

Your key to the ivory tower

Every year, around 50,000 students apply to graduate psychology programs. Only about 20 percent will get in.

This section can help you—or those you mentor—improve the odds and take full advantage of the grad school experience.



MAX KORNELL

Applying to grad school can feel like a seven-month scavenger hunt. Here's a map to help you find your way.



SEPTEMBER

Apply to take the Graduate Record Examinations (GREs) in October, and start studying.

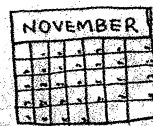
Tip: Take practice exams and focus on areas where you need the most improvement.



OCTOBER

List the programs you want to apply to and schedule campus visits to your top choices.

Tip: Call the department to see if any faculty can meet with you while you're there.



NOVEMBER

Request that your undergraduate transcripts be mailed to the institutions to which you're applying. Contact your favorite former professors and ask for letters of recommendation.

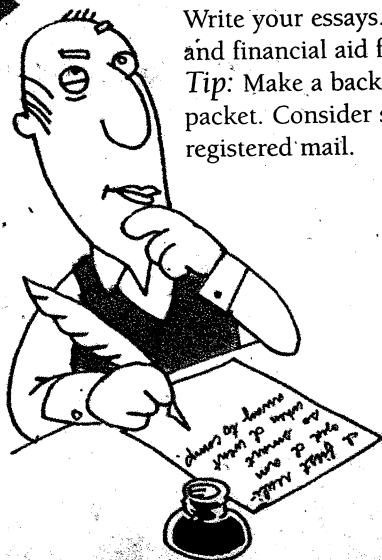
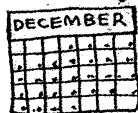
Tip: Send an information packet to the people who write your letters, including your resume, undergraduate transcript and a list of accomplishments.



DECEMBER

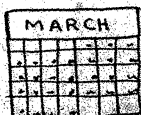
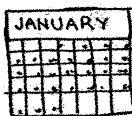
Write your essays. Finalize and mail applications and financial aid forms.

Tip: Make a backup copy of your application packet. Consider sending it through registered mail.



JANUARY

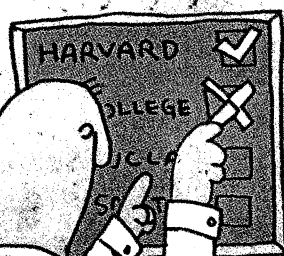
File your Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Confirm that your professors sent their recommendation letters.



MARCH

Accept and decline offers.

Tip: As soon as you have two offers in hand, pick the one that you prefer and immediately decline the other.

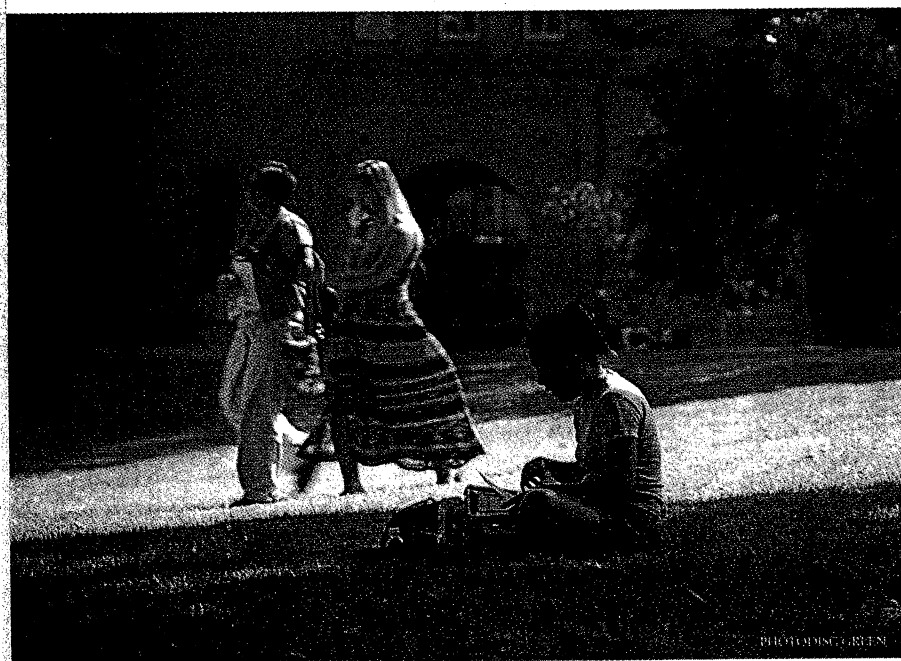


APRIL

Celebrate (or regroup).



Adapted from Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology, Second Edition (pp. 8–9). Copyright ©2007 by APA.



Use your undergraduate years to get critical biology courses under your belt and bone up on research hours.

Clinch your graduate school acceptance

Insiders offer tips on ways to stand out from the pool of graduate school applicants.

BY AMY CYNKAR *gradPSYCH staff*

It wasn't just Jon Green's acing of an undergraduate psychology course that caught Clark University's attention. It was his desire to conduct research and work directly with faculty from his first day on campus, says Michael Addis, PhD, chair of the university's psychology department.

"By the time he came to work with me on research in his junior year, he'd already been collecting his own data, presented it at a conference...and was able to relate it to existing research in the field," Addis recalls.

Green's experience and clear focus boosted his chances for acceptance into Clark's clinical psychology graduate program, Addis says.

But you don't need gobs of poster presentations and research projects under your belt to get accepted to graduate school. Here are some ways to boost your chances of getting in.

• **Schedule wisely.** While it might be tempting to sign up for Modern Dance for Beginners or Society and Leisure 101—undergraduate classes you know you can breeze through—the better route for sharpening your graduate school application is to take rigorous courses that will prepare you for your chosen field. For example, students who plan to pursue psychology doctorates can gain a strong foundation by taking biology, computer science and math courses, says Katherine Sledge Moore,

a third-year cognitive psychology graduate student at the University of Michigan.

• **Start research early.** These days, graduate school admission reviewers expect stellar grades and strong Graduate Record Examination scores. Stand out from the applicant crowd by immersing yourself in research as soon as you think a psychology career might be in the cards for you, says Moore.

"Research experience is the best preparation for graduate school, and these days is virtually a requirement," she says.

To find research opportunities, ask professors from your undergraduate psychology courses if they need research assistants or want to take on

independent study students. And completing a senior thesis is a must, she adds, because it shows that you have the ability to conduct an entire research experiment from idea conception to final data analysis.

Green, now a first-year doctoral student at Clark, also recommends working on different research projects at various labs to help you narrow your interests.

"Research experience is the best preparation for graduate school, and these days is virtually a requirement."

Katherine Sledge Moore
University of Michigan

"The only way to figure out what you want to do is to make mistakes and study things that maybe don't pique your interest," he says.

Students—especially those without much research experience—may want to put off graduate school for a year or two and work as research assistants at a local university, says Moore. Working post-college may provide some perspective and help you fine-tune your career plans, she adds.

"In two years, you'll have a substantive amount of work done, maybe even enough to submit for publication, before you apply," she says.

• Get psyched for summer.

Spend your free time—over summer break or afternoons off, for example—working in a research lab or volunteering at a hospital's behavioral health center, says University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign psychology professor David E. Irwin, PhD. He says the best applicants often show that they've gained real-world experience by working, for example, at a summer camp for children with autism or for a suicide hot line, which demonstrates

a commitment to the field, and shows that applicants have a good idea of what they're getting into.

"It's easy in the abstract for someone to say that they want to help other people, but sometimes they discover that it is more difficult than they realize and that it is not really for them," he says. "It's better for them to discover that before they enter graduate school, rather than after."

• Identify your cheerleaders.

Most graduate school applications require recommendation letters, often from faculty you've worked for or taken classes with. The best letters come from those who know you and your abilities well, says Irwin. Moore suggests giving your letter-writers a list of your research and academic activities as a reminder of your accomplishments.

• Build your network. To make new contacts in your field, attend professional conferences, says Irwin, who adds that many conferences encourage graduate and undergraduate students to submit their research for poster sessions. But even if you don't yet have research to present, attending a conference or getting involved in a local psychological association helps you meet graduate school faculty, says Moore. Several months before she applied to graduate school, Moore e-mailed professors she thought she might eventually interview with and set up time during an upcoming conference to introduce herself. After meeting them, "professors recognized my name when they read applications, which probably gave me a bump in the admissions process," she says.

• Find your perfect match.

Finally, says Addis, undergraduates should be sure they understand the graduate school admissions process and the requirements of doctoral study in their chosen fields.

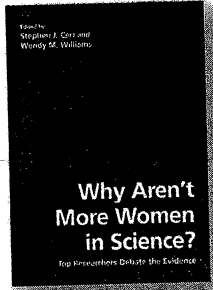
"Often, students think that graduate school is a lot like undergraduate study and that they're going

to take classes, write papers and take exams, and at the end of that, they'll have a PhD," he says. "It's not really like that."

He adds that students should view graduate school as more of a mentorship program, where they'll be required to transition from being "consumers of knowledge" to "producers of knowledge" by conducting their own research, analyzing data and writing research papers.

To identify the right graduate program, Moore suggests asking trusted professors or graduate students for advice and reading through research papers in your intended field to find programs that might interest you. Putting in the extra time to get to know certain programs and their research openings can yield great results, she says.

"How much you want to go to graduate school often determines whether you end up getting in," Moore concludes.



Why Aren't More Women in Science?
Top Researchers Debate the Evidence
Edited by Stephen J. Ceci,
and Wendy M. Williams

Written accessibly to appeal to students and non-specialists as well as psychologists and other social scientists, the contributors reframe this key controversy and challenge readers' emotional and political biases through solid empirical science.

2007 | 248 pages | Hardcover
List: \$59.95 | Member/Affiliate: \$49.95
ISBN: 978-1-59147-485-2 | Item #: 4316085

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
www.apa.org/books
800-374-2721



Standing out as a 'bench science' applicant

Steven Yantis, PhD, is director of graduate studies for the department of psychological and brain sciences at Johns Hopkins University. A small bench science program with 12 full-time faculty members, Johns Hopkins offers doctorates in biopsychology and cognitive and developmental psychology.

After the program's mid-December application deadline, Yantis and his colleagues review 100 to 120 applications; of those, they invite 15 to 20 applicants for interviews and recruitment visits. Between two and nine students end up joining the program each year.

Yantis discussed with *gradPSYCH* the qualities he and his colleagues look for.

At what stage of the application process do you start to see individual applications?

We create tables of the applicants and their interests, so the faculty can begin to sift through them. I start looking at them once they are all in and starting to be categorized. Eventually, every application is read by somebody.

What "objective indicators" are evaluated on an application?

GRE (Graduate Record Examination) scores and GPA (grade point average) are the numerical indicators. But, knowing that if a person has research experience, knowing a person they worked with can be an objective indicator or a subjective indicator. And with GRE scores, I weigh them somewhat more heavily than GPA.

How important is the psychology GRE score?

I tend not to weigh that as heavily as the others. It's been a very long time since I've taken a psychology subject test—30 years ago and I didn't do so well on it—so I figure it must not be so critical. I think of it as testing your knowledge for remembering names and facts more than your intellectual ability, so I tend to weigh it a little less heavily.

What do you look at with GPA?

I look at the courses a person has chosen to take. That gives me a sense of where their interests are, whether they're interested in quantitative dimensions, or whether they've avoided science courses, because that can tell something about what they see as their strengths. And if their GPA is not great, you like to see that it has a positive rather than a negative trajectory.



Dr. Steven Yantis
director of graduate
studies for the
department of
psychological and
brain sciences at
Johns Hopkins
University.

LOYD WOLF

Who decides which applications get a closer look?

Since we operate as a committee of the whole, everyone gets to decide who gets a closer look.

What are you looking for in an applicant's research background?

Ideally, you'd like to see evidence that the applicant has engaged in research at a level that indicates that they know what they want to do at the next level of their education. [We look to see if] they've been able to acquire technical skills, and that after having done that, they continue to want to pursue that as a career. [That's important since] sometimes people think they know what they want, but without having the experience, once they get to graduate school they may realize it wasn't what they had in mind.

Are you looking for specific courses?

I'd like to see some evidence of quantitative background, statistics, math, computer programming and so forth, but that's not going to be relevant for every lab, because some labs are biologically oriented.

What is helpful about working as a paid research assistant following an undergraduate degree?

Spending a couple of years as a paid research assistant can help you decide where you want to end up going, and make you that much more attractive as a candidate.

What makes a recommendation letter stand out?

Probably the rarest kind of comment you can get is, "this person exhibits a level of independent creativity, in terms of coming up with really novel ideas for new experiments." That's the hardest thing to teach, and that's the hardest thing to achieve when you're starting out in a career. [But] if you don't see that, that's not really a problem, because very few people have that.

What's not helpful in a recommendation letter?

Letters that say "this applicant was a student in my class and they got an 'A'" are probably worse than nothing, because if that's the best you can say, it means you can't say much. So, I'd urge students who are applying to grad school to make sure their letter-writers are able to write a unique, and fairly detailed, letter that speaks specifically to them.

What do you look for during the on-campus interview?

You like to meet someone and get the sense of their abilities to work in teams and think on their feet—someone who can talk about what they've done and express enthusiasm about their own interests.

What can sink an applicant during the interview?

If someone is just incredibly arrogant and no one wants to be around them. So, if you're really a jerk, you should try to hide it (laughs). You like to have the sense that there can be an intellectual exchange, because that's what the whole thing is about for the

coming five years or so, you're going to be trying to learn from one another, and you need to feel like there's an intellectual presence there that everyone can benefit from.


Is it necessary for an applicant to identify the faculty member they want to work with?

No, but it's very helpful. If an applicant says, "Oh, yeah, that lab looks really good to me," then you have a sense of the kinds of scientific problems that interest that student, and a sense of where they fit in.

Anything else you want applicants to know about the process?

Begin planning as early as you know you want to go to graduate school. If that happens late in the game, you should really think hard about taking an extra year or two, getting more experience [working as a research assistant] and making sure you have better options. Getting that extra level of experience and making yourself a more competitive candidate can be time well spent. ▶

—C. MUNSEY



CHESTNUT
HILL
COLLEGE

Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology
Accredited by the American Psychological Association

- Optional concentrations in Psychological Assessment or Marriage & Family Therapy
- M.S./Psy.D. track open to students with a bachelor's degree and 12 undergraduate credits in psychology
- Applicants with master's degrees in clinical or counseling psychology may apply to transfer up to 30 credits

Applications are now being accepted for the Fall 2008 semester.

M.S. or M.A. in Clinical and Counseling Psychology

- Concentrations available in Addictions Treatment; Marriage & Family Therapy; Trauma Studies; and Child & Adolescent Therapy

Enrollment may begin in Fall, Spring, or Summer semesters.

For more information, contact:
Jayne Mashett, Director of Graduate Admissions
215.248.7020 or mashettj@chc.edu

9601 Germantown • Avenue • Philadelphia • PA • 19118 • www.chc.edu

What do graduate programs look for in clinical applicants?

Last summer, just before the deluge of applications came flooding in, University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill director of clinical psychology Mitch Prinstein, PhD, answered questions about how to stand out in the highly selective application process.

Offering two main tracks to a clinical psychology doctorate, adult and child/family, UNC is a highly sought after program. Last year, of the 450 students who applied to the program, 25 were selected for on-campus interviews, and nine ultimately matriculated.

As the director of clinical psychology, at what stage do you see an application?

In our program, one tenure-track faculty member reviews every application, and from there, we create a short list of about 25 percent of the applications. Each faculty member reviews candidates from the short list.

What does your program evaluate in the first hurdle of the application process?

Primarily two things: Academic potential as measured by grade point average (GPA) and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores and match to our program values and research.

How important is an applicant's psychology GRE score?

Not very important. It offers a sense of someone's general breadth of knowledge in psychology. But, it's not directly related to their potential to succeed as a clinical scientist. The psych GRE score usually will not get you in, and it will not keep you out.

What reasons might keep an applicant from making it past the second hurdle, of deciding whether there's a fit with the program's values and training experiences?

That's really going to pertain to whether the applicant matches the general emphasis of the program's training, and has research interests that match an available mentor.

Dr. Mitch Prinstein, director of clinical psychology
at UNC-Chapel Hill

What do you look for in an applicant's research background?

Some independent research experience, an ability to think like a scientist, someone who can generate hypotheses, who is familiar with research literature, who can understand the limits to prior research and maybe someone with some ability for scientific writing.

Can you give an example of "thinking like a scientist"?

Some applicants indicate a lot of enthusiasm for an area of research, but not knowledge of how to conduct good research. For example, they might indicate that they're very excited about working with children or adolescents, and that they think it's important to study internalizing symptoms. This is fairly broad. That type of essay will not stand out as much as an applicant who expresses such enthusiasm, but also is knowledgeable about some of the current theories and methodological approaches that are used to study specific developmental psychopathology symptoms. Applicants who can think like scientists usually express ideas that begin to sound like a hypothesis, their ideas convey an appreciation of the way in which constructs might be associated with each other.

What do you think is the value of working as a research assistant?

It's usually an opportunity to get a very detailed and thorough experience in how research is conducted, both the specific logistical issues and seeing a research project move from the conceptual stage to the methodological design to sometimes even manuscript preparation. These are the exact tasks that students will need to know how to perform competently when they're grad students.

What do you look for in a letter of recommendation?

A letter that can help to put that applicant's strengths into a context, and can give more specific examples of how

this applicant differs from other intelligent, enthusiastic and conscientious students. A letter might indicate that a student is particularly adept at statistics, or has strong organizational abilities, or is able to think theoretically at a sophisticated level that's beyond their peers.

What do you look for during the on-campus interview?

Since that's occurring later on in the application process, you hope students have been able to focus their research interests as they've gone through the application process to get a little clearer picture of what they would like to do if they were in your lab in particular. It's good if, at that point, applicants are able to listen to what research is ongoing, and then talk in an informed way about how they think their research might be a match.

What are potential turnoffs during the interview process?

We're very committed to maintaining

a very collegial, respectful and very comfortable environment here, so, we're very much on the lookout for arrogance, egos and competitiveness. Those are the kinds of qualities we're very much steering away from.

Why is it a good idea for an applicant to identify a potential mentor?

For a couple of reasons. It's usually a way to more clearly illustrate the match and articulate exactly what their interests are. Also, it's good to have an advocate, someone who throughout the application process is thinking that you're the person they'd like to have work with them, someone who can really champion your application.

What else should applicants know about the process?

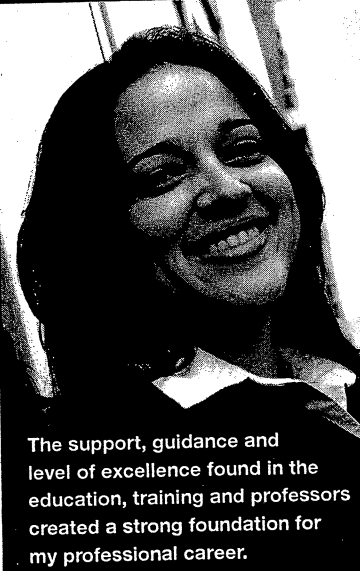
Once they have started to receive offers, I'd ask students to work as quickly as they can to decide which offer they might not want, and to please not hold more than two offers at a time. 🐦

—C. MUNSEY

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Inspiring Lives of Purpose, Service and Leadership



The support, guidance and level of excellence found in the education, training and professors created a strong foundation for my professional career.

The Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University offers a Doctor of Psychology in Clinical Psychology (Psy.D.) in West Los Angeles. At Pepperdine, students receive the highest quality education and training from accomplished scholars and clinicians. Prepare to make a difference and apply today.

**Application Deadline for the
Doctor of Psychology in Clinical Psychology
Fall 2008 Term
January 7, 2008**

**Early Application Deadline
November 15, 2007**

To speak with a program administrator about the Psy.D. program, call (866) 503-5461 or email psyd@pepperdine.edu. For information on psychology master's degree programs call (866) 503-5460.

**To apply online, visit
www.gsep.pepperdine.edu**

The doctoral program is conducted at the West Los Angeles Graduate Campus only.

Pepperdine University's Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) Program in Clinical Psychology is accredited by the American Psychological Association. For information about accreditation, contact the APA Office of Program Consultation and Accreditation, American Psychological Association, 750 First Street NE, Washington D.C. 20002-4242, Telephone: (202) 336-5979.