Researching Human Behavior

Since the dawn of time, people have sought to understand how the mind works. There is an intrinsic curiosity to know more about why people think, feel, and behave as they do. The study of psychology incorporates research from the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities to provide insight into all facets of human behavior.

The School of Arts and Sciences Department of Psychology embodies the true spirit of a liberal arts education through a broad range of courses and experiences that develop students’ skills in critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and teamwork. Through course work and experiential learning opportunities, students discover important concepts that underlie current scientific thought while receiving training in the application of psychological research methods.

With more than 900 undergraduates majoring in psychology, the department is one of the most popular and largest departments in Arts and Sciences. “Psychology is a fundamental area of interest for many students who are fascinated by human behavior,” says Cynthia Lausberg, director of the department’s Office of Undergraduate Advising. “The psychology program serves as an excellent introduction to the world of scientific inquiry for students, whether they continue in psychology or choose another career path.”

To stay competitive in the field of psychology, the department completely overhauled its major in 2009. “Our undergraduate committee extensively analyzed the entire program and looked at how we could improve the total student experience,” explains Lausberg. “Through a more rigorous curriculum that includes expanded credit hours, we can now more fully capitalize on the strengths of the faculty to ensure that students are totally prepared with the research and analytical skills they need to go out into the workforce or move on to graduate school.”

Because the new major is more heavily focused on developing research skills, undergraduates are encouraged to engage in experiential learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom as part of the total educational experience at the University of Pittsburgh. Through the directed research program, students gain valuable exposure to various aspects of the research process by working on a faculty member’s research project. Currently, there are more than 40 research laboratories conducting approximately 100 research studies in clinical, cognitive, developmental, health, and social psychology. Undergraduates play a vital role in the day-to-day functioning of the labs, performing duties such as subject recruitment; data collection, coding, and analysis; scientific literature reviews; and use of assessment tools and gaining exposure to research design and planning.

In addition to the directed research program, students receive hands-on knowledge through supervised field placements. These internships give students an opportunity to gain applied, practical experience in a psychology-related setting. Students who would like to learn more about internships should meet with their advisors to discuss site-specific choices that align with their career paths.

Psychology majors interested in experiential learning opportunities inside the classroom can participate as undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs). Students are encouraged to speak to professors who taught classes in which they have done particularly well and ask about opportunities to assist with teaching projects. By being UTAs, students reinforce their own mastery of the subject, build a college résumé, and gain confidence and satisfaction from helping others to learn.

“The Department of Psychology strives to excel in both training and research so that graduating students have a strong foundation in the skills they need to be successful leaders in their communities,” says Lausberg. “Whether it’s a career in education, mental health services, criminal justice, business, or other fields, the skills that students learn in psychology courses, as well as through experiential learning opportunities, will ultimately be helpful in whatever career they choose.”

For more information on the Department of Psychology, visit www.psychology.pitt.edu.

DID YOU KNOW?

• Six faculty members in the Department of Psychology have received the prestigious Chancellor’s Distinguished Teaching Award among a departmental faculty of approximately 40.

• The Department of Psychology is a collaborative partner in research, with more than 15 schools, centers, and departments across the University of Pittsburgh campus.

• The Panther Psychology Club is an on-campus club for psychology majors as well as any student at Pitt who has an interest in psychology.
MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

Transitions

As we enter the final days of the academic year, it is an appropriate time to reflect on the School of Arts and Sciences’ commitment to monitoring and improving student satisfaction with the University of Pittsburgh experience. National research studies indicate a direct correlation between students’ positive perceptions of their university experience and academic success. It also recognizes that what students need to succeed changes each year. The school’s awareness and response to these changing needs helps to ensure positive outcomes as students progress toward graduation.

For a successful transition to college life, it is essential that freshmen feel a sense of community and belonging. As a way to connect freshmen with faculty and peers, the Office of Freshman Programs introduced a common reading experience in fall 2009, with 80 percent of freshmen participating. Academic Learning Communities, one-on-one advising, and First Experiences in Research provide additional opportunities for freshmen to feel at home and part of the University.

By the second year, most students begin exploring and narrowing down their interests. Because sophomores concentrate more on selecting a major, the Advising Center helps students to identify courses that connect with their future goals. Advisors also refer students to academic departments, the Career Development Office, and other appropriate resources for help in choosing a major.

As juniors move into their major department, they look for more faculty support and direction. Departmental advisors guide students through major requirements, encouraging them to develop mentoring opportunities with faculty. Juniors often build upon their intellectual growth through internships and study abroad programs.

While the senior class looks forward to graduation, departmental advisors make sure all their requirements are complete. Seniors anticipate moving on to real-world situations, exploring different fields of interest, and focusing their academic learning toward postgraduation goals.

Congratulations to the Class of 2010 and all Arts and Sciences students on their outstanding achievements.

Juan J. Manfredi, PhD
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies

Solving the Autism Puzzle

Throughout her undergraduate and graduate career, Jana Iverson, associate professor in the Department of Psychology, always had a profound interest in children with delayed language and communication skills. She immersed herself in researching the connection between speech and gestures and its relationship to language impairment.

Now, as director of the Infant Communication Lab at the University of Pittsburgh, she conducts a variety of research studies on the development of gesture and language in infants and toddlers.

Iverson’s current study, supported by a five-year grant from the National Institutes of Health, focuses on the early vocal, motor, and communicative development of infants at risk for autism. Her team of researchers conducts in-home visits with 5-month-olds who have an older sibling diagnosed with autism. These infants are videotaped once a month until the age of 14 months and then again at 18, 24, and 36 months. Students working on the project analyze and code the many hours of videotaped interactions between parent and child to examine the development of fine and gross motor skills, communication abilities, and language.

“Research consistently shows that babies who have an older sibling with autism are at a higher risk of developing the disorder,” says Iverson. “However, up until now, there hasn’t been any reliable method for diagnosing autism in children younger than 2 years of age. With this research, we may be able to identify very early on certain behavioral markers that may be of help in the diagnosis of autism.”

Signs of autism may include delays in gesturing, smiling, and language development as well as little or no eye contact. However, Iverson notes these early signs are not always reliable markers for autism. Some babies who show these delays may not develop autism. “Unfortunately, with autism, there is not a magic bullet; as of now, there is no clear-cut pattern of behavior to determine which infants will develop the disorder.”

For Iverson, a 2007 recipient of the Chancellor’s Distinguished Research Award, uncovering new information is one of her greatest joys. “When I receive new data, I feel like a child on Christmas day,” she explains. “I go into hibernation,’ analyzing all of the pieces of the puzzle. It’s particularly exhilarating to find that one important piece that connects all of the data together.”

In addition to her extensive research projects, Iverson teaches upper-level psychology courses. “It is hugely rewarding to see a student who is normally quiet and reserved in class transform into someone so engrossed in a project that he or she eats, breathes, and sleeps research,” says Iverson. “It’s truly an amazing job!”

For more information on Iverson’s Infant Communication Lab, visit www.pitt.edu/~ICL.

& ANNOUNCEMENTS

• 2010 Commencement Convocation
On Sunday, May 2, the University of Pittsburgh will hold its 2010 Commencement Convocation at the John M. and Gertrude E. Petersen Events Center at 2 p.m. For more information about commencement activities, contact the Office of Special Events at 412-624-7100 or visit www.pitt.edu/commencement/students/prep.html. Congratulations and best wishes to the Class of 2010!

• Special Receptions for Graduating Seniors
Academic departments often host special receptions to recognize graduating seniors. If you have a senior graduating in May, please contact your student’s home department for more information about planned festivities. For contact information, go to www.pitt.edu/academics.html.

• Dean’s Stars Awards
Undergraduates who complete the spring term with a minimum of 12 credits and a term GPA of 4.0 will receive a $50 Dean’s Stars gift award posted to their accounts in PeopleSoft. If your student qualifies for this award but does not see it in his or her account, please contact us at pittpride@as.pitt.edu. The Dean’s Stars awards will be posted in mid May.
FUTURE LEADERS
Learn Today
FINDING ANSWERS IN THE QUESTIONS

Inside a darkened laboratory, the high-pitched squeals and laughter of a mother playing peekaboo with her 7-month-old son emanate from a computer terminal. Staring intently at the screen, captivated by the infant's movements, is Karen Jakubowski, a senior psychology and history and philosophy of science major. She is assisting Jana Iverson, associate professor in the Department of Psychology, with ongoing research into the developmental behavior of infants at high risk for autism.

Jakubowski spends countless hours in the Infant Communication Lab identifying and coding the movements and the social and communication skills of infants. “Even though the coding process is tedious and time consuming, it is very rewarding to know that I am part of a research study that can have a profound impact on families,” says Jakubowski. “Parents have so many questions, and if I can be part of finding an answer for them, that is so gratifying to me.”

She initially set out to be a physician but realized after her first year at Pitt that psychology was her true love and passion. “I was so intrigued by Dr. Iverson’s research with autism that at the beginning of my sophomore year, I pursued a research opportunity with her,” explains Jakubowski.

This is not Jakubowski’s first research project with Iverson. As a recipient of a 2008 Brackenridge Undergraduate Fellowship, she conducted independent research on attention-directing behavior between mothers and their 18-month-old children. This was the first study of its kind to look at how sensitive mothers are to their child’s attention issues and whether mothers are making any adjustments in their speech patterns and gestures. Jakubowski presented her findings at the International Meeting for Autism Research. That same year, she presented findings on the rhythmic motor activity of at-risk infants at the Society for Research in Child Development conference.

In addition to her other lab projects, Jakubowski recently began a research study with older adults in the Brain, Aging, and Cognitive Health lab. She supports Kirk Erickson, assistant professor in the psychology department, in measuring how changes in the brain affect memory skills and then compares those findings to younger adults. She also looks at interventions that can slow the aging process, such as reading, crossword puzzles, and health and fitness activities.

Jakubowski, who holds a Certificate in the Conceptual Foundations of Medicine and a minor in neuroscience, volunteers at CONTACT Pittsburgh, Inc., a crisis intervention and suicide prevention organization. “Talking with people on the suicide hotline provides me with a wonderful opportunity for more clinical, hands-on experience,” says Jakubowski.

This busy senior will continue her studies at Pitt for a fifth year, working toward a Bachelor of Philosophy degree through the University Honors College.

Registration Continues for Summer Sessions

Whether students are finishing their first term or looking forward to graduation, summer sessions at the University of Pittsburgh provide an exciting opportunity to catch up on needed credits, stay on track to graduate in four years, or get ahead of schedule for the fall term. With more than 500 course offerings, summer sessions classes are designed to help students reach their educational goals no matter where they are in their academic career.

The flexibility of 4-, 6-,12-, and 14-week sessions allows students to enroll in courses that fit around their busy work and internship schedules. Because classes are offered during day and evening hours, students can choose the times that fit best to complete final general education or specialized requirements needed to graduate, finish core and prerequisite courses, or explore subjects in their major without the pressure of a full class load.

For the 2010 summer sessions, the School of Arts and Sciences will offer up to 200 $100 special tuition assistance awards for qualified Arts and Sciences undergraduate students who register for 12 or more credits during summer sessions. The deadline to apply for the special tuition assistance awards is May 1.

For more information on specific classes, on-campus housing, and special tuition awards, visit www.summer.pitt.edu.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS OF DEPRESSION
by Mary Koch Ruiz, University Counseling Center

Depression is a problem that many college students experience. According to the University of Michigan Depression Center, the age of onset for depressive illnesses tends to peak during the ages of 15–19. It is estimated that 15 percent of the college student population may be struggling with depressive illnesses.

Depression is frequently confused with sadness. Sadness is a normal reaction to challenges, disappointments, and setbacks in life. The terms sadness and depression are used interchangeably, but depression is much more. In fact, some people don’t feel sad at all when they are depressed. They describe feeling lifeless or empty or having a feeling of impending doom.

Depression differs from sadness because it pervades day-to-day living. It interferes with the ability to study, work, sleep, eat, and relax. Feelings of helplessness and worthlessness can become intense and unrelenting. A depressed person can withdraw emotionally and physically, feel lethargic, become self-critical, and sometimes have thoughts of suicide.

Even though depression manifests itself differently in each person, there are some common signs and symptoms.

• Feeling hopeless and helpless
• Changes in sleep—too much or too little
• Difficulty with concentration
• Loss of energy or fatigue
• Decrease or increase in appetite or weight
• Feeling agitated, irritable, or restless; excessive crying
• Loss of interest in daily activities; unable to feel joy and pleasure
• Increase in physical complaints such as headaches, stomach pain, back pain, muscle aches

How Can You Help Your Son or Daughter?

• Be understanding and empathic.
• Initiate a conversation by saying something simple, such as, “You seem to be feeling down lately, not like yourself.”
• Respond in a nonjudgmental and reassuring manner.
• Challenge expressions of hopelessness.
• Avoid rationalizing or minimizing your child’s feelings.
• Emphasize that depression can be treated.
• Advocate for recovery by suggesting counseling.
• Seek consultation if student refuses necessary treatment.

RESOURCES
University of Pittsburgh
University Counseling Center
334 William Pitt Union
3590 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
412-648-7930
www.counseling.pitt.edu

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov
The School of Arts and Sciences has named Barbara Kucinski, lecturer in the University of Pittsburgh Department of Psychology, the recipient of the 2010 Ampco-Pittsburgh Prize for Excellence in Advising. The award, which carries a $4,000 cash prize, honors outstanding faculty achievement in undergraduate advising and recognizes the many contributions advisors make to help students to maximize their educational experiences.

For more than 20 years, Kucinski's extraordinary interest and investment in teaching and advising has had a major impact on the quality of life for undergraduates in the psychology department. As a trusted advisor, she spends many hours with her students discussing topics ranging from how to choose an appropriate clinical internship to interview strategies for jobs or graduate school. In addition to her advising duties, Kucinski teaches six courses a year for the department, including the required courses Introduction to Psychology and Research Methods, in which students get their induction into the field of psychology. Kucinski's commitment to undergraduate student success also is evident in the vital role she plays as the faculty advisor for the Pitt chapter of Psi Chi, the international psychology honor society. She also was instrumental in creating the Panther Psychology Club for students who may not have the GPA necessary to be considered for membership in Psi Chi but who still want to become involved in psychology-related activities.

Kucinski earned her BS and PhD degrees at Pitt. She has received the Psi Chi Eastern Regional Faculty Advisor Award (2006–07), Outstanding Professor of the Year Award, and Excellence in Teaching Award.

The Ampco-Pittsburgh Prize for Excellence in Advising is given annually to a full-time faculty member who has served as a departmental advisor for at least three years at the Pittsburgh campus. For more information on the Ampco-Pittsburgh Prize, visit www.as.pitt.edu/teaching/awards.html#ampco.