

Research Opportunities in Psychology

Peer Advisors offer suggestions based upon their personal experiences

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Participating in a research experience is an excellent and rewarding opportunity to become more involved in psychology. By conducting research, Psychology Majors develop valuable critical thinking skills, learn how to plan and implement a long-term project, and refine and develop presentation, discussion and writing skills. Becoming involved in a project also gives students a chance to work closely with a psychology faculty member with similar interests. Potential employers and graduate schools value the skills acquired through research. The three types of research opportunities available in the School of Psychology are described below.

Psychology 290: Project Assistance

Participating in Psyc 290, Project Assistance, is the simplest way to become involved in a research project. Psyc 290 is usually a 1 credit commitment that counts towards graduation, but not towards the 38-credit hours required for the psychology major. Research-oriented Psyc 290s involve helping faculty with projects. Some projects are advertised in the newsletter or in the e-mail news. You can also find projects by asking professors who work in the area of psychology that interests you if he or she is conducting a project with which you can help.

Psychology 402: Independent Research

For a more intense and comprehensive research experience students can enroll in Psyc 402, Independent Research. Students enrolled in Psyc 402 earn 3-credit hours, which count towards the requirement that all Psychology Majors complete six credit hours of 400-level courses. Only three credits of Psyc 402 may be counted towards the 38-hour Psychology major, although additional hours can be taken for university elective credit. Psyc 402 projects are often advertised in the newsletter or e-mail news, and you can find others by talking to professors who work in the area of psychology that interests you.

Psychology 499: Honor's Thesis

The thesis is a research project developed by the student that usually involves selecting a topic, designing a study, collecting data, analyzing results and presenting the findings orally and in writing. The honor's thesis is a 3-semester commitment. Six credits are earned that fulfill both the psychology major capstone requirement (3 credits) and the 400-level psychology elective requirement (3 credits). Most students begin the thesis in the spring semester of their junior year. During this semester, students earn one credit by narrowing their thesis topic and literature review of this topic. During the fall semester of senior year, students earn three credits as they continue their literature review and write a research proposal. During the final semester of the honor's thesis, students earn two credits as they collect data, analyze the results of their study, and write their thesis report. Students who complete the honor's thesis graduate "with distinction," one of the highest honors awarded to graduates at James Madison University. Students must have at least a 3.25 GPA to complete an honors thesis. To enroll, students must first identify a faculty member who will supervise the project. If you need help finding an appropriate sponsor, see your advisor or Dr. Stoloff. Your sponsor will guide you through the process.

Examples of Psyc 290 and Psyc 402 Experiences

Student Perception of Sexism

Karen Daum

I took part in a Psyc 290 project during the Spring of 1999. Our initial Psyc 290 research team consisted of two professors and two students. The next semester, two additional students joined our team as we all enrolled in a Psyc 402 course. Dr. Stoloff and Dr. Brewster were interested in determining whether or not the gender of a professor (the messenger), the gender of the student (the receiver), and the content of the material being presented has an effect on student's perception of the professor.

As research assistants, we met weekly and were responsible for much of the work necessary to complete the project. We read and discussed relevant journal articles. We also gathered materials about the biology of human sexual motivation in order to help formulate the lecture materials that would be used in the study. As a team, we determined the exact variables that were to be studied. We designed the research protocol, and we submitted the research proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Once the study was approved by the IRB, we conducted our experiment using participants from the Psychology Subject Pool. Data collection is now complete, and we have handed the work over to another team of three students enrolled in Psyc 402, who are analyzing our data. We are all looking forward to seeing the results of this project.

Participating in a Psyc 290/402 was probably one of the best decisions I have made in my effort to become more involved in the School of Psychology. I have learned what it is like to conduct an experiment. I discovered that one of the most challenging aspects of this project was the complex task of creating a study that would gather the exact data we were looking for and would be interpretable because we minimized experimental confounds. The process of thinking of confounding variables and creating ways to avoid them has greatly improved my critical thinking skills. These skills will be useful for any career path I choose.

The greatest thing about participating in a research project is that you are working side-by-side with your professors and a small group of other students while you are earning credit. I had a great time working with my research team. We had some good laughs and developed some new friendships. I suggest that all students inquire about any project opportunities that your professors may have to offer, and to get involve in every way you can.

Sports Psychology

Lynn Hobeck

As a sophomore Psychology major, I became aware of a one-credit Psyc 290 research opportunity offered by Dr. Kitsantas in the area of sports psychology. The research that I helped conduct examined self-regulation techniques in athletes. I conducted library research and summarized articles. Along with a partner, Liz Green, I also contacted coaches that we hoped would participate in this research. Dr. Kitsantas, my partner, and I met once a week to discuss our project and we helped develop an experiment that would be conducted the following semester.

The following semester my partner and I were asked to enroll in a three-credit Psyc 402 and participate in the project that would continue our research. In the end, we collected data, completed the experiment, and wrote a paper summarizing our results.

My Psyc 290 and Psyc 402 experiences were just the start to my research in psychology. I am now working on my honors thesis in sports psychology. Psyc 290 helped me to begin to develop the foundation on which I could conduct my own research. I encourage all psychology majors who are interested in research to begin by participating in Psyc 290.

Animal Research

Carolyn Keating

Last spring I worked with a group of seven other students assisting Dr. Suzanne Baker with research on laboratory mice. The hypothesis of our research was based largely on past studies of animals in captivity. Animals that are housed outside of their natural habitats tend to develop repetitive behaviors, called stereotypies, such as rocking and hitting. We collected quantitative data on the prevalence of these behaviors in the mice through videotaped observations of the subjects in various settings. We collectively analyzed the data and then individually wrote APA-style papers discussing the results of our research. We presented our findings at the Annual School of Psychology poster session.

Participating in an animal-based Psyc 402 experience strengthened my application for an internship, for which I was applying, that involved research on chimpanzees that communicate with sign language. To find this project, I checked the faculty interest sheet located in the Peer Advising office and identified professors who were interested in the psychology of animals and set up an appointment with Dr. Baker. She informed me about the study she was planning, and I decided that being a member of her research group would be a beneficial experience for me.

Participating in Psyc 402 provided me with an appreciation of the detailed work required to conduct a research project. We were active participants in each stage of project development, from the initial design of the study to the presentation of the final results. Not only did this experience provide me with practical exposure to animal research, it also improved my overall understanding of how to conduct research.

Sexual Assault and Rape

Tracy Lambert

For two semesters, I have worked with Dr. Arnold Kahn and a group of fellow students on a variety of projects that explored the topics of sexual assault and rape. During my two semesters on the research team, I was active in every step of the research process. I enjoyed reading and discussing recent literature with team members and brainstorming ideas for a research study to be implemented at JMU. I learned fundamental research skills by writing a research proposal, administering surveys to participants, entering quantitative data, coding qualitative data, and analyzing and interpreting data using SPSS. The process of writing a final paper helped me to become better at documenting results and discussing conclusions in APA style. I also gained valuable experience working as a team member. Our team presented at both the School of Psychology poster session and at a symposium at The Radford University Gender and Culture Conference.

This year I continue to work with several members of the team, analyzing the qualitative data and revising our final paper. We have been invited to participate in the Southeastern Psychological Association Conference in New Orleans later this spring, and we will present at the APA Conference symposium in D.C. this August. Our goal is to have our paper reviewed for publication before the end of the summer.

At the end of this year, I will complete an honors thesis. My topic is an extension of the research from my Psyc 402. I found it extremely beneficial to read the literature and to have become comfortable with the research process before I began my thesis. I would recommend a Psyc 402 experience to anyone who is interested in doing an honors thesis, or who is pursuing graduate study in a research-related field. This experience has given me the skills and the confidence to conduct my own research projects.

Cognitive Psychology

Emily Phillips

I was first introduced to Dr. Richard West's research through his Cognitive Psychology course. He mentioned during class that he was looking for students to help with his

research on critical thinking. The enthusiasm he showed while speaking to our class peaked my interest, so I met with Dr. West after class to get more information. I found out that he was investigating why individuals choose different answers to the same questions. The project sounded interesting so I asked if I could help and Dr. West agreed.

Participating in Dr. West's Psyc 402 project consisted of three major components: attending weekly two-hour meetings, administering the experiment to subjects, and writing a final APA-style paper. During this time, Dr. West led a class discussion of assigned readings for the week that allowed students to become familiar with the research. Students were encouraged to bring up questions and concerns about the experiment or the research. Each research assistant was responsible for administering the experiment to subjects twice a week during two- to three-hour testing sessions.

My participation in Psyc 402 provided me with many unique opportunities. I learned specific theories on critical thinking and I was responsible for making certain that experiments were administered properly. It also allowed me to develop a working relationship with a faculty member. Working on a Psyc 402 project gave me an insight into what research is all about and is an experience that every psychology student should have.

Cohabitation and Marital Expectations

Jessica Volz

Being in the honors program since my first year at JMU, I knew that the thesis project would be the final honor's program requirement. When the time came to start my project and enroll in Psyc 499A, I found myself becoming stressed about finding a topic, worried about having enough time to work on it, and doubting my ability to complete a thesis. However, talking about areas of interest with my advisor, Dr. Nelson, I was able to find a topic that really interested me. My research studies college students' attitudes toward cohabitation and expectations of marriage. I am also studying the effects of parental conflict and intactness of the students' family of origin. While numerous studies have been done examining marital expectations and parental divorce, very few studies have focused on attitudes toward cohabitation and parental conflict. I was excited to be one of the first researchers to examine this issue.

Late last semester I was able to pilot a questionnaire that I had developed the Cohabitation Attitudinal Scale (CAS). After I wrote my thesis proposal, I had a meeting with my thesis committee (Drs. Nelson, Serdikoff and Cowan), about my research proposal and discussed the changes I needed to make. After that meeting, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board to begin collecting data by using the School of Psychology's Subject Pool. I am currently collecting data. I believe this is the most exciting part of the entire thesis because I am working with real data from real people, and generating results of my own study. One of the most rewarding aspects of doing my thesis has been to work closely with Dr. Nelson and get to know her better. Being in one of the most popular majors on campus, it is sometimes difficult to establish a close relationship with a professor; but working on an honors thesis certainly allows one to overcome that barrier.

By the end of the semester, I hope to publish my article in the Journal of Marriage and The Family. If you plan on obtaining a master's or doctorate degree, I highly recommend completing a thesis. It has taught me a tremendous amount about the research process, and I feel confident in my research abilities as I head into graduate school.

Identity Development, Dating Relationship Maturity and Sport Participation

Jenny Maskell

My thesis has provided me with the unique opportunity to link aspects of my kinesiology minor with my psychology major. I knew I wanted to study sports psychology, but I didn't know what topic I wanted to pursue. I completed a Psyc 402 project on sports psychology and through that research, I selected a topic. I decided to study identity development and dating relationship maturity among college women and how these factors relate to women's sports participation. By the time I finished the Psyc 402, the literature search for my thesis was nearly done.

During the Fall of my senior year, my thesis advisor, Dr. Eileen Nelson, helped me choose the instruments that I would use for my study. My study deals with the analysis of two populations: female varsity athletes and a control group of female students who are not varsity athletes. I decided to use three different surveys that I combined into a single study of about 100 questions. Additionally, I added a demographic data sheet to assess how long and involved the participant had been in sports. During the Fall semester, I wrote the proposed method of my study that I submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). My project was approved in late January, and I began data collection. When I complete my data collection, I will be able to begin the analysis of the data. I am excited to learn the results of my study and credit my completion of the honor's thesis in helping me to learn much more about the research process.

Want to Get Involved in Research?

If you want to be involved in research, all you need to do is find a faculty member who is conducting a project that interests you and ask if you can help. This newsletter contains "Help Wanted" ads for some of the projects that are going to be conducted during the Fall semester that still need help. Additional projects will be announced in our e-mail news. You can also e-mail, phone, or visit faculty who are interested in areas of psychology that match your interests and ask if they need any help. (Some faculty never advertise their projects). A list of faculty and their research interests may be found in your Psychology Major Handbook or on the web at cep.jmu.edu/ugpsyc (look under Undergraduate Handbook and then Faculty). You can also speak to the Peer Advisors in JO-113 or your academic advisor if you need help. Many faculty feel that in the ideal undergraduate psychology program EVERY student will have some hands-on research experience. Give it a try!