The Scavenger Hunt: Getting to Know Your Psychology Department

Dan J. Segrist and Cynthia R. Nordstrom
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

One hundred and forty-four undergraduates enrolled in a careers in psychology course participated in a group-oriented scavenger hunt activity. The purpose of this activity was to increase students' awareness of the types of resources, available to them within the psychology department and within the larger campus community, related to psychology as a major and a career. Pre–post data indicated that the activity significantly increased students' self-reported knowledge of the resources available to them. Evaluation ratings also indicated that students found the activity both helpful and enjoyable.

Colleges offer various resources to assist students with educational, vocational, and personal issues including counseling centers, learning centers, career planning and placement centers, and faculty advisors (Heppner & Neal, 1983). As helpful as these services may be, a key issue is the extent to which students are aware of them and use them. For instance, research indicates that although students are aware of counseling and career services, relatively few actually use them (Benedict, Apsler, & Morrison, 1977; Fouad et al., 2006; Kramer, Berger, & Miller, 1974), and many psychology students have difficulty locating, evaluating, and using library resources to their advantage (Merriam, LaBaugh, & Butterfield, 1992).

Although awareness of resources available in one's environment is important for problem solving (Neal & Heppner, 1986), many students are not attuned to even the departmental resources and services available to assist them (e.g., graduate school preparation services). To assist students regarding career and graduate school opportunities, some psychology departments have developed courses specifically to address these issues (e.g., Thomas & McDaniel, 2004). These courses may also include information about specific departmental and campus resources. The purpose of our study was to examine the effectiveness of a group scavenger hunt activity incorporated in a careers in psychology course. We designed this activity to increase awareness of the psychology curriculum, departmental and campus re-sources, faculty activities, and the location of departmental and campus offices.

Method

Participants

One hundred and forty-four undergraduates, primarily women (81.9%), from a Midwestern university, participated in a scavenger hunt activity as part of a careers in psychology course. The sample was comprised of freshmen (11.1%), sophomores (20.8%), juniors (34%), and seniors (34%). Seventy-five percent of the participants were psychology majors. Mean age was 22.19 years ($SD = 4.13$).

Procedure

During the third week of the semester and prior to discussion of the psychology department, we randomly assigned participants to teams (e.g., Team Freud, Team Skinner) of 4 or 5 students and provided them with copies of a 32-item Scavenger Hunt questionnaire we developed. Several questions required students to provide evidence of visiting specific Web pages or offices. For example, one question asked students about the location and hours of operation for the Resource Center—an office in the psychology department providing students with access to psychology-related resources, including graduate school directories, information on test protocols, copies of theses, and personal computers—and to have their answer sheets stamped by an office worker. Another question required students to locate the Career Development Center and acquire specific career-related handouts.

The Scavenger Hunt questionnaire encompassed 11 areas: (a) names, positions, and contact information for staff and faculty (e.g., What is the name of the graduate secretary in the Psychology Department [get stamp]?);

(b) department Web page (e.g., What is the Web address for the SIUE Psychology Department home page? Print out a copy of the home page.); (c) location and services of offices and resources within the department (e.g., What is the room number of the main office of the Psychology Department? What resources does the Resource Center contain? What are the hours it is open—you'll have to go there to find out [get stamp]?); (d) psychology curriculum (e.g., According to the undergraduate program link on the SIUE Psychology Web page, what are the seven "Undergraduate Learning Objectives"?); (e) requirements and objectives for specific courses (e.g., What is PSYC 491 and who is eligible to take it? What is PSYC 493 and what are the objectives for this course? Who would you see to register for PSYC 493?); (f) graduate programs offered; (g) specialization areas and research interests of the faculty (e.g., Match the professor with his or her research interests); (h) psychology department student organizations (e.g., What is the Web address for the SIUE Psychology Club? Who can join? What is the Web address for SIUE's chapter of Psi Chi? Who can join?); (i) departmental policy on plagiarism (e.g., What is the Web address for the Psychology Department's policy on plagiarism? According to this site, what is the most common example of plagiarism and who should you ask if you have any questions about plagiarism and how to avoid it?); (j) resources and services available for psychology majors through the Career Development Center (e.g., What is the Web address and phone number of the SIUE Career Development Center? Where is it located? Go to the carousel located outside of the SIUE Career Development Center. Pick up a copy of each of the following handouts: *Making the Most of a Career/Job Fair*, *Designing Your Resume*, and *Guidelines for Interviewing*); and (k) campus library resources (e.g., On what floor of the Lovejoy Library will you find psychology journals?).

Teams could divide the questions among members, work in pairs, or work as a whole group in locating answers for each question. We gave teams 1 week for the activity and required them to turn in one complete copy of the questionnaire with their answers and materials (e.g., handouts and printouts). Consequently, for any team that divided the workload, members had to meet to put together a final copy complete with all of their answers and materials. We informed students that their grades on the activity would be determined by the accuracy of the questionnaire and materials turned in by their respective team.

Prior to the activity, students indicated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*) their familiarity with resources available in the psychology depart-

ment, locations of key departmental offices, resources available on the departmental Web page, and faculty research interests. Additionally, they indicated their frequency of visiting the department Web page and awareness of student organizations within the department. On completion of the activity, students again completed this survey. Additionally, students evaluated how helpful they considered the activity, how much they recommended the instructor continue using it, to what extent the activity enabled them to meet classmates, and their level of enjoyment.

Results

Pre–Post Self-Reported Knowledge Ratings

Paired samples t tests indicated significant increases on all self-reported knowledge ratings (Table 1). Because matriculation level would likely influence familiarity with resources, we also examined postknowledge scores by class level. All results were nonsignificant ($ps > .05$), with the exception of familiarity with departmental offices, $F(3, 108) = 5.44$, $p < .01$. Seniors were more familiar with departmental offices ($M = 4.47$, $SD = .83$) than freshmen ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.45$) and sophomores ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .69$).

Evaluation

Table 2 displays participants' mean evaluation ratings for the scavenger hunt activity. Perceptions of the activity were positive, with participants reporting that they learned from the activity, enjoyed it, and suggested that the instructor use it in the future.

Discussion

Psychology students often hold misconceptions regarding graduate admissions criteria, job prospects, and salary information (Briihl, 2001; Nauta, 2000). Thus, it is critical that psychology departments find ways of encouraging students to access the numerous resources available to facilitate their career pursuits. With either no or erroneous information, students may find themselves disadvantaged compared to those more cognizant of these resources. We used a scavenger hunt activity to better familiarize students with available departmental and campus career-related resources.

Table 1. Mean Pre- and Postknowledge Ratings for Scavenger Hunt Activity

	Prescores		Postscores		
Item	M	SD	M	SD	t
Familiarity with departmental resources	2.99	1.07	3.88	.88*	−9.66
Familiarity with office locations	3.61	1.25	4.15	1.00*	−4.67
Frequency of visiting department Web page	2.60	1.29	3.28	.98*	−6.40
Familiarity with resources available on department Web page	2.53	1.21	3.69	.95*	−9.82
Familiarity with faculty research interests	2.50	1.13	3.53	1.07*	−7.72
Familiarity with clubs sponsored by the psychology department	3.05	1.16	4.06	.86*	−8.84

Note. Items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*).
*$p < .001$.

Students reported greater knowledge of these resources after taking part in the activity. This was true even for seniors, whom one might assume to be already fairly knowledgeable. In addition, student ratings suggested that the activity was an effective and enjoyable way to acquire this information. Moreover, instructors can easily modify the activity to meet specific objectives. For example, although we limited our scavenger hunt to primarily departmental resources, professors could include items related to other campus resources to which they want to draw attention (e.g., counseling services, academic support services) or to regional or national psychology organizations and Web sites (e.g., American Psychological Association, Midwestern Psychological Association, Division 2, Psi Chi).

From a content perspective, this activity allows students to learn about resources relevant to their academic and professional careers of which preactivity data suggest they were relatively unaware. From an efficiency standpoint, this activity helps faculty and staff as well. First, data from the activity provide departments with ideas of where students lack knowledge. For example, faculty research interests and department Web page resources were areas about which students reported the least knowledge. Armed with this awareness, our department can now develop mechanisms to showcase the departmental Web site and faculty research interests (e.g., placing a list of the faculty's research interests by their photographs in the main hallway). Second, to the extent that students make use of departmental and university resources, faculty and staff time that had been spent providing or directing students to this information can be used in other ways.

This activity also had significant process benefits. Students worked collaboratively with other students and, as the evaluation data showed, met people they did not previously know. Thus, this activity encouraged the development of team skills—skills in high demand in the workplace (Cascio, 2003). Anecdotally, students also reported that during the activity they engaged in career-related conversations with fellow team members (e.g., "Are you taking the GREs? Maybe we can study together."). Thus, an unintended but positive consequence of this activity was that students learned about an additional resource that could help them navigate their future careers in psychology—each other.

Table 2. Mean Evaluation Ratings for Scavenger Hunt Activity

Item	M	SD
Helped me become more aware of office locations	4.0	.96
Helped me learn about resources in the Psychology Department	4.0	.87
Helped me become familiar with faculty research interests	4.2	.89
Helped me learn more about the staff in the Psychology Department	4.1	.89
Helped me become more familiar with the Psychology Department Web page	4.1	.82
Helped me become more aware of student organizations within the Psychology Department	3.9	.97
Helped me learn how the Career Development Center can help psychology majors	4.0	.88
Enjoyed the scavenger hunt activity	3.8	.92
Recommend that the instructor use the scavenger hunt activity in future classes	4.2	.92
Met new people as a result of the scavenger hunt activity	4.1	.99

Note. Items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

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Notes

1. We presented a portion of this article at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA, August 2006.
2. We thank anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on a previous version of this article.
3. Send correspondence and requests for the Scavenger Hunt questionnaire to Dan J. Segrist, Department of Psychology, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Alumni Hall, Campus Box 1121, Edwardsville, IL 62026; e-mail: dsegris@siue.edu.