



## **APPLYING TO PHD PROGRAMS IN PSYCHOLOGY: A RESOURCE MANUAL FOR CSP STUDENTS**

The information included here is intended as a broad overview of resources available for applying to PhD Programs in Psychology. There is a wealth of information available on the internet in the form of websites, book references, links and general tips from professors and other graduate students. The content of this packet is an overview of the process of applying to graduate programs, important steps to remember and suggestions for further reading. There is much more information out there to be gathered, so use this as a springboard to become aware of the areas you may need to fortify your knowledge in. Best of luck!

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## Websites:

Before getting started, there are some fantastic websites you should know about right off the bat.

PsychGrad.Org: [www.Psychgrad.org](http://www.Psychgrad.org)

PsychGrad.org is “the Psychology graduate applicant’s portal” to the graduate student world. Advice topics include: School rankings and programs, writing your essay, how to obtain good letters of recommendation, choosing an advisor, doing research, and much more.

Council of Program Directors in Community Research and Action (CPDCRA):

<https://www.msu.edu/user/lounsbu1/cpdcr.html>

Contains, among things, a list of Universities hosting PhD Programs in Community Psychology.

PsychWeb: <http://www.psywww.com/>

Contains psychology-related information for students and teachers of psychology. Provides links to Psychology Departments of different Universities, and an entire section on applying to Graduate Programs. The Graduate Program section provides a list of books on graduate school programs for psychology majors and on the areas of specialization that require graduate education.

APA: A Guide to Getting Into Graduate School: <http://www.apa.org/ed/getin.html>

The APA Education Directorate's three keys to graduate school acceptance: preparation, application know-how, and patience.

## A Graduate School Application Timetable:

*This recommended timetable assumes a January or February deadline. Adjust accordingly for other timeframes.*

### **First year of M.A. Program, (or before)**

- Find out research interests of faculty at your school, read their articles, and make acquaintance with those whose work interests you.
- Take a class or two with the professors identified above; ask if you can assist them with their research through a Directed Study.
- Find out if you are qualified to join Psi Chi and decide whether to become a member.
- Get research and other field-related experiences pertinent to areas of psychology in which you're interested.
- Peruse Graduate Study in Psychology and check out resources at Career Counseling Center.

### **Summer between First and Second Years of M.A.**

- Request application packet from programs that seem to be a good match with your interests, goals and credentials to obtain information about the program and about financial aid
- Compile list of programs based on conversations with faculty and books such as Graduate Study in Psychology.
- Calculate application fees and travel costs for interviews and make sure you have enough money to cover these costs.

### **September of Second year**

- Request undergraduate transcript to give to those who will write letters of recommendation.
- Prepare resume for letter writers.

### **October**

- Finalize list of schools to which you plan to apply (apply to range of schools).
- Ask faculty for letters of recommendation.
- Begin filling out application and financial aid forms.
- Write first drafts of essays; ask others for feedback.

### **November**

- Request that undergraduate and graduate transcripts be sent to all institutions to which you are applying.
- Finalize application and financial aid forms and essays.
- Supply individuals who will write your letters of recommendation with the packet you prepared for them, including any forms sent by each school.

### **December**

- Carefully prepare each application for mailing. Keep photocopy of each.

### **January/February**

- Follow up to confirm that your completed applications and all letters of recommendation were received.
- Thank those who wrote letters of recommendation.
- Attend any pre-selection interviews to which you are invited.

### **March/April**

- Accept/decline offers.
- Call or write people who wrote you letters of recommendation and inform them of the outcome.

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Source: <http://www.psychgrad.org/timeline.html>. By: Dr. Bailey and Dr. Berler, Florida State University, adapted from **Getting In: A Step-by-step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology** (APA) 2006.

## Preparing a Personal Statement:

Most graduate schools require a personal statement as a part of the application. This statement is often centered around your interests in psychology, your personal background, the reasons you are applying to a particular graduate program, and your career and personal objectives. Although a well-written personal statement will not overcome poor grades or a low score on the Graduate Record Examination, a poor one will surely hurt your chances of acceptance. Fretz and Stang (1980) cite the following example:

*Take the case of the student with a competitive grade- point average and good references who was not accepted to any of the 11 programs he applied for. One cannot be sure, but the biographical statement included with his application is the suspected reason. First, it was poorly typed, with many smears and crossed-out words. The spelling and grammar were both appalling. Finally, the content left much to be desired. It was far too long--about 15 pages--and stressed emotional agonies and turning points in his life. Hoping to cure the world of all its evils, this person tried to indicate how a Ph.D. in psychology was necessary to fulfill that end. In short, it was an overstated, ill-conceived essay that may have been received so badly that it overshadowed his other attributes and data. (p. 45)*

Plan and produce your personal statement as carefully as you would a crucial term paper. The following tips will help you produce an effective personal statement.

1. Prepare your personal statement on a word processor. It will require a series of drafts, and the inconvenience of rewriting each draft with a conventional typewriter can make you willing to settle for a less-than-perfect final product.
2. Before you begin your statement for each school, read as much as possible about their program so that you can tailor your statement to the program and convince the admissions committee that you will fit well there. Many applicants will write, for example, that they want to attend the counseling psychology program at University X because they want to learn how to counsel emotionally handicapped children--even though the program specifies in its brochure that it does not provide training for work with young children. Any selection committee immediately rejects such candidates.
3. Prepare an outline of the topics you want to cover (e.g., professional objectives and personal background) and list supporting material under each main topic. Write a rough draft in which you transform your outline into prose. Set it aside and read it a week later. If it still sounds good, go to the next stage. If not, rewrite it until it sounds right.
4. Check your grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization carefully. Nothing detracts from the content of a statement more than these types of errors. Avoid slang words that make you sound uneducated, and overly elaborate words or stilted language that will make you appear pompous or pretentious.

5. Ask two of your instructors to read your first rough draft and make suggestions. Incorporate these suggestions into your second draft. Ask for another reading and set of suggestions, and then prepare your final statement.
6. Your final statement should be as brief as possible--two double-spaced pages are sufficient. Stick to the points requested by each program, and avoid lengthy personal or philosophical discussions.
7. Do not feel bad if you do not have a great deal of experience in psychology to write about; no one who is about to graduate from college does! Do explain your relevant experiences (e.g., field studies or research projects), but do not try to turn them into events of cosmic proportion. Be honest, sincere, and objective--that is the only way to impress the evaluators that you are a person who is already taking a mature approach to life.

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Adapted from Appleby, D. C. (1990). *Handbook of Marian College Psychology Department*. Indianapolis, IN: Author and Fretz, B.R., & Stang, D. J. (1980). *Preparing for graduate study in psychology: NOT for seniors only!* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

### Letter of Recommendations:

Graduate school applications include letters of recommendation (typically 3 of them, usually written by university professors). These letters play a significant role in admissions decisions.

If possible, lay the ground work for such letters a year or more in advance of when you will need them, by getting to know several of your professors. If the people who write for you know nothing about you except what marks you received in their courses, they will be unable to add much that isn't already communicated in your transcript.

When you approach a professor to ask for a letter of recommendation or to talk about doing an independent studies course or a thesis, come prepared with information that will make the professor's decision easier. In the case of letters of recommendation, such information will also enable the professor to comment on your skills and abilities on numerous dimensions; the more detailed and concrete information you provide, the more detailed and concrete (and hence convincing) the professor can make the letter. A copy of each of the following can be very helpful:

- a. Your transcript (doesn't need to be an official copy), with psych courses highlighted.
- b. A separate, typed list of the courses you have taken with that professor, with information about your work (e.g., topics of any papers you wrote) and marks in those courses.
- c. Your resume (which should focus on your skills and experiences relevant to psych).
- d. A sample of your written work (e.g., a paper you've written for a past course).

- e. An example of the "personal statement" you've written for your application. Have someone else proof read this before you give it to the professors who are going to write letters for you.
- f. If you know your GRE scores then include a photocopy of the GRE slip with your scores (or if you have not yet received the printed slip then simply type them on a separate sheet). (The same goes for other standardized tests relevant to grad-school abilities.)
- g. A separate typed sheet with the names of the programs and universities to which you plan to apply, indicating for each the due date for the letter and whether the letter is to be sent directly to the university or returned to you for inclusion with your other application materials
- h. An envelope for each application, appropriately addressed (with the rating form described above either in the envelope or paper-clipped to it). Typed addresses look more professional than written ones (you can print the addresses on regular paper, cut them out, and use a glue stick). If multiple envelopes are to be addressed and returned to you (for inclusion with your other application materials) be sure to somehow mark the outside of each such envelope (e.g., with a post-it note) so that you'll know which university that envelope is for. It is typically best not to put postage on the envelopes, but polite to offer to provide postage. \*Note: some professors prefer to use university letterhead stationary/envelopes.
- i. Most graduate schools provide a form with various rating scales to be completed by the people who provide recommendations for you. Such forms almost always include sections that the applicant is to fill out before giving the form to the referee-make sure you've filled out those sections neatly and completely. If you are applying to schools that do not use such a form, note which schools don't use a form on the list of places to which you are applying (g. above).

### Graduate School Interview:

- Do your homework. Learn about the program and faculty. Read recent faculty publications to learn more about their labs.
- Prepare intelligent questions to ask. Remember that you're judged by your application but also by your presentation and your interest in the program and faculty.
- Dress professionally and comfortably.
- Find out what graduate students really think about their advisors and the program
- Try to meet graduate students for a one-on-one conversation so you can find out what they really think
- Don't underestimate the potential influence of current graduate students. Although they might sound like they're speaking off-the-cuff, remember that you're on an interview, regardless of with whom you're speaking. Present your best side because current graduate students may be in a position to help or hurt your application.
- Follow standard rules of interviewing (i.e., eye contact, self confident presentation, conservative dress, etc.)
- Some interviews include social events like parties. Don't drink too much (even if others do). Remember that even though it seems like a party, it's an interview. Assume that you're being evaluated at all times.

## Choosing an Advisor:

- Target your applications to individual faculty members rather than to universities. This means that before you apply you need to do some serious thinking and research to determine with which faculty members you would most like to work.
- Apply broadly. You cannot assume that the faculty member with whom you would most like to work will admit any student the year you apply (let alone that you will be among his/her top choices). There's no sense applying to a university that you definitely would not attend even if it were your only choice, but if you really want to go to graduate school it would be unwise to apply to only one or two schools.
- Prepare your application carefully, particularly with regard to written statements of your research interests etc. Tailor applications to the potential supervisor(s) at each school. Have other people proof read your applications. Writing skills are crucial for success in graduate school, so if your application indicates that you are a poor writer your chances of being admitted plummet. Bear in mind that completing an application for grad school takes a substantial amount of time.
- Try and secure a meeting with the faculty members you wish to work with the most. Face-to-face contact will be helpful later when they are making a decision and not only remember who you are, but realize you took the time to meet with them.

## Characteristics of Graduate School Superstars:

Graduate school can be a traumatic experience. Some graduate students spend their time complaining about a heavy work load, uncaring attitudes of faculty, or constant pressure of being evaluated. These students quickly begin to devalue their graduate education, deny its relevance, and develop strategies that help them to "beat the system" (i.e., merely satisfying degree requirements without engaging in any actual learning). Graduate school for these people is an unpleasant experience to be endured, survived, and forgotten as quickly as possible.

Another group seems to thrive on their graduate education. According to Bloom and Bell (1979), "These are the few who proceed through the program with the minimum amount of difficulty and a maximum amount of quality performance. They are respected by the faculty, they receive the best financial assistance, they receive accolades, and as a group, they end up with the best employment" (p.231). These are the graduate school superstars. But what makes them so successful? Bloom and Bell identified four factors which were named most often by graduate school faculty to identify superstars they had known:

- **Visibility:** The most often mentioned behavioral characteristic was visibility. Superstars were observed to be physically present in the department, during and often after working hours.
- **Willingness to Work Hard:** The next most often mentioned quality was that they were hard working. It is important to point out that the superstars were perceived

as hard working because faculty actually saw them working hard. Other students may have worked harder, but because they were working hard at home or in the library, they were not perceived to be as hard working as the superstars.

- ***Reflection of Program Values:*** A consistently mentioned quality was the faculty's perceptions of their professional values. These values were concordant with program values of research and scholarly excellence. Superstars also recognized the value of having contact with broad areas of psychology, even though their own programs might be highly specialized.
- ***True Interest in Research:*** Many students preparing for graduate school in clinical psychology may assume that clinical and counseling skills will be much more valuable to them in graduate school than their ability to perform research. However, potential clinicians should work equally as hard to develop their research skills in courses such as research methods, statistics, experimental lab courses, and directed research, as they do to develop their clinical and counseling skills. Superstars were engaged in ongoing research projects in addition to their MA and PhD theses. (Non-superstars did research because it was a degree requirement.) Superstars viewed research as an integral part of their discipline and a desirable and worthwhile activity for any professional psychologist. They were curious enough about a problem to want to see data on it.
- ***Development of Relationship with a Mentor:*** From the time they entered graduate school almost all superstars attached themselves to one or two faculty members with whom they continued to work during the course of their training. Faculty reported that they "were easy to teach," "picked up things quickly," "could receive and use feedback well," "were not constant complainers," and "were able to grow into colleague status without taking advantage." In essence, the superstars listened, learned, grew, and produced through close working relationships with faculty.

Note that the above characteristics do not include intelligence, excellent grades, or writing ability. Perhaps these qualities are simply assumed to exist in superstars. The lesson to be learned from these findings is that success in graduate school is due to more than just raw brain power. It is also strongly affected by dedication, hard work, seriousness of commitment, clarity of goals, and a willingness to embrace the values of a program.

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Adapted from Appleby, D.C. (1990). *A Handbook of the Marian College Psychology Department*. Indianapolis, IN: Author.

## Important Considerations:

### **What is the Program's Teaching Philosophy?**

Each graduate program has a different approach to teaching and emphasizes different aspects of psychology in the curriculum. If you plan on working in academia or research after graduation, consider programs that emphasize experimental methods, psychological theory, and research experience. Those who plan to work directly in patient care will want to look for programs that offer coursework in clinical topics and allow students to practice skills in real-world situations.

### **How Much is the Cost of Attendance?**

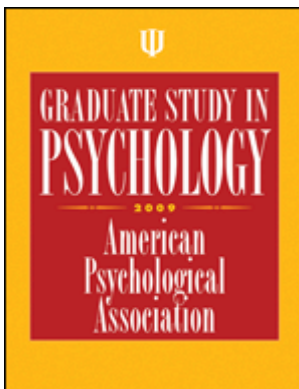
Graduate schools vary widely in terms of tuition and fees, so it is important to realistically consider your current financial situation. Prepare an estimate of yearly tuition and living expenses for each school you are considering and compare it with your savings, yearly earnings, and willingness to acquire debt.

### **Where Is the School Located?**

When you are looking at choices of graduate schools, carefully consider the school's location. Do you plan on moving away to attend graduate school, or would you prefer to remain closer to family and friends? If possible, visit each school, spending some time touring both the campus and local community. Is it in a rural or urban area? Think about your own needs and wishes and then prepare a list of pros and cons for each area.

## Additional Resources:

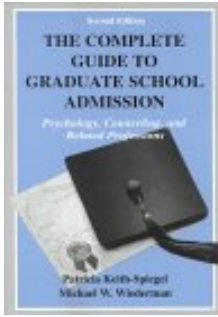
*Graduate Study in Psychology*, 2009 Edition



*Graduate Study in Psychology* is the best source of information related to graduate programs in psychology and provides information related to approximately 600 graduate programs in psychology in the U.S. and Canada.

Graduate Study in Psychology contains information about:

- The number of applications received by a program
  - The number of individuals accepted in each program
  - Dates for applications and admission
  - Types of information required for an application (GRE scores, letters of recommendation, documentation concerning volunteer or clinical experience, etc.)
- In-state and out-of-state tuition costs
  - Availability of internships and scholarships
  - Employment information of graduates
  - Orientation and emphasis of departments and programs



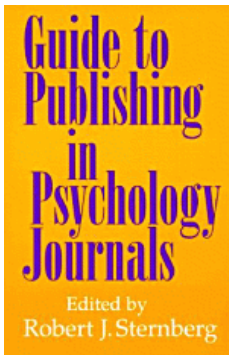
*The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission: Psychology, Counseling and Related Professions* (2000). Patricia Keith-Spiegel and Michael Weideman

A book you should definitely have! It takes you through the entire application process: deciding which schools to apply to, getting the information you need, completing the tasks you must do before you apply, completing the application itself, and managing the postapplication period. A very thorough resource!



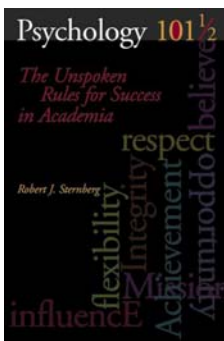
*Getting In: A Step-by-step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology* (2006), APA.

Having an inside knowledge of how graduate schools evaluate applications can be the deciding factor of acceptance. This book attempts to help you maximize your chances for success by allowing you to make informed choices and know what you need to do to have a competitive application. Provided by the American Psychological Association.



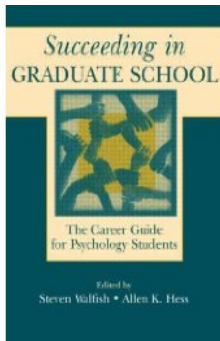
*Guide to Publishing in Psychology Journals* (2000) (Paperback) by Robert J. Sternberg (Editor).

Contemporary Psychology APA Review of Books stated: "Robert Sternberg's edited book, filled with good advice from editors and former editors, is meant to take students to the next step- to give them the knowledge needed to produce a manuscript that will be intended for our best undergraduates who will pursue research careers and for our graduate students. The book, however, also has some helpful hints for seasoned researchers."



*Psychology 101 1/2: The Unspoken Rules for Success in Academia* (2003) (Paperback) by Robert J. Sternberg.

This book for psychology students makes recommendations on how to have a gratifying career in the academic world of psychology. Explains how to capitalize on individual strengths and turn career defeats into opportunities. Discusses the importance of networking and balancing personal and professional life successfully.



*Succeeding in Graduate School: The Career Guide for Psychology Students (2001)* (Paperback) by Steven Walfish (Editor), Allen K. Hess (Editor).

Psychology students who want to continue their education today are confronted by a bewildering variety of possibilities. *Succeeding in Graduate School* offers them much needed practical help. Written by experienced mentors, this book:

- Gives reader-friendly tutorials in teaching, research, and clinical/consulting skills
- Describes the stresses of life as a graduate student
- Suggests ways to cope with the management of difficult professors, the search for the optimal advisor-mentor match, and other political and emotional problems that can make or break a graduate career
- Offers advice on overcoming obstacles to completing a thesis or dissertation
- Provides guidance on navigating beyond graduate school: maintaining one's ethical focus, getting into and completing the internship that is a requirement of many programs, obtaining a license for those requiring one to work, and in general, building a career beyond the degree.