The Scavenger Hunt: Getting to Know Your Psychology Department

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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 resources, 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]?)
teams 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
they would be determined by the accuracy of the
questionnaire and materials turned in on the activity.
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.

Results

Pre–Post Self-Reported Knowledge Ratings

Paired samples t-tests indicated significant increases
on all self-reported knowledge ratings (Table 1). Be-
cause matriculation level would likely influence famil-
arity 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. Se-
niors 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 rat-
ings 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 re-
garding graduate admissions criteria, job prospects, and
salary information (Briihl, 2001; Nauta, 2000). Thus,
it is critical that psychology departments find ways of
couraging students to access the numerous resources
available to facilitate their career pursuits. With ei-
ther 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 avail-
able departmental and campus career-related resources.
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 1. Mean Pre- and Postknowledge Ratings for Scavenger Hunt Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Prescores</th>
<th>Postscores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with departmental resources</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with office locations</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of visiting department Web page</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with resources available on department Web page</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with faculty research interests</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with clubs sponsored by the psychology department</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

### Table 2. Mean Evaluation Ratings for Scavenger Hunt Activity

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

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


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.