/General Psychology

Your first course in psychology will provide a whirlwind and fast-paced tour of the field, including each of the subdisciplines discussed in Chapter 1.

Methodology and Statistics

It is the methodology courses that will teach you how psychologists learn about human behavior. Students learn the research methods that psychologists

use to ask and answer questions about behavior. They also learn statistics and the methods psychologists use to compile and draw conclusions from the information they collect. Finally, students gain experience in designing and carrying out research studies that give them practice in asking and answering questions about human behavior.

Breadth Courses

Just as the general education curriculum is designed to provide students with a broad knowledge base for a well-rounded education, the psychology breadth requirement imparts psychology majors with a well-rounded education in human behavior. The particular sets of requirements vary across psychology departments, but all will include courses in the clinical, developmental, cognitive, biological, and social/personality subfields. Common courses offered by psychology departments are listed in Table 2.1.

Elective Courses

You can expect to take several elective courses in your major—courses that are not required but are your choice. These courses are opportunities to explore your interests or gain knowledge and skills that you think will be helpful in the future.

Capstone Course

The capstone course is intended as the crowning achievement for majors, a course that requires them to synthesize all that they have learned to demonstrate that they have mastered the curriculum. It is an advanced course that is intended to require you to integrate your knowledge about how to study psychological phenomena: how to ask research questions, devise methods of addressing questions, and draw conclusions. You might conduct an independent research study or write a lengthy review paper or senior thesis. Ask your professors for more information about the capstone requirement and get advice so that you can plan ahead and take the courses that you believe will best prepare you for this experience.

Research Experience in Psychology

Completing coursework is essential to earning a college degree, but the best educational and professional development opportunities occur outside of the classroom. Most students interact with their professors only in the classroom. If this is true for you, then you're not taking advantage of your college's most valuable resource. There's much more to learn from professors than content knowledge. Get to know your professors and you might get involved in their research, learn about professional development, learn about special opportunities like internships, and see what it's really like to work in the field.

TABLE 2.1 • Psychology Courses**Applied Psychology**

Family Psychology
 Health Psychology
 Industrial Psychology
 Organizational Psychology
 Psychology and Law
 Sport Psychology
 Consumer Psychology

Biological Psychology and Neuropsychology

Physiological Psychology
 Sensation and Perception
 Psychopharmacology

Clinical Psychology

Clinical Psychology
 Abnormal Psychology
 School Psychology

Developmental Psychology

Adolescent Psychology
 Adulthood and Aging
 Lifespan Development
 Developmental Psychopathology
 Child Psychology

History, Methods, and Statistics

Research Methods
 Experimental Psychology
 Psychological Statistics
 History of Psychology

Learning and Cognitive Psychology

Psychology of Learning
 Psychology of Creativity
 Educational Psychology
 Behavior Modification
 Cognitive Psychology
 Cognitive Neuroscience

Personality, Social Processes, and Measurement

Group Dynamics
 Social Psychology
 Psychology of Motivation
 Psychology of Personality
 Psychological and Educational Testing
 Psychology of Adjustment
 Psychology of Gender
 Psychology of Women
 Cross-Cultural Psychology

The above courses may be grouped in several ways, depending on department. Some psychology courses are required for majors at nearly all schools, while others are electives found at a handful of schools.

Get to Know Professors

How do you get to know professors? Talk to them after class. Stop by during office hours. What do you talk about? Psychology. Ask questions about material—theories, research, cases—discussed in class. Ask about their experiences as students, how they decided to go to graduate school, and what led

them to their research interests. Share an interesting website about the brain, for example, or tell the professor about a relevant program you viewed. The goal is to learn from these conversations and to show your interest in the subject. Remember, professors are people too: smile and be friendly and you'll be surprised at how easy it is to get to know faculty. Relationships with faculty provide opportunities for mentorship. A *mentor* is a person with expertise who takes a special interest in you; he or she may be a college professor, advisor, or job, research, or practicum supervisor. Mentors provide their protégés with opportunities to learn, be advised, and obtain moral support. They are often a source of research experience.

Benefits of Obtaining Research Experience

Research generates new knowledge. When we engage in research, we make new discoveries and learn new things. Sure, you read about psychology research, but carrying it out is an altogether different animal that will help you learn more than you have in any class. It's an opportunity to be on the cutting edge of psychology. Aside from the thrill of generating new knowledge, assisting a professor with research provides many other valuable opportunities (Grover, 2006; Landrum, 2008), such as the following:

- Gaining specialized skills and knowledge by working one-on-one with a faculty member
- Learning methodological techniques that will be helpful in completing your senior thesis or, perhaps, graduate work
- Practicing written and oral communication skills by learning how to express research findings and preparing papers for submission to, and presenting at, professional conferences and journals
- Developing a mentoring relationship with a faculty member
- Obtaining experiences that will enhance your applications to employers and graduate programs
- Acquiring outstanding letters of recommendation, as faculty who work closely with you can write more detailed letters that fully demonstrate your capacities and strengths

Research experience demonstrates your ability to work independently and sharpens your analytic and critical thinking skills. You will develop important skills, learn what it's like to generate new knowledge, and have an experience that looks great from the perspectives of employers and graduate school admissions committees. It also provides employers with evidence of your motivation, initiative, and willingness to go beyond basic requirements.

How to Obtain Research Experience

How do you seek research opportunities? First and foremost, you should perform well in class and be motivated and visible in your department. Let faculty know that you're interested in getting involved in research, but do not send out a mass or form e-mail notifying them of your availability. Instead, approach professors during their office hours and ask for leads on who might be looking for research assistants. Before you approach a professor you would like to work with, learn about his or her work. Read some of the professor's articles, especially the most recent ones. When you find a professor who is looking for an assistant, carefully and honestly describe what you can offer (computer skills, Internet skills, statistical skills, and the number of hours per week you're available). Let the faculty member know that you're willing to work hard (be honest). Ask questions about the professor's expectations and how you will be evaluated. For example, what will you do? What will be your responsibilities? Are the work hours set or will they change each week? Is the project ongoing? How long is the commitment (semester, year)? Professors are often unintentionally vague in describing their expectations for students during the research assistantship as well as for the products of the collaboration (such as a paper).

It may be tempting to consider turning the professor down because the hours don't fit your schedule or the research isn't interesting enough, but the opportunity to work as a research assistant will enhance your academic and professional development in many ways. Don't be hasty in turning down such an important opportunity. You may not work on a project that you find mind-blowingly exciting, but you will obtain excellent experience. Also, research projects often become more interesting once you're immersed in them. Your academic interests most likely will change as you gain more experience and education.

In most cases, there is no pay involved for assisting professors with their research. Instead, you'll get a free learning experience that will improve your skills and abilities as well as make you more appealing to graduate schools and employers. Sometimes you may earn course credit for your work. Finally, volunteer to work closely with a professor only if you have the time to commit. Remember that falling behind or dropping out will reflect negatively on you—much more so than if you hadn't become involved at all.

What to Expect as a Research Assistant

If you work with a professor on his or her research project, you're doing the work of a research assistant. The specific tasks that research assistants complete vary with the project, faculty member, and area of psychology. Some research assistants collect data by administering surveys or maintaining and operating lab equipment. Others code and enter data, make photocopies, or write literature reviews. Here are some general tasks that research assistants perform (Landrum & Davis, 2014):

- Collect data by administering surveys, interviews, or running research protocols.
- Score, code, and enter data into a spreadsheet or statistical analysis program.
- Conduct library research, including literature searches using databases (e.g., PsycINFO, Social Sciences Citation Index, PsycARTICLES), making copies of articles, and ordering unavailable articles and books through interlibrary loan.
- Assist in developing new research ideas.
- Use computer skills such as word processing, spreadsheet, scheduling, and statistical analysis programs.
- Assist in preparing submissions for local or regional conferences and, if accepted, work on poster or oral presentations for professional conferences.
- Assist in preparing a manuscript to submit the results of your collaborative research to a scientific journal.

Seek Opportunities for Independent Study

Students who assist faculty in research often develop their own research ideas and hypotheses that stem from the professor's work. Others develop ideas on their own or as class projects. Conducting an independent study is another important way of obtaining research experience. As you're aware, research generates new knowledge. When we engage in research, we make new discoveries and learn new things. Sure, you read about psychology research and may have assisted faculty with their research, but carrying out your own study to examine your own hypothesis is a very different experience that will help you learn more than you have in any class.

Although student-developed studies are often referred to as *independent studies*, they are far from the isolated experiences that the name conveys. All are closely supervised by faculty. Some psychology departments require students to carry out their own research projects in order to demonstrate their competence; these studies often take place in capstone courses.

If you are interested in developing and conducting your own study, take the steps we have described to find a faculty member whose interests match yours and who is willing to oversee your study. Together you will determine your research question and how to address it. Frequently students' ideas for independent studies come from their work on faculty projects. It is often said that research often generates more questions than answers. These are often the best studies to conduct, as they already have a faculty member's attention and interest. However, you may also consider approaching faculty with whom

you have not conducted research. The specific steps entailed in designing and conducting your research study will be determined by the topic and by your interactions with your faculty supervisor.

Internship Experiences for Psychology Students

Employers want to hire skilled employees. How do you demonstrate your useful skills? Real-world experience. One of the best ways to learn about career options, develop skills that match your career goals, and get attention from employers is to get experience outside of the classroom. An internship provides hands-on experience in a work setting for a specific period of time (typically a summer, semester, or year). Internships vary by field and employer. Some internships are paid and some are not. Some internships are organized through the psychology department and others through the college career center or co-operative education office. Sometimes students obtain their own internships by contacting local businesses and social service agencies. Often students earn course credit for completing an internship. Ideally, internships are supervised by a faculty member as well as by an on-site supervisor.

What Does an Internship Entail?

Internships vary dramatically, so it is difficult to predict any one student's experience. Some internships will be exciting and others less so. Virtually all internships will entail some tasks that are repetitive or dull, such as filing, answering phones, or entering data. However, that is the nature of most entry-level positions. Examples of internship settings include social service agencies (where you might observe or assist in intake of clients, psychological testing, report writing, and behavior modification) and human resource departments (where you might observe and assist in administering structured interviews, writing performance appraisals, and coordinating special projects or programs). The best internship opportunities provide experiences that are similar to entry-level jobs.

Benefits of Internships

The most obvious benefit of an internship is that you'll learn and practice skills that are relevant in everyday work settings, such as professional styles of communication. Many students are surprised and gratified by the recognition that they already have useful skills that employers desire. Internship experiences can hone these skills and help you learn new ones. An internship lets you try out a career setting. You'll learn about a particular job, duties, and support. You'll learn about the types of colleagues and clientele or customers you might encounter and what you can expect in terms of responsibilities and resources.

Moreover, internships offer opportunities for personal development. You'll learn how to adapt to new settings, circumstances, and people.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson that accompanies an internship experience is that you'll learn about your own interests, likes, and dislikes. Your internship experiences may confirm your interest in a given career or you might be surprised to learn that your chosen career setting isn't right for you. Sometimes an internship tells you about what you don't want to do. For example, it is not uncommon for some students to believe that clinical or counseling psychology is for them until they gain some experience and realize that they don't enjoy the challenges of working closely with people. Therefore, one of the most important reasons for seeking field experience is to clarify your career choice. There is no "unsuccessful" internship, because learning about yourself—your interests, skills, and also your disinterests—prepares you to seek job opportunities that are right for you. Working in the field helps you to identify not only what work-related outcomes you value (e.g., pay, autonomy, responsibility) but also what interests and abilities you need to be satisfied in that work.

Internships offer practical benefits too. Internships can lead to contacts in the field and someone who can provide a reference or recommendation based on your ability to apply your knowledge of psychology in a real-world setting. For example, in an annual survey, employers consistently rated internships and job-related experiences as very desirable (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). Interns are evaluated positively by recruiters, are hired more quickly, and earn higher salaries in the workplace than students who have not interned (Guarise & Kostenblatt, 2018; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). In addition, students who work as interns are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs after graduation. Students who obtain field experience are able to consider the match between their academic preparation and work requirements (e.g., students are often poorly equipped for the stresses of work, including the realities of politics, difficult clients, and the conflict between theory and application) while they are still in school. Doing so gives you time to learn more and to resolve the conflicts early. Therefore, it may not be surprising that after graduation, students who obtain field experience often have a smoother, easier transition to work, without the "reality shock" that other graduates often experience.

How to Find an Internship

There are several ways to obtain an internship. The organization of field experiences varies by institution and department. Many departments have a faculty member who serves as a campus coordinator for field experience and internship programs. He or she makes sure that internship sites are appropriate, develops working relationship with them, and evaluates student performance. Other departments may not have one coordinator; in some cases, different faculty are responsible for each internship site, depending on their relationship with the site. Some colleges have an office that specializes in placing students

in internships. Sometimes these offices and opportunities are referred to as co-operative education. Typically these centers offer workshops or job expos in which employers visit the campus. Check with your advisor, another professor, or the career or co-operative education center at your institution.

Some departments offer an internship course in which students are matched with applied settings and earn credit for their work. Other departments require students to find their own internships. If you are in this position, begin this process at least 2 to 3 months early because it takes time to locate a site, make contact and meet with the director, obtain a faculty supervisor, and get permission to proceed. For example, if you are interested in an internship at a social service agency, look up the social service agencies in your area, such as women's centers, shelters, and not-for-profit agencies that help individuals and families. Sometimes professors have contacts at companies, such as alumni, who can direct you toward internship opportunities. E-mail the director and explain that you are a student and are looking for internship or, depending on the setting, volunteer opportunities and perhaps get course credit for your work. Attach a résumé (see Chapter 13). Alternatively, you might call and ask if they'd like more information. Anticipate meeting and interviewing with the agency staff. Be prepared to have a faculty member speak with the agency, vouching for you and taking responsibility for providing academic supervision.

Round Out Your Education

You are more than your major. Your college major indicates your specialty, but much of what you learn in college will come from experiences that are outside of your major. Seek opportunities to learn about yourself and about career paths and recognize that opportunities often arise unexpectedly. We often don't know when we will encounter an opportunity to learn about ourselves or our futures. Instead, successful students attempt to remain open to new perspectives and opportunities.

Participate in Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities, such as clubs, teams, and out-of-class activities, can help you develop useful teamwork and leadership skills and enhance your marketability. Similar to internships and work experience, extracurricular activities can give you opportunities to test career paths, develop contacts, and work on your communication and interpersonal skills. In addition, employers value volunteer work for campus and community organizations because it shows that you're a good citizen.

Take advantage of the extracurricular activities available at your institution. Extracurricular participation gives employers evidence about your leadership skills, your ability to work effectively in a group, and your initiative and motivation.

Take Classes or a Minor in Another Discipline

Take a range of classes. You'll fulfill your college's general education requirements and learn about areas in which you might want to major. If you find a class interesting, take another in that discipline.

After you've considered where you'd like to be (i.e., your ultimate career goal), take a few elective courses outside of psychology that are specific to your goals. For example, if you plan to enter the business world, a course in management or accounting certainly wouldn't hurt. If you would like a job in human services, take courses in social work, communication, criminal justice, sociology, or anthropology. Regardless of your career plans, classes and experiences that enhance your communication skills (e.g., courses in writing, speech, and communications; writing for the campus newspaper) are a good investment because employers view communication skills favorably. Consider learning a language. For example, the ability to speak Spanish is useful in all settings. Once you know what you'd like to do, consider adding a minor or even a double major to your curriculum to enhance your experience and skill set. For example, students interested in human resource careers might consider a business minor while those interested in law enforcement might consider a minor in justice and law administration. One survey of graduates with bachelor's degrees in psychology found that the happiest and most successful graduates took coursework in a field related to their career—especially a minor or double major (Landrum, 2009). However, weigh the costs and benefits of a double major or minor given your situation. If it delays your graduation, can you afford the additional time and money to complete a double major?

Get Work Experience

Employment is another source of applied experience. Psychology students often work in childcare, office, and retail settings. There is something to learn in every setting, but the students who benefit the most from employment are those who are aware of the skills they are developing and seek additional opportunities to learn.

Most institutions offer on-campus work-study opportunities in which students are employed on campus for a set number of hours each week. The positions vary and students may be placed in any setting on campus. Work as an administrative assistant in an academic department or administrator's office can give you the opportunity to learn what's entailed in managing an office. Working in a high-traffic setting, such as the registrar's or cashier's office or the library, can put you in contact with many people—students, faculty, and administrators—and offer opportunities to practice and improve communication and interpersonal skills. Working as a tutor can help you to broaden your understanding of your field and learn how to teach and motivate others. Colleges with residential programs often offer students the opportunity to

serve as a resident assistant (RA), a peer leader who supervises and offers support to students living in an on-campus residence or dormitory. RAs are often students' first stop for seeking help with a range of issues, such as resolving conflicts with peers and adjusting to college. They are involved in planning programs, disseminating information to students, and monitoring facilities. RAs develop skills in communication and interpersonal relations, planning and decision-making, and leadership.

EXERCISE 2.1

DEVELOPING SKILLS AND ACQUIRING EXPERIENCES

Over the college years, your goal is to develop transferrable skills, obtain real-world experiences, and establish ongoing relationships with faculty. This exercise encourages you to consider these tasks.

Skill Development

Consider how psychology majors can develop the following competencies desired by employers. For each competency, identify at least two psychology courses, two courses from other departments, and at least one out-of-class experience that can aid its development.

1. Interpersonal and teamwork skills
2. Thinking and problem-solving skills
3. Written communication skills
4. Data analysis skills
5. Computer literacy
6. Self-management and adaptability

Relationships With Faculty

Learn about the faculty in your department. Visit the psychology department website and review faculty biographies. Visit their websites. Review their lists of publications.

1. Choose two or three faculty to study in more depth. Who are they and why did you choose them?
2. Next, choose one professor. Review his or her research. Look up the abstracts of articles that sound interesting. Write a two-sentence summary of the professor's area of expertise and research. Do you find it interesting? Why or why not?

3. If you're interested in the professor's work, read more and devise three questions to ask about his or her work. List them.
4. Visit the professor's office hours to discuss his or her research. What did you learn?
5. Consider your overall impressions: How comfortable do you feel speaking with this faculty member? If you're uncomfortable, try to identify why.
6. Complete this process for each faculty member, and you'll begin to get ideas about which faculty you're more inclined to work with. Discuss the results of this exploration.

Applied Experiences

Identify specific opportunities for outside-of-class experience, through internships, work experience, or volunteer work. The psychology department course catalog and website, your advisor, and the career services office at your school are useful sources for completing this task.

1. Describe the opportunity.
2. Who do you contact to learn more?
3. When should you obtain this experience? How far ahead must you plan?
4. How will this experience enhance your education? What will you learn? What skills will you gain? What are the outcomes of this experience?

Suggested Reading

Dunn, D. S., & Halonen, J. S. (2017). *The psychology major's companion: Everything you need to know to get where you want to go*. New York, NY: Worth.

Landrum, R. E., & Davis, S. F. (2014). *The psychology major: Career options and strategies for success* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Silvia, P. J., Delaney, P. F., & Marcovitch, S. (2009). *What psychology majors could (and should) be doing: An informal guide to research experience and professional skills*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Wegenek, A. R., & Buskist, W. (2012). *The insider's guide to the psychology major: Everything you need to know about the degree and profession*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Resources

American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org>

American Psychological Society

<http://www.psychologicalscience.org>

APS Observer Student Notebook

https://www.psychologicalscience.org/members/apssc/observer_student_notebook

Eye on Psi Chi

https://www.psichi.org/page/eye_main#.XDOEee8KuZE.link

Psychology Student Network

<http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psn>

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