

**The Development of Professional Skills and Attitudes through
Out-of-Class Experiences in Psychology**

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Educators and employers agree that skills such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, leadership, and initiative are necessary for success in adulthood (Bartram, 2005; Landrum & Harrold, 2003; Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz, 1989). Recently, researchers have begun to focus on mechanisms by which adolescents and emerging adults learn and refine professional skills and attitudes (Larson, 2000). This work is part of a larger movement called Positive Youth Development, which focuses on understanding ways to promote adaptive development during adolescence and beyond. Emerging adulthood (i.e., 18 to 25 years) is an important time of transition marked by refinement of identity and preparation for the future (Arnett, 2000). Undergraduate curricula offer unique opportunities to help prepare emerging adults for personal and professional success, particularly through out-of-class experiences (APA, 2011). Our goal was to document the development of professional skills and attitudes through out-of-class teaching and research experiences in psychology during the undergraduate years.

Thirty-seven undergraduate students (28 women, 8 men) enrolled in out-of-class teaching and research experiences during Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 at a large, public university participated. (Note that one student did not provide demographic details.) Four students were sophomores, 20 were juniors, and 12 were seniors. Eighteen students were participating in undergraduate research experiences, and 18 were participating in undergraduate teaching assistantships. Fifteen students were completing their first

semester of out-of-class experience, 12 students were completing their second semester, and 9 students were completing their third to fifth semester.

Qualitative analysis of student reflections revealed that students noted substantial gains in professional skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills. Importantly, students also noted sizeable gains in understanding content, research methods, and principles related to teaching and learning emerging from their hands-on experiences guided by role models. Students noted that their out-of-class experiences were relevant for their futures. Specifically, 97% of students noted increases in professional skills (e.g., perspective taking, critical thinking, the ability to overcome uncertainty or challenges), 76% noted increases in communication skills (e.g., oral communication and professional presentation skills), 81% noted increases in interpersonal skills (e.g., helping others, teamwork, working with diverse people), and 81% noted increases in intrapersonal skills (e.g., confidence, openness to new ideas, solidifying future goals) through their out-of-class experiences (see Table 1). The overall pattern was quite similar for students involved in teaching and research experiences. These skills are consistently shown to predict success in the workplace and in life. As such, these results are useful for instructors and administrators seeking to design and implement out-of-class experiences for undergraduate students that facilitate the emergence and refinement of professional skills and attitudes, growth in understanding, and lifelong application of learning.