

# Beyond the bachelor's degree

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This chapter focuses on the strategies to be applied by that minority of under-graduate psychology majors seeking acceptance into psychology graduate programs. Because of the myth that one cannot do anything with just a bachelor's degree is widespread, it may be surprising that those planning to enter graduate school constitute only a small proportion of psychology graduates. In Kulick's (1973) review of undergraduate education in psychology, departmental chairpersons estimated that only from one fourth to one third of their students were oriented towards graduate school. From 1975 to the present at the University of Washington, fewer than 20% of each class have applied to graduate school.

Why, then, should there be any need for strategies for admission? Remembering the fairly uncomplicated transition from high school to college, many students think that a similar transition takes place between undergraduate and graduate study. Not so! The competition for acceptance is incredibly keen. At some schools the acceptance rate is less than 2% of applicants (APA, 1986). The competition is similar to that for medical school with one important difference. If one wants to continue in psychology, is willing to take the time needed for preparation, and develops a reasonable application strategy, one will probably be accepted in a graduate program, although not necessarily at one's first- or even second-choice school.

Jobs in traditional settings for psychologists are diminishing. Opportunities in colleges are declining slowly but steadily, as are those in hospitals and clinics. The major positive change is an increase in opportunities with state and local governments (Cuca, 1975). Wood's (1976) *Career Opportunities for Psychologists* with its emphasis on expanding and emerging nontraditional areas is testimony to this changing market, as is Zambrano and Entine's (1976) *Career Alternatives for Academics*. So there is a good market for psychologists, but it's a different market, and fresh PhDs will have to seek new settings and work activities in which their training and expertise can be fully utilized.

The decision then to attend graduate school should really be a function of the desire to study psychology because it is the area in which one wants to become educated. Students should ask themselves where becoming a psychologist falls in their priority list. If other goals or obligations have higher priority, these may limit their chances for acceptance into graduate study. For example, if one decides to remain in San Francisco, such a decision reduces one's chances for advanced study, as one must apply to schools of varying geographic location to maximize the chances of acceptance. Not everyone who would like to continue in psychology wants it more than anything else in life; there may be other things of more importance, depending on the individual. However, the fewer restrictions one puts on becoming a psychologist (i.e., I must live *here*, I must attend school *there*), the higher the probability that one will make it.

A bright spot – after asking the above question many students might look at alternative ways of meeting their career goals and discover that psychology might not be right for them after all. They may find that a program in social work, educational psychology, business, public affairs, guidance and counseling, law, nutrition, occupational therapy or special education may be more appropriate to their needs and desire and less difficult to enter.

After making the decision to continue in psychology, what should one do? There are three keys to achieving acceptance into a graduate program: persistence, preparation, and application know-how.

## **Persistence**

Webster's defines persistence as a resolute or stubborn continuance, in spite of opposition, importunity, or warning. No matter what obstacles appear and regardless of pessimistic advice received, one must maintain dedication to one's academic goals and career objectives and refuse to be deterred. Schools look favorably on those who demonstrate decisiveness. One student, against our advice, decided that there was only one school for her. After applying there for 3 consecutive years she was finally accepted. Each time she was rejected, she found out the reason for the rejection and worked to correct the deficiency. Her dedication and willingness to work hard was finally rewarded.

## **Preparation**

Preparation is an easy word referring to a not so-easy task. In this context it means using one's undergraduate years (not necessarily 4 years but possibly 5 or 6) to build attractive credentials. As a potential graduate student one will be judged on a number of criteria that vary in weight depending on the orientation of individual departments: cumulative grade point average, psychology grade point average, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, general academic coursework, science background, research experience, letters of recommendation, and clinical experience. If a department has a strong research orientation and is heavily funded by grants, it will favor people with strong science, laboratory, statistics, and research backgrounds. For those interested in clinical or counseling psychology, research is still important, but field experience is also necessary. It is critical to be able to offer a graduate program proof that one has experience in the field of clinical/ counseling psychology and knows what is involved. In summary, a student with a solid background in the "hard" sciences (math, biology, chemistry, etc.) and laboratory work statistics, research, and fieldwork (if appropriate) is well on the road to graduate acceptance.

## ***Academic Background***

Once students know what is needed, they usually want to know how much is needed. There is no one, right answer. How much of any one element is needed to make you attractive as a candidate for a graduate program depends on the emphasis of individual graduate departments. A general rule is that a minimum of 10 quarter credits of math, physical sciences, and biological sciences is necessary. As part of the psychology major one should take at least two solid courses in laboratory and statistics, and a minimum of 1 year of research. Add to this a year of clinical work if appropriate. Combining all of these courses with desired electives, one can see why the undergraduate career may stretch to 5 years, particularly if one's decision to go to graduate school is not made early in the college career.

We came up with these numbers from our experience in advising thousands of students. We routinely examined the backgrounds of our undergraduates who have applied to hundreds of different programs to see which schools accept what types of backgrounds. We concluded that the best approach is a conservative one – excellent preparation in all areas. Of course, exceptions, both by students and programs, can be found. One student accepted into graduate school did not major in psychology, another refused to get involved in research, and another had a science background consisting only of oceanography. These people are to be congratulated, but not modeled. Schools can also prove to be exceptions. Although this chapter concerns preparation for the typical traditional graduate program in psychology, there are humanistic and

clinical programs that place less emphasis on science and research as undergraduate requirements.

### ***Research and fieldwork***

Research experience as an undergraduate can be obtained by linking up with faculty in one's department and working as a research assistant. Eventually one may progress to doing one's own research and possibly even coauthor some publications; graduate schools are extremely impressed by such activities. Some institutions have undergraduate-research or independent-study courses that provide research experience. However, it is not the accumulation of credits that is important. What is critical is to perform research over an extended period of time to develop a close professional relationship with faculty members.

Students who need clinical field experience, but whose schools have no practicum programs, can contact local mental health agencies, hospitals, or other agencies of interest and volunteer. One should make clear to the agency the type of experience desired – counseling, interviewing, testing, or research – and keep looking until one finds it. This process is much easier than it sounds, as half of most mental health agencies' staffs are volunteers.

### ***Letters of recommendation***

One cannot expect to come up with three strong letters of recommendation without having cultivated a few sources. For students attending small colleges where the normal class size is less than 30, finding faculty sources is usually not a problem. However, for those attending a university where even upper-division courses can have as many as 200 students, getting to know faculty becomes a real challenge. In such universities, faculty the student has worked with on research are the best sources of letters. These professors are able to evaluate the student in terms of research ability, critical scholarship, written communication, professional identification, emotional stability, effective energy, and interpersonal relations. They can also provide an overall judgment of the student's probability of success. For clinical/ counseling students, fieldwork supervisors are another excellent source for letters or recommendation.

What kinds of letters should applicants have? In general, the applicant should have at least three solid academic references – these are the most impressive. For clinical/ counseling students, two academic references and one fieldwork reference are a good base. Some schools are now asking for four letters. However, as a courtesy to reviewers, we advise that applicants send no more than five letters.

### ***Graduate Record Examinations***

The finale in the preparation is the Graduate Record Examinations, which consists of two separate tests, the General Test and a Subject Test, and is required by essentially every graduate program in psychology. The General Test contains three sections measuring verbal, quantitative, and analytical ability and results in three scores. The Subject Test in psychology, not required by all programs, is designed to measure knowledge and understanding of psychological principles and facts from basic to advanced study and yields an overall score as well as experimental and social subscores. The verbal and quantitative scores are commonly viewed as most important. To determine if a school requires both the General and Subject Tests, consult *Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields*, published annually by the American Psychological Association.<sup>1</sup>

The GRE was administered five times in 1987-88 with test dates in October, December, February, April, and June (General test only). The General test is given in the morning on test

dates and the Subject test in the afternoon. The testing office at one's college or university should have copies of the most recent *GRE Information Bulletin* (including the test application form and sample questions) published by the Educational Testing Service (ETS).<sup>2</sup>

Should one study for the GRE? Yes! The consensus of our advisees over the years has been that studying is critical. There are two basic purposes for studying: to increase speed and reduce anxiety. One may not learn any new material by studying, but reviewing will bring to mind material once learned but not recently used. Becoming familiar with the nature of the material will also increase one's speed and reduce the accompanying anxiety; one will know what to expect when walking into the testing room.

To study for this important exam, students should buy a GRE study guide at a local bookstore. These guides aim primarily at preparation for the verbal and quantitative sections of the General test. Although study guides are available, we have found that reviewing as many new-edition introductory texts as possible is the best method of studying for the test in psychology. What about timing? The GRE should be taken in October of the year preceding the fall one would like to start graduate school. Some program application deadlines are as early as December, but most cluster around January and early February for admission the following fall. Completing the test in October leaves ample time for distributing test scores and for solving any problems that may arise.

How important is the GRE? *Very important*, but it is one of several criteria evaluated. One's attitude toward the GRE should be one of acknowledging its importance, studying hard for it, doing as well as possible, and then following through with an application strategy consistent with one's test scores. Poorer-than-expected test scores may mean toning down one's list of prospective graduate programs. In addition, the GRE should be viewed as a onetime endeavor. Even though the test can be retaken the ETS reports all scores, and the first scores are generally regarded as most valid. There is also a 50-50 chance for getting a poorer second score; most students we have known did not do significantly better on a second try.

### ***Application schedule***

Appendix A is a suggested schedule for the undergraduate (Scott & Davis – Silka, 1974). This schedule for applying to graduate school represents an ideal. Unless the decision to attend graduate school is made during the first year of college, one will not be able to follow the schedule exactly. For example, if the decision to major in psychology is not made until the junior year, it is next to impossible to become a viable candidate in one year. With imagination, however, the schedule can be adapted to meet individual decision-making plans. Students applying to graduate school for the fall (when the majority of programs accept students) following June graduation should apply almost a year ahead of the anticipated admission time. Therefore, the most impressive course work must be completed by approximately December of the senior year. This does not apply to those delaying graduate study – such students will be able to submit their entire records.

### ***Resume and letter of intent***

Two important elements mentioned in the suggested schedule are the resume and the letter of intent; copies of both should be sent to prospective schools. The resume outlines one's educational background, work and field experience, and research. A resume should be no longer than one page – *never* more than two. A guide to preparing such a resume can be found in Appendix B.

The letter of intent is a description of (a) the development of one's academic interests; (b) research experience; (c) clinical/ counseling interests and experience (if appropriate); (d) unique abilities and skills relevant to psychology (e.g., experience as a computer programmer); (e) graduate schools; (f) reasons for wanting to attend a particular graduate school; and (g) professional goals. It is not an autobiography. If particular programs want other information, this will be specified in their application materials.

The letter of intent has some standard parts and some that are specific to particular programs. Applicants should be aware that even a qualified individual would probably not be accepted into a program whose specific emphasis is not clearly reflected in the individual's application materials. One must be very sure of one's direction and area of specialization and build the letters of intent around them. The goals stated must be compatible with the prospective program.

### ***Application know-how***

The final key to acceptance by a graduate school involves knowing the mechanics of applying – where to get information on prospective programs: how many programs to select, strategy in selection, financial aid, and timing. Three excellent sources of information are available. First, and most comprehensive, is *Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields*, published annually by the APA. Along with general advice on graduate study application, it provides specific information (including departments and addresses, programs and degrees offered, application procedures, admission requirements, student statistics, degree requirements, tuition, and financial assistance) for hundreds of graduate programs in psychology in the United States and Canada. This book is a must!

A second source of application information is psychology department faculty. Professors aware of students' interests and abilities can use their knowledge of various programs to advise students on the most appropriate schools to which they should apply. A third source is the library. By going through relevant journals, students can find out who is writing articles and doing research of interest to them and where these authors are affiliated. The result of this research should be a list from 20-30 prospective programs. If catalogs from other colleges are available, students can probably eliminate some programs from the list immediately. For those programs remaining, a typed postcard should be sent to the chairperson requesting information on the program, a catalog, an application, and financial aid forms. This information can then be used to trim the list down to the finalists.

How many and what type of schools should be on that final list? The list should consist of not less than 10 schools, representing a range in quality, geographic location, and level of degree offered. There are two main reasons for this distribution: competition and limited control over selection procedures. The keen competition has already been discussed; one simply cannot count on getting into any one program. Even though an applicant can exercise partial control over graduate acceptance, there are some aspects of the process that are impossible to control. For example, an applicant may be rejected because a department decides not to take anyone in a particular area of specialization. A number of objective criteria including GRE scores, cumulative and psychology grade point averages, and science background are weighted according to a graduate department's orientation and combined to predict the success of each applicant. However, once a final group of top candidates exists, it is often difficult to choose from among them in an objective fashion, and subjective opinion may play a role. For example, a selection committee might choose a candidate who impressed them by making the trip to the department and being interviewed.

Another reason for applying to a wide range of schools is the problem of interpreting admissions criteria. In APA's *Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields*, schools rate the importance they place during selection on nonobjective criteria such as letters of recommendation and work experience. While each department knows precisely what it means by these ratings of high, medium, or low, how does an applicant know? Even with objective admissions criteria there can be a substantial difference between meeting stated minimum requirements and being competitive. Thus, in order to allow a margin of safety for what cannot be controlled, one should apply to as many programs as possible (10 at a minimum).

Doctoral programs are harder to get into than master's programs. Thus, we advise all students to apply to some "master's only" programs. "Master's only" refers to schools that specialize in master's programs and do not offer the PhD. (Generally, if a school reports that it grants both master's and doctorate's degrees, it is really in the business of producing PhDs.) As a guideline for choosing the 10 schools to which to apply, it is wise to include three to four PhD. Programs that the candidate would *like* to attend, another four or five PhD. Programs one would not mind attending, and two or three "master's only" programs.

Many students are confused by this application strategy because they have been told that if they cannot attend a prestige institution, they might as well not go to graduate school. Others may wonder about applying to master's programs when they really want a PhD. First, it would be great to be accepted by one of the top schools in the country; however, there are only so many top programs, and they take only so many people. In considering other schools, students should remember that the decision to continue in psychology was made because it is the area in which they want an education; they should be willing to get that education anywhere possible.

Second, master's programs are another excellent way to work toward the PhD. They are less difficult to enter, and, if one's undergraduate record is less than glowing, the master's program may be the path to the doctorate. After completing the master's degree, one can apply to PhD. Programs with a much better chance of admission because acceptance will be based on graduate-level work, rather than one's undergraduate record.

What about costs – the time and money to apply? Costs are a minimum of \$300-400, depending on the number of applications sent. The average application fee is \$25: add to this the cost of official transcripts (which must come from every college attended), duplication costs (for recommendations, resumes, letters of intent, etc.), postage, and even long-distance phone calls. Second, hundreds of hours are needed for the application process.

If students need financial assistance while in graduate school they should routinely ask for financial aid forms along with applications and apply for it. Graduate school is a full-time job, which leaves little time for part-time jobs. Programs with a tradition of supplying financial aid are still providing it, although they are not as committed in their initial letters of acceptance. In addition, stating that financial support is not needed will not necessarily help one get accepted, unless the reason is that one has a scholarship or funding from another prestigious source.

Finally, to avoid frustration, students should get started early, because it will be necessary to apply essentially a year prior to entering. Faculty must encourage students to begin to meet faculty early in one's undergraduate career, complete the most impressive coursework as soon as possible (statistics!), start selecting prospective programs early (not 2 weeks before deadlines), and when asking for letters or recommendation allow for procrastination on the part of faculty writers (definitely follow up on requests to make certain starting a month after request).

For those who do not want to continue their education right away, everything mentioned still applies. By graduation students should have letters of recommendation and GRE scores on file. Sadly, faculty disappear for a variety of reasons, and if one returns in one or two years to ask for a letter, a particular faculty member may be gone. One may never use these letters, but if needed the original letters will be there. In addition, students not planning to go to graduate school immediately should take the GRE while still undergraduates or within a few months of graduation. Students out of school for any extended period get out of the habit of taking exams, and their exam-taking ability also decreases. GRE scores remain valid for five years, so students delaying their graduate education should plan accordingly.

There is no indication that not going on to graduate school immediately is detrimental to one's chances of acceptance. Factors that correlate with maturity – employment, post-baccalaureate studies, years of research and clinical experience – are gaining weight in the selection process. What would be detrimental would be disconnecting oneself from psychology: One should always keep a foot in the door as an indication of commitment to the field. If employment in psychology cannot be found, recommend that graduates at least do volunteer research or related fieldwork. The stronger ones continued commitment to psychology, the higher ones chance future acceptance into graduate school.

## Postscripts

Here is the parting advice of our most recent successful applicants.

1. Start the application process early (like early summer before the fall you apply). Writing your resume and letters of intent is very, very time-consuming. You must take a light course load the fall quarter you apply.
2. If you blow the GREs, spend your time on the areas of life where you have control. Get good grades, do excellent and lots of research. Impress faculty with your reliability and creativity so they will write good letters.
3. Choose prospective schools based on the match between their training goals and your professional goals. Success and pleasure in graduate education come only from a good match. Anything less will be a disaster.
4. A positive attitude is important. It shows in your applications, letters, and resume. Don't apply to graduate school until you are ready and know you will get in. then confidently go for it.

## References

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# Appendix A: Suggested Schedule for Career Planning and Applying to Graduate School

## SOPHOMORE YEAR

After completing most of the general education requirements in the first year of college, work on the basic psychology-major requirements, including statistics, laboratory, and science courses.

Become acquainted with several faculty members in the department.

Write a preliminary resume.

Attend departmental colloquia.

## JUNIOR YEAR

Continue, and try to complete basic requirements.

Begin research with faculty and continue throughout junior year.

Think about letter of recommendation resources (e.g., research supervisors, professors of small classes).

Explore opportunities for joining professional organizations (e.g., obtain faculty sponsorship for a student membership in the American Psychological Association).

Redraft the preliminary resume.

Attend the state's annual psychological meeting.

Keep attending departmental colloquia.

Do fieldwork if interested in clinical or counseling psychology.

Begin work on a paper on one's previous research for possible publication or presentation. (Start in spring of junior year).

## SUMMER BETWEEN JUNIOR AND SENIOR YEARS

Buy study guides for the GRE and begin studying.

Begin to investigate prospective graduate programs (consult with faculty and use library resources).

Do third draft of resume.

From research work, write paper(s) for publication or presentation.

## SENIOR YEAR

Complete, as much as possible, all impressive degree requirements, research, and fieldwork by December: continue the research and fieldwork, however, because they may be helpful later on.

**September:** Buy the current issue of APA's *Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields* and write to prospective schools for application materials. Register in September to take the October GRE. Begin requesting letters of recommendation.

Through application materials, find out about any additional requirements or tests needed by individual programs.

**November:** Have letter of intent written and a polished resume completed. Have a faculty member or adviser check them for grammar, spelling, and content.

**December:** Send completed applications to schools way ahead of deadlines. Request transcripts to be sent from all colleges attended. If not continuing on to graduate school immediately, continue research, fieldwork, and faculty affiliations as long as possible.