Getting Into Graduate School in Psychology

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The Nature of The Process

- Nerve Racking
  - Uncertainty about the future is always tough
  - Psychology graduate programs are very competitive

- Confusing at Times
  - What is required to apply to each program?

- Time Intensive
  - Classes and work do not stop while engaged in this process
The Goals of This Workshop

- Provide a framework for understanding the process
  - We are going to talk about completing different aspects of the application
  - We are going to talk about common do’s and don’ts

- Argue for the importance of keeping a strict schedule and staying organized during this chaotic process
  - With a disciplined schedule comes greater efficiency and less stress

- Document avenues for you to pursue in getting questions answered and obtaining support
Our graduate school mantra

- With preparation and basic knowledge comes an increased chance of being accepted to the graduate program that best fits your unique needs
  - After all, psychology graduate programs are amongst the most competitive graduate programs
Depending on who you speak to, different professors and advisors are going to have different opinions about what types of experiences and/or characteristics are going to be most helpful in getting you into graduate school.

We have faculty members in the psychology department that are uniquely qualified to talk about these issues:

1. It has not been too long since we went through this process
2. We have assisted in making graduate program admissions decisions
3. We are opinionated and willing to offer our thoughts to help students
A debate in the making

- Varying opinions about what is most important!!!
  - Dr. Sikorski – Research Experience/Research Methods
  - Dr. Fallon – Developing Relationships with Faculty
  - Dr. Mealy – Outside School Experiences
  - Dr. Bruno – Pursuing diverse interests and embracing diversity
A knowledge of research methods also suggests that you:

- Wish to use the science, as opposed to your own personal experiences and opinions, to make decisions in your chosen field
- You are better prepared to read the literature and critique other studies in the field of psychology
  - ACCOUNTABILITY FOR YOUR WORK
- You are better prepared to write a thesis or dissertation
Why pursuing relationships with faculty is most important!!

- Letters of recommendation are a critical piece of your application package
  - Gives your personal statement some context
  - Let would-be graduate supervisors know that you respond well to a mentor-mentee relationship
  - Highlight areas of strength
  - Qualify areas of challenge (e.g., GREs/GPA)

- Faculty are real people too, and even social on occasion
Why pursuing outside experiences is most important!!!!

Personal Statement

- Why are you interested in a particular field?
  - What past experiences have you had that are relevant to the program?

- Demonstrate 1) clear professional goals, 2) an ability to apply learning, & 3) potential for success in your field.

- Communicate positive characteristics:
  - Leadership ability, Independence, Dedication, Forward-Thinking, Self-Sufficiency, Maturity, Motivation, Responsibility, Dependability, Time-Management, etc.

- Remember: As a graduate student, faculty invest A LOT of time and effort in you, they want to know that their time will “pay off.”
  - Faculty want to see you complete the program and succeed in your field?
There are several other most important issues to consider

- Like what?

The Graduate Application Gestalt

- The truth is that the whole is very often greater than the sum of its parts, and graduate applications are no exception
  - Can we really hope to be strong in all of these categories????
    - If not, then what should we do?????
With all this said…..

- It is likely that the most important thing is……
  - Being prepared and organized when constructing your graduate applications

- Some common errors that students make:
  - Not knowing plans until 3 weeks before the application due date
  - Just submitting the applications should not be the goal
  - Just getting letters of recommendation should not be the goal
  - Just writing your personal statement should not be the goal
The most important thing is........

- Control what you can control!!!!!!!!!!
  - Think far ahead!!!!!
  - Consider each aspect of the application carefully and plan accordingly
    - Gestalt, gestalt, gestalt!!!!!!
Thinking far ahead

- Do you know what research says is one of the most important predictors of success as an undergraduate student in psychology?
  - Getting to know at least a couple of professors well!!!!!!
    - WHY?

- This could also prove to be very important as far as the graduate application process goes
Advantages of Knowing Your Professors Well

- Getting solid advice from professors who have been through the process
  - Finding internships in psychology/Getting research experience working with professors
  - Discussing specific graduate programs in psychology that may be best suited to your goals, interests and strengths
  - Seeking feedback about your personal statements that many graduate programs require for admission
Advantages of Knowing Your Professors Well

Letters of Recommendation
- Bare Bones Letters vs. Detailed Letters
  - Detailed Letters Usually Allude to Things Like:
    - Personality characteristics likely to lead to success in graduate school
    - Passion for the field of psychology
    - Learning/Thinking Strategies
    - Critical Thinking
  - Bare Bones Letters Usually Allude to Things Like:
    - Grades in classes only?
    - Grade point average only?
Advantages of Knowing Your Professors Well

- REMEMBER, YOU CAN’T REALLY GET TO KNOW A PROFESSOR WELL IN A MONTH OR TWO
  - This process of relating to and getting to know your professors should take place well in advance of your graduate application deadlines

- Goal #1 – Getting to know your professors represents a worthy goal to pursue early on in your undergraduate education
  - If it’s too late for this, just work toward controlling what you can control – talk to your professors about it!!!!
Staying Ahead of the Game
Being Active

- Every graduate program in psychology requires a considerable amount of work beyond the courses you take

- Therefore, pursuing a range of experiences outside of your coursework is usually looked upon highly
  - Doing research with professors
  - Seeking experiences in the field of psychology
  - Joining the Psychology Club/Psi Chi
  - Volunteering your time
  - Traveling/Interacting with a diverse group of people
Staying Ahead of the Game

Being Active

- Establishing a pattern of activity cannot occur in one month!!!!!!

- Goal #2 – Try to do a range of extra things when you begin as an undergraduate or as soon as you can
  - Establish a pattern of activity as opposed to doing things extra in a sporadic fashion
    - Provide documentation of your passion for the field of psychology
      - For instance, what about the gosh darn Psychology Club???
Staying ahead of the game
Charting your Plan

Some important facts to know:

- All graduate programs in a specific discipline are not the same
  - Example – All School Psychology Graduate Programs emphasize different things and have varying requirements for admission

- All graduate programs have different application deadlines and different requirements

- It is likely that you will have questions about some of the graduate programs you are interested in
  - Look early enough so you can ask them
In considering graduate programs, there are some basic rules to follow

1. Start early looking for graduate programs
   - Make a detailed list that includes the following types of information – Don’t consider geography early on!!!!!
     - Type of program?
     - Strengths/weaknesses of the program?
     - Questions about the program?
     - Application deadlines?
     - Standardized testing requirements?
     - What is required as far as application materials go?
     - Where to direct questions about the program?
Stay ahead of the game
Charting Your Plan

- Timing of constructing these types of lists
  - 3 months in advance of typical application deadline
    - Maybe sometime in October of the year you are applying??
    - PREFERABLY YEARS IN ADVANCE

- Why so early? What advantages are you afforded if you do this?
  - Gives you time to do thorough searches – No one else can do this for you…there is no graduate school fairy!!
    - Internet Searches
    - Checking out Dr. J’s OR Dr. Fallahi’s Graduate Study in Psychology Book
  - Gives you time to ask questions about the programs
  - Gives you time to request letters from your professors
  - Gives you time to refine your personal statements
How and when to request letters of recommendation

- Give your letter writers about 1–2 months warning if you need a solid letter from them
  - Provide the following to your letter writers:
    - A list of the programs you are applying to
    - Addresses of where the letters need to be sent
    - A list of which letters should be sent by the professor and which letters should be provided to the student for inclusion with the other application materials
    - A list of the strengths of each program you are applying to so professors can individualize their letters
Standardized Testing Requirements

- Know what standardized tests are required
  - Know deadlines for scheduling these tests
    - Plan ahead!!! You cannot wait till the last minute to schedule these tests
  - Take a look at websites and books that provide detailed information about scheduling standardized tests and taking these tests
    - Educational Testing Service Website
    - PRAXIS Website
Goal #3 – Stay on top of things! Keep detailed lists of application specifics and deadlines.
  ◦ Start as soon as possible
Personal Statements/Essays

- A tricky task for many reasons
  - Each program requests different things of their personal statements
  - Each program has different strengths, weaknesses and program foci that should be considered when constructing the personal essay
Personal Statements/Essays

Some General Tips/Issues to Discuss

The challenge in balancing humility with bragging
- Outline your experiences and strengths
- Make sure you don’t come across as a know-it-all
  - Graduate programs want teachable students, not students who know all there is to know

- Make sure you satisfy page restrictions or word count restrictions
Personal Statements/Essays

- Some potential No-No’s
  - Mentioning your own mental health history/Mentioning the mental health history of family/friends
    - A delicate balance
  - Overdoing It
    - Program characteristics
    - Program faculty
  - Flowery writing
Specific graduate programs in psychology

- Clinical Psychology/Counseling Psychology
  - Research Experience
    - Consistent with the work of professors in that particular program
  - Experience in the field of psychology working with individuals who have emotional or behavioral problems
    - You don’t have to bring the house down here!!!!!!
  - GRE performance
Ph.D. or Psy.D.?

- Smaller number of admissions per program
- Stronger research focus
- More funding available
- Represented more in academia

- May admit more students per program
- Stronger clinical focus
- More expensive
- Programs may take less time to complete (5 years vs. 7 years)
Specific graduate programs in psychology

- School Psychology/School Counseling
  - Experience working with children
  - Experience working in the schools
  - Knowledge of empirically supported treatments that can be applied at school
  - Research experience
    - School psychologists are focused on the science of psychology
  - Often GRE
Specific graduate programs in psychology

Experimental Psychology Programs

What are YOUR interests?
What do you want to do every day for the rest of your life?

◦ Program
  • It doesn’t matter if it is APA accredited.
  • Location and reputation are less important than whether it matches YOUR interests & your advisor is “right” for you.

◦ Advisor
  • RESEARCH HIM/HER:
    • How similar is their area of interest to yours? What have they published? What are they currently doing? How well known are they?
  • CONTACT HIM/HER:
    • Are they currently taking graduate students? What is their philosophy of working with graduate students?
  • TALK TO CURRENT GRADUATE STUDENTS:
    • What do other graduate students think of them? Do they encourage you to do your own research, or do they want you to do theirs?
  • REMEMBER:
    If your advisor isn’t “right” for you, your experience won’t be “right” for you!
Specific graduate programs in psychology

- International Programs
  - You don’t have to stay in the US, ya know.
  - Benefits
    - Get to experience another culture
    - Really get to live on your own
    - Meet your life partner… well, it’s possible!
  - Challenges
    - The application process gets a little more involved
    - Visas
    - Financial aid
      - Scholarship programs
    - Culture-shock
Summary

- Preparation is the key to success in applying to graduate programs
  - Self Monitor your Progress

- Start early in crafting your curriculum vitae

- Talk to your academic advisors
  - They are busy, so put the pressure on and request help early and often
I’ve always wondered......

- Why don’t students form groups to go over important documents and monitor progress
  - You could read personal statements
  - You could monitor task completion
  - You could support one another
  - You could become BFF’s!!!!!!!
QUESTIONS
In order to arrange a time to:

◦ Borrow Dr. Sikorski’s Graduate Study in Psychology Book
  • Dr. Fallahi has one too!!!!

◦ Have Dr. Sikorski send you the slides for this workshop
  • Just sign the form going around

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