

Reimagining Introduction to Psychology

CTL Fellows 2021-2022

Alisha Holland

Introductory Psychology is one of the most popular courses across the country, with over one million undergraduate students taking the course each year. The course is unique in that it serves not only students who will go on to major in psychology, but also students who will go on to major in myriad other subjects. Despite the ubiquity of the course, there has historically been a lack of consistency in course objectives and design both across and within institutions. Additionally, prior empirical research has demonstrated that even senior psychology majors only retain about 60% of the material that they learn in introductory psychology courses (Landrum & Gurung, 2013) and that the introductory course does not change frequently-held misconceptions of human behavior over the long-term. To address these challenges, a working group within the American Psychological Association (APA) has conducted pedagogical research to identify best practices in course design, learning objectives, and student assessment. This 30-month-long research endeavor has culminated in the publication of a new guide due to be released in August 2021, entitled, *Transforming Introductory Psychology: Expert Advice on Teacher Training, Course Design, and Student Success*.

I have three main objectives that I would like to meet during my CTL fellowship. My first objective is my own professional development. I am proposing to spend time reviewing the new APA guidelines for Introductory Psychology by reading the forthcoming *Transforming Introductory Psychology* book and the pedagogical research publications that informed the guide. Additionally, I am planning to participate in workshops that the APA will be hosting to demonstrate how their recommendations may be incorporated into introductory psychology.

My second objective is to implement the APA recommendations into my own PSYC 101 course at Trinity. I will be re-designing my course syllabus, learning objectives, and formative and summative assessments for the 2022-2023 academic year to reflect updated best practices in the field. For example, one preliminary recommendation that the APA has made is to incorporate seven “integrative themes” throughout the course. Historically, a common strategy in introductory psychology has been to cover a long list of topics in the field (which may ultimately be forgotten, as mentioned before). A better strategy may be to make broader points; for example, one such integrative theme is that our own personal biases can shape how we behave (an integrative theme that is applicable to how we perceive the world, how we interact with in-group vs. out-group members, and how we make decisions). This type of course reorganization invites students to think critically about how different theoretical approaches to psychology (such as cognitive, developmental, social) can address the same integrative theme and may promote better retention of course material.

My third objective is to work with my colleagues in the Psychology Department at Trinity to facilitate the implementation of the APA’s recommendations into PSYC 101. For example, I could survey faculty who are teaching upper-level psychology courses to identify which topics are most important for students to have a strong foundation in prior to beginning those courses. This may be especially critical given that another preliminary APA recommendation is to reduce the number of topics covered in introductory

psychology. Based on this feedback, I can develop a more standardized list of objectives and topics that all PSYC 101 faculty might highlight in the development of their respective sections. I also look forward to summarizing and sharing what I learn about course design, learning objectives, and student assessment with my fellow PSYC 101 faculty.

Taken together, I believe that studying empirically-supported best practices in introductory psychology will support my personal pedagogical development, both with respect to PSYC 101 and my own upper-level courses. Additionally, updating PSYC 101 will enhance students' experience with and memory for course content, so that they are better prepared to undertake further psychology coursework or to carry with them the lessons of introductory psychology to other subject fields.