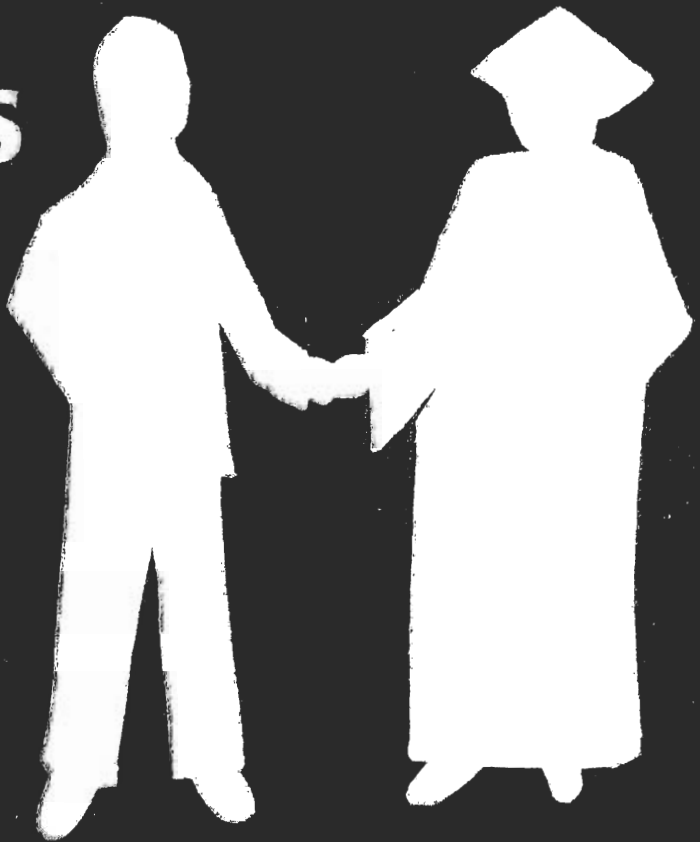


Applications That Make the Schools You Want, Want You

By David K. Dirlam



A GOOD APPLICATION FINDS A GOOD match between you and a graduate program. The process is often anxiety producing, but the anxiety can be replaced by knowledge. The knowledge you will need to write a good application is not so much the sort you find in books. Rather, it is more like wisdom—you find it in a variety of places. I will detail three sources: (1) your perspective, (2) individuals in your audience, and (3) the culture in your audience.

Your Perspective

An application with a clear sense of purpose is impressive. But learning about yourself in relation to psychology may be the hardest task of the application process. After 8 or 10 courses in psychology, you have probably read references to 2,000 different articles. That's less than 1% of psychology articles of the last seven years.

Psi Chi members who attend the national convention of the American Psychological Society are the cream of the crop [This article was originally presented at the 1997 APS Convention.—EDITOR] You are interested in world-class psychology or you wouldn't be here. Bloom's (1985) study of becoming world class in various fields revealed

three steps: (1) begin with a teacher who makes it fun, (2) move on to one who hones your skills, and (3) perfect them with a world-class teacher.

What psychological specialties are fun to you?

Early in her career Janet Taylor Spence told her students that to make a difference in psychology, people had to spend nearly all of their waking time on it. Three decades later, at her inaugural address as the very first president of the American Psychological Society, she talked on workaholism. I caught up with her later in the poster hall, reminded her of her earlier comments, and asked, "What's the difference between your advice back then and workaholism?" She thought for a moment, perhaps remembering her early work on the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale. "I'm not sure," she answered, "but I think workaholics do it because they are afraid not to, while great psychologists do it because they love it." Both of her words to the wise can be life-forming, but the later one tells you how to add grace to the process.

Psychology is already fun for you, or you wouldn't be seeking more of it. Even so, at application time, it will help to review. Go back to your General Psy-

chology book and leaf through it. What catches your eye again? Imagine yourself doing every step of the study. Do these activities feel interesting? What did your favorite teacher like best?

What skills have you developed?

Your undergraduate research project can be a ticket to studying with a person in the area of that research, but use your letter of introduction to yourself to keep it from also "foreclosing" on your choices. That happens when people focus on the content of your project rather than the skills it developed or revealed. Let people know how far from that problem you may be interested in straying. Also, note on your applications the particular skills you used in the project and any other unusual skills you may have. Since your advisor's letter may be more convincing than your own, make sure you share your list with him or her.

Do you have a stronger than usual background in computers, science, math-

This article is based on material presented by David K. Dirlam, formerly of King College, as part of a Psi Chi Symposium titled "Getting into Graduate School" (Norine L. Jalbert and Lynne Baker-Ward, cochairs) at the 9th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Society, Washington, DC, May 24, 1997.

ematics, literature, history, music, outdoor recreation, languages, data analysis, writing, videotaping, behavior coding, electronics, animal training, drawing? There are few areas of human knowledge that psychologists have not studied and used. Every special skill could be a ticket to some research program where it might be useful, but is currently in short supply.

How will you make a difference?

To complete your preparation for making a difference in the world, according to Bloom, you need perseverance and world-class feedback from a master in your field. Either in graduate school or during postdoctoral work, you will need input from someone who has made a difference during his or her generation. Make sure your letters show that you know what difference your potential advisor(s) have made.

Individuals in Your Audience

Because it is the quintessential science of people, psychology may ultimately be the most useful science. Every science, every business, and every art is ultimately about people. Don't forget the individuals within the generalities of the science. You are applying to study with a person first, her or his department second, and your "chosen specialty" third. Have a person in mind when you write each application.

Who is recommended by someone you know?

There are probably only two or three people between you and each of the greatest living psychologists—you know someone, who knows someone, who knows them. If you have done research with people at your campus, they can be especially helpful. Who do they know, like, and admire? If you are presenting at a conference, take a special interest in anyone who comes and talks to you. A person who is interested in your paper might make or know a great doctoral advisor. Even young faculty in an acclaimed or growing program can make excellent advisors. As you help build their career, they will help you with yours. The results could well be a life-long friendship.

Who is eager to talk about programs they know?

The communications theorist, Marshall McLuhan, argued that "the

medium is the message." People not only love to talk about the programs they are in, but the way they talk and even the attention they give you can be as important as what they say. Thus, graduate students at good schools are competent; good communicators have good social skills; and researchers who make time for strangers also make time for their own students.

Use your time at conferences to talk to people from departments that interest you. Graduate students presenting papers can be informative. Listen to their answers, but also ask yourself if the person's work appears good to you. Listen to talks that interest you, but also ask yourself if you like the person as well as the work. Introduce yourself with quality questions, but also note if the presenter will make time for you (if not right at that moment, try for a time later in the conference or in conjunction with a trip to see their lab).

Are distant places actually close to home?

Henry Steele Commager argued that one of the three pleasures of history was the discovery of great companions from the past. Likewise, you can use journal articles and even the Net to find great companions in distant places. Do a *PsycInfo* search on each person you have found interesting. Look up their name on the Web, but don't stop there. Read at least two recent articles before writing to them about their work or their program. Tell a little about yourself and ask for papers and information about their current interests.

The Culture in Your Audience

Renowned cultural psychologist Michael Cole argues that the defining characteristic of humanity is our tendency to inhabit environments transformed by other members of our species. The people and laboratories in a department provide a setting for the growth of everyone in it. Your application will be screened, not just by individuals, but by departments and even schools.

What are the program's interests?

In what subfields does a department have several faculty members? In what areas is it especially productive? Are there special opportunities for research that could only be found in their region of the country? By all means, check out the department's Web site and read a few

articles by at least a few of the faculty listed before applying.

How does the department rate?

Check the National Research Council ratings for research published in the *APS Observer* (available from quality faculty members anywhere). This ranks nearly 200 doctoral programs for research productivity and impact. It also gives interesting figures, like the average length of time for obtaining a PhD.

The Final Steps

The final steps are communicating your sense of purpose and trusting your audience.

Communicating your sense of purpose

Read through the application forms you have solicited until you find one that poses questions you like. Draft an answer and share it with the person who will be your primary reference. This serves two goals: it communicates your goals to the referee, and it gives you another opportunity to get feedback. As a result, both the referee's letter and your own will be improved.

Trusting your audience

Mark Twain tells of two strangers who passed through a town asking if it was a good place to live. An old man at the outskirts answered after first asking them how they liked it where they came from. The first passerby was fleeing dismal, old neighbors and the old man told him he probably wouldn't like the people in his town either. The second was forced by circumstances to move from good friends and the old man welcomed him to the town. Don't lose sight of the idea that no matter how technical it becomes, scientific psychology is a people business. You are seeking to enjoy psychological work, to know and like the people involved, and to make your best choices about programs. As you accomplish these goals, getting into the right graduate school will lose much of its anxiety-producing aspect and become an exciting part of the process of learning to make a difference in this world. If you have done this right, there is a very good chance that people at one of the right programs will agree with you. ☺

Reference

Bloom, B. S. (Ed.). (1985). *Developing Talent in Young People*. New York: Ballantine Books.

From the "trenches," a former Psi Chi chapter officer, Allyn & Bacon Award winner, current grad student, and teacher of undergrads shares her tips about the application process...

Applying to Graduate School: Maximizing Your Chances For Success

Carla Strassle

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

THE BEST PREPARATION that you can do comes long before it is time for you to actually apply.

The Sooner the Better

- Excel in your course work, get to know your professors (good letters of recommendation are a must!), and above all, research, research, research.
- Start looking at schools early so you can narrow your choices. Many schools even have Web sites that you can access.

Narrowing Down

- Look for specific faculty members with whom you would like to work. If no one has the same research interests as you, you are probably not right for that program.
- Call or visit before interview day. Really get to know your top choices.
- Know what you're getting into: What kind of program is it (research oriented, etc.)? What is expected of you?

This article was presented by Carla Strassle, graduate student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, as part of a Psi Chi Panel Discussion titled "Applying to Graduate School: Maximizing Your Chances for Success" (Peter Giordano, chair) at the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA, April 5, 1997.

Applying

- Make your letter of intent specific (e.g., make sure it is clear what area of research interests you and why, and what some of the research questions you would like to pursue in that area are).
- Give your professors plenty of time, let them read your letters of intent, and help with any editing that may need to be done.
- Make sure you submit the specific information that each particular school requests; all applications are not created equal.

The Interview

- Have specific questions prepared for the interview (e.g., things you want to ask them about their program).
- Talk to current students in the program.
- Don't assume that everyone you talk to during the interview has thoroughly read your application. Make sure they know why you would be an asset to their program, but don't be overbearing.
- Talk to the professors; try to get a feeling for how the faculty members get along. If your major

professor is at war with another professor, you can get stuck in the middle. Ask the professors, then ask the students to make sure facts are accurately presented!

If Problems Arise

- Be persistent, but always polite.
- Always be nice to the secretaries; they don't make the decision but they do take the messages!

Getting Accepted

- If you have the luxury of being accepted at more than one place, weigh your options carefully.
- Congratulate yourself, you have definitely earned it! ☺

Carla Strassle earned her BS in psychology in May 1996 from Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, where she served as reporter for the Psi Chi chapter in 1995-96. Also in 1996, she won fourth place in the Psi Chi/Allyn & Bacon Undergraduate Research Award competition for her honors thesis, "Teacher Effectiveness and Student Learning Motivations." She gathered firsthand experience in applying to and accepting offers from graduate school programs when she underwent the application process for admission into doctoral programs in clinical psychology. She is currently in her third year of training at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she is providing psychological services through various agencies and teaching undergraduates at the University of Tennessee. Her contact with undergraduates allows her to continue to encourage active research and scholarly participation for those students who are planning to apply to graduate school in the future.