When Demand Exceeds Supply: Second-Order Criteria Used by Graduate School Selection Committees

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The three primary criteria used to evaluate applicants by doctoral selection committees – grade point average, Graduate Record Examination scores, and letters of recommendation – may fail to narrow the field to the small number of slots available. A survey of doctoral selection committee members identified the relative importance of the next level of selection criteria. Among the most important are research experience, "good match" factors, and writing skills. Among the least important are ability to speak a language other than English, geographical origins of applicants, and "legacy." Few differences were found between selection committee members from clinical/ counseling programs and experimental programs, underscoring the importance of undergraduate research opportunities and adequate faculty advising.

Acceptance into accredited, traditional doctoral programs in psychology remains highly competitive, as even a casual analysis of the most recent edition of *Graduate Study in Psychology* (American Psychological Association, 1993) indicates. A random sample of application/ admission rates of 60 PhD programs (30 clinical or counseling and 30 nonclinical research) revealed that the ration of applications to admissions is 100:7 overall (100:4 for clinical and counseling programs and 10:1 for nonclinical research programs). The ratio was almost 200:1 for 2 of the clinical psychology programs. The quality of the applicant pool, the overall rate of multiple applications, and the number of applicants who refused offers cannot be gleaned from the data presented in *Graduate Study in Psychology*. It seems safe to conclude, however, that far more qualified applicants apply to PhD programs than are accepted.

The primary selection criteria used by graduate selection committees are grade point averages (GPAs), Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, and letters of recommendation (Keith-Spiegel, 1991). Applicants' status within their undergraduate institution is indicated by GPAs, GRE scores place applicants within a national sample, and letters may provide information about applicants' strengths and weaknesses not evident from other sources. Nevertheless, given the large number of applicants to a given program, use of the three first-order criteria may not narrow the field to the small number of slots available. We designed a survey to explore the relative importance of many other variables used by doctoral program selection committees to make final acceptance decisions.

Method

Surveys were sent to a random sample of 180 graduate faculty from different programs, selected from a collection of nearly 300 current catalogs. Clinical and counseling psychology programs (excluding professional schools) and a variety of experimentally oriented programs in

general experimental, social, developmental, quantitative, physiological, and cognitive psychology were included. One hundred twenty-three completed surveys were returned by 83 men and 40 women, for a return rate of 68%.

Respondents were given the following scenario and then rated 31 factors that might be of interest to those evaluating graduate school applicants:

> Imagine that you are left with a pool of applicants, all of whom have very acceptable undergraduate GPA's, GRE scores, and strong letters of recommendation. This applicant pool remains three times the size of the number you are able to select into your program. Please rate the items listed below in terms of their importance in assisting your selection committee with the final decisions using the following key: 5 = *very important, 4 = generally important, 3 = somewhat important, 2= minimally important, 1= not important, and 0= don't know or not sure.*

Results

Table 1 presents the 31 second-order criteria items ranked according to their overall importance. Multiway frequency analyses were used to evaluate differences associated with gender and professional specialty in answers to the 31 items. Differences were hypothesized for 6 of these items. We expected that clinicians would assign more importance to relevant field/ volunteer work and social/ personality style than would nonclinicians. However, nonclinicians were expected to attach more importance to research experience, prestige and status of undergraduate university and faculty, and harder science courses taken. Women were expected to give higher ratings to neatness and professional look of the application. Each was tested (with alpha = .007) to compensate for inflated Type 1 error rate with multiple analyses. Degrees of freedom for chi-square tests differ because categories were sometimes combined to produce adequate expected frequencies. Sample sizes vary due to missing data on some of the items.

Three of the predictions were supported. Clinicians placed more importance on the relevant field/ volunteer experience than did nonclinicians, partial $x^2(4, N = 118) = 22.73$, $p = .0001$ (combining Categories 4 and 5). Results for the partial rather than marginal tests were used for multiway frequency analyses. These tests adjust for the relations among variables and are usually more conservative when such relations exist. Seventy-eight percent of the clinicians considered the criterion at least somewhat important, but only 45% of the nonclinicians did so. Clinicians also considered social/ personality style of the candidate more important, partial $x^2(5, N = 120) = 39.27$, $p < .0001$ (no combined categories). Among clinicians, 86% rated the criterion at least somewhat important; 50% of the nonclinicians provided that rating. Nonclinicians were more interested in the number of harder science courses taken as an undergraduate, partial $x^2(3, N = 234) = 12.94$, $p = .0048$ (combining Categories 1 and 2). Of the nonclinicians, 58% considered the criterion generally or very important, whereas 27% of the clinicians did so. None of the 6 items showed gendered differences, and no interactions between gender and specialty were statistically significant when alpha is set at .007.

For the remaining 25 items, exploratory multiway frequency analyses were performed, using an alpha of .001. At this level, 1 item distinguished between the specialties; clinicians gave greater importance to the potential for success as judged by a preselection interview or other personal contact, $x^2(4, N = 117) = 19.73$, $p = .0006$ (no combined categories). Most of the clinicians (75%) considered this criterion generally or very important, but only 32% of the nonclinicians did. Neither gender differences nor interactions were found among the 25 items when alpha was .001.

Table 1. Second-Order Selection Criteria mean Rankings (and Standard Deviations) for Clinical and Nonclinical Program Respondents

Item	Overall	Nonclinical Programs	Clinical Programs
Research experience resulting in a publication credit in a scholarly journal	4.45 (.77)	4.49 (.70)	4.35 (.92)
Degree to which the applicants skills and interests match those of your program	4.41 (.79)	4.40 (.80)	4.46 (.77)
Research experience resulting in a paper presentation at a professional meeting	4.25 (.87)	4.29 (.82)	4.13 (.98)
Degree of interest expressed by you (or one of your colleagues) in working with particular applicants as graduate students	4.16 (.99)	4.26 (.92)	3.95 (1.13)
Clarity and focus of applicant's statement of purpose	4.12 (.77)	4.14 (.74)	4.08 (.84)
Research assistant experience	3.85 (.88)	3.88 (.90)	3.78 (.85)
Writing skills as revealed in statement of purpose	3.75 (.76)	3.69 (.77)	3.89 (.74)
Status and reputation of applicant's referees (letter of recommendation writers)	3.75 (.86)	3.77 (.78)	3.70 (1.05)
A strong, supporting mentor actively involved in advocating an applicant's candidacy	3.66 (.90)	3.69 (.92)	3.59 (.86)
Underrepresented ethnic minority group membership	3.61 (1.26)	3.42 (1.32)	4.05 (.97)
Degree to which applicants possess knowledge and express interest in your program	3.59 (.99)	3.53 (.97)	3.73 (1.04)
Number of statistics/ research methodology courses taken as an undergraduate	3.48 (.93)	3.56 (.96)	3.31 (.79)
Number of harder science courses taken as an undergraduate	3.41 (.97)	3.59 (.96)	2.97 (.87)
Prestige and status of psychology faculty in applicant's undergraduate department	3.35 (.82)	3.47 (.82)	3.08 (.80)
Prestige of applicant's undergraduate institution	3.30 (.80)	3.33 (.81)	3.24 (.76)
Potential for success as judged by preselection interview or some other personal contact	3.19 (1.32)	2.89 (1.27)	3.86 (1.20)
Honors or merit scholarships awarded by undergraduate institution	3.03 (.95)	3.01 (1.00)	3.06 (.83)
Area of undergraduate major (i.e., is a psychology major advantageous?)	2.98 (1.12)	2.85 (1.11)	3.27 (1.12)
Social/ personality style as revealed through preselection interview or other personal contact	2.80 (1.21)	2.42 (1.02)	3.69 (1.17)
Relevant field or volunteer experience in placement relevant to your program	2.75 (1.18)	2.44 (1.13)	3.43 (.99)

Relevant paid or volunteer experience in placement relevant to your program	2.62 (1.08)	2.44 (1.11)	3.03 (.90)
Neatness and professional look of the application materials	2.48 (.87)	2.35 (.83)	2.78 (.90)
Teaching assistant experience	2.41 (.98)	2.36 (1.05)	2.54 (.80)
Level of applicant's active participation in department activities (e.g., chair of the student colloquium committee)	2.23 (.87)	2.10 (.88)	2.51 (.77)
Student affiliate status of applicants in a relevant professional organization (e.g., APA or American Psychological Society)	1.81 (.81)	1.78 (.82)	1.89 (.77)
Sex balance (e.g., degree to which an applicant would help to balance the sex ratio within the program of the department)	1.81 (.91)	1.63 (.75)	2.24 (1.09)
Psi Chi Membership	1.75 (.81)	1.65 (.78)	1.97 (.83)
Multilingual applicant (e.g., degree to which fluency in English as well as another language is helpful to applicant)	1.68 (.84)	1.59 (.82)	1.86 (.87)
Contribution to geographical diversity (i.e., degree to which an applicant from out of state has an advantage)	1.61 (.85)	1.43 (.73)	2.03 (.96)
Legacy status (i.e., close relation of applicant who completed graduate training in your program	1.39 (.78)	1.40 (.75)	1.36 (.87)

Discussion

The differences in desirable characteristics of applicants' records between clinical and nonclinical doctoral programs seem to validate common advice given to prospective graduate students. Students interested in clinical doctoral programs would be wise to obtain relevant field experience and should expect that judgments about their personal style will influence the decision. Students interested in experimentally oriented programs should take a number of solid, science-based courses. However, the most useful findings are the differences that were not found. The highest ranked items do not differ as a function of program type.

Some type of research experience, either in the form of an authorship on a published paper or a presentation, was confirmed as an impressive undergraduate achievement regardless of the type of program. Thus, students who say "I want to get into a clinical program because I don't like doing research" should be informed of the realities and, if they cannot or will not realign their present activity, be redirected toward programs in professional schools that rate research orientations (Halgin, 1986). Note that positively viewed research activity can be manifested in relatively modest forums. These include Psi Chi student presentations within one's own psychology department program, and independent studies or acknowledged assistance in support of professors' research (Spain, 1990).

Three of the highest rated second-order criteria items concern the goodness of fit between the applicant and the graduate program faculty members. Hence, students should keep in mind that a good part of their attractiveness to a given program's selection committee depends on how successful and fulfilled the selection committee imagines the applicants would be in their program. Students are advised to actively seek and carefully study materials about programs of

interest and to research faculty's interests, perhaps by reading a selection of their recent publications. Writing ability – revealed through the applicant's statements of purpose, other requested essays, or writing samples – is an important second-order criterion for both clinical and nonclinical programs.

Some of the findings may distress applicants who realize that it is too late in their undergraduate careers to meet the demands of many of the second-order criteria. Seniors cannot turn the clock back and select a more prestigious undergraduate institution, take many more demanding courses, or nurture a relationship with a mentor. However, even late starters can assure that the statement of purpose is exceptionally well crafted and select graduate schools carefully, keeping a keen eye to goodness of fit.

Cautions in interpreting the findings are in order. Among the top-ranked criteria may be items that are less common in the records of recent college graduates. It may be, then, that the rarity itself elevates the ranking. For example, more than half of the successful graduate school applicants to the most competitive programs have no publication credits (Keith-Spiegel, 1991). Lower ranked criteria do not necessarily mean that the activity or skill is unimportant and should, therefore, be avoided or go unmentioned by applicants. For example, Psi chi membership and active participation in departmental activities are among the lower ranked second-order criteria, yet both socialize students into the profession and facilitate contact with faculty who may later become enthusiastic supporters.

When considering programs individually, some second-order criteria may be far more important to one program than another. For example, although multilingual skills may be a lower ranked item overall, graduate programs training mental health service providers in southern California are likely to prize qualified candidates who speak fluent Spanish as well as English.

In conclusion, the most important finding from this survey for psychology teachers and advisers is clear-cut. Research experience opportunities should be facilitated in undergraduate psychology departments as a way of enhancing students' competitiveness in the graduate school selection process.

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Notes

1. The descriptive data on which this article is based originally appeared in Keith-Spiegel (1991).

2. Requests for reprints should be sent to Patricia Keith-Spiegel, Department of Psychological Science, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306.