

Educating the public: The role of graduate students

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A recent American Psychological Association task force reported that the public's understanding of psychology is mainly based on media stereotypes, and that the public is largely unaware of both the scope and the impact of psychological research (Mills, 2009). This lack of awareness hampers psychologists' ability to positively impact the community. During her keynote address at the 74th Annual Convention of the Canadian Psychological Association, Dr. Jennifer Frain argued that such misconceptions occur because psychologists rarely receive training as advocates. To rectify this problem, the current authors propose that graduate students should be trained in advocacy to increase the public's access to psychological research.

Training graduate students as advocates can benefit both the public and the discipline of psychology. Graduate students possess useful knowledge and often have flexible schedules, which make them ideally situated to educate the public. Increasing access to credible information can occur on a variety of scales; ranging from everyday conversations with individuals outside the discipline, to televised interviews showcasing research findings. Moreover, these exchanges can be mutually beneficial. By working as educators in the community, graduate students may become more aware of the community's current concerns. Furthermore, engaging in knowledge translation fosters critical thinking, which can help minimize the development of negative biases early in one's career. Interacting with the public will make will make graduate students more qualified to serve the community.

In order to be effective advocates, graduate students should start by implement the following four skills. First, obtain a clear understanding of the audience's perspective. Adopting the audience's viewpoint can help the educator identify potential sources of bias or misunderstanding. Second, use the audience's language, context, and culture. Failure to do so can both alienate and create defensiveness among audience members. Third, present the audience with new information. Sometimes this may lead to disagreement, and if so, respect the individual's experiences and opinions. Avoid engaging in protracted debates, as this can be counterproductive, and instead present a concise and parsimonious point. Finally, do not be pedantic; for example, avoid dwelling on methodological concerns at the cost of the message being shared.

Although implementing this skillset can occur in a variety of settings, Mills (2009) found that the public perception of psychology is derived from the media. Therefore, the media should be a primary target for advocacy. Academic research, especially by students, is generally inaccessible to non-academics, thus limiting its potential benefit to the community. This is unfortunate as members of the media are often interested in, and present on, topics that are within the purview of psychology, such as group dynamics and behaviour, forensics, business, and mental health. While approaching media members may be daunting for graduate students, it does not have to be. For example, graduate students can write press paragraphs (short documents typically 100 words in length) summarizing the simple and non-theoretical findings of their research, and distribute them to media representatives to gauge interest. Engaging the

media, rather than waiting for the media to contact psychologists, will assuredly have positive benefits.

Mental health is an area that has already enjoyed some public advocacy from graduate students. For example, two of the authors have undertaken projects aimed at educating the public about mental health. Andrew Brankley provided informational sessions on a variety of mental health topics to at-risk youth in Toronto. In a discussion on substance use, Brankley utilized the first and second skills discussed previously by having the youth describe their motivations and benefits for use. He found that adopting a nonjudgmental and inquisitive approach was empowering to the youth, making them more receptive to discussing behavioural change and safety. Separately, Jeanine Lane collaborated with the *Stand Up for Mental Health* comedy group, founded by David Granirer. This organization successfully integrates humor and psychology as a therapeutic intervention, while reducing the public stigma of mental health. Educating the public using humor requires the use of multiple skills outlined above, including identifying with the audience, using language and examples the audience can relate to, and approaching discussions about mental health in an informal manner. These cases demonstrate that the skillset outlined above can assist graduate students in effectively providing the public with accurate information about mental health in innovative ways.

Successful dissemination of psychological findings is crucial to improve the public's perception of psychology. Graduate students can be a driving force in this process. Specifically, graduate students can maximize the impact of research findings by taking steps to ensure (1) the audience's opinions are understood, (2) the audience's framework is utilized in the discussion, (3) new information is presented in a non-confrontational manner, and (4) esoteric issues are avoided. Ryerson psychology graduate students have begun an advocacy initiative called *Graduate student Advocates for Psychology*¹ that is built on these principles. Promoting graduate students as public educators is a simple solution to increase access to meaningful information, while improving the way Canadians think about and understand psychology.

Mills, K. I. (2009). Getting beyond the couch: How does the general public view the science of psychology? *Monitor*, 40, 28. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/03/public.aspx>

¹ For further details see their YouTube Site (<https://www.youtube.com/user/MindTheGAPRyerson>) or follow them on Twitter (@MindTheGapRye)