

Applying to Graduate School in Psychology: A Professor's Perspective

Applying to graduate school in psychology can seem like a daunting process. Given the extremely low acceptance rates (approximately 32% for PsyD programs and 7% for PhD programs), it is not surprising that many prospective applicants have questions regarding the application process generally, as well as specific queries regarding ways to make themselves more appealing and successful candidates (Kohout & Wicherski, 2010). In an effort to help guide prospective applicants, we conducted an interview series with Annette M. La Greca, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and pediatrics at the University of Miami, and an expert in the fields of peer victimization, youth internalizing problems, youth trauma exposure, and pediatric diabetes. Dr. La Greca graciously provided her opinion regarding the psychology graduate program application process, as well as specific tips for interested students.

Part I of this series focuses on how to find the programs and mentorship that best match your needs, and the benefits of pursuing a career in the field of psychology. Part II of this series will focus on the application process specifically, wherein Dr. La Greca describes her ideal prospective graduate student and discusses the key elements of a strong application (including GPA, GRE, CV and personal statement).

When choosing a psychology graduate program, what criteria should an applicant consider?

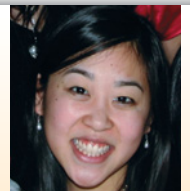
La Greca: I think there are many issues you could consider. It is important to ask yourself what you want to do in the future, because that will narrow down the types of programs that you consider. For example, if you want to do predominantly clinical work, you might consider a graduate program such as a PsyD program, which is a doctorate in psychology—this is a very practice-oriented degree. If you see yourself engaged in research, you should consider a PhD program. You should also consider a PhD program if you want to do a combination of research and clinical work.

Once you've taken into account your future goals, the next thing to consider is your specific area(s) of interest. Are you interested in children, adults, or health populations? Are you more interested in psychopathology research within the clinical area, or are you more interested in intervention research? Identifying those specific areas of interest will also help to narrow the programs to consider and identify the more appropriate matches.

Beyond that, you need to look for programs that have people who are actively doing research in the area in which you are



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Sherilynn F. Chan, BA, is a second year clinical psychology graduate student (Pediatric Track) at the University of Miami working with Dr. Annette La Greca. She earned her honours bachelor's degree in psychology at the University of British Columbia. Sherilynn is interested in risk and resilient factors as they relate to children's and youth's psychological and physical health. Her current research is focused on examining the relationship between peer victimization and adolescent substance use, and the moderating roles of gender and peer aggression.

interested. For example, if you have interests in the area of child psychopathology, you should look for programs that have people doing research in the child psychopathology area, as well as course work and practica that are related to that area. If you are interested in health oriented research, then you should look at programs that have affiliations with medical schools or with medical settings.

Additionally, if you are interested in clinical work, you should check the accreditation status of the program, because it will be much easier to become licensed as a psychologist if you attend a program that is accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA). Some states require APA accreditation of graduate training for licensure; some employers also require that. Further, completing a non-APA accredited internship (which is more likely to occur if you do not attend an APA accredited graduate program) may be limiting in terms of job choice (e.g., working at a Veteran's Administration Medical Center). Beyond that, other issues become important for selecting a graduate program, like program location.

How closely aligned should a prospective applicant's and professor's research interests be?

La Greca: I would say, generally speaking, the closer the fit the better. That's because faculty are better able to train someone in an area where they already have expertise. That being said, interests that are strongly related to a faculty member's expertise, but differ a bit, could also be good. Two former students of mine are good examples of that; neither student's interests overlapped 100% with my own. However, they were able to expand some of their focal areas, which brought us to common ground. So I don't think it has to be an exact match, but it has to be something at least compatible or complementary. Otherwise, you're selecting the wrong mentor or the wrong program. If your research interests don't seem compatible with your professor(s) of interest, then go back to the previous question and reconsider if this the right program for you, and if this is the right mentor for you.

Is there anything you wish you had known when applying to psychology graduate programs?

La Greca: One thing that I would reemphasize is the importance of the match between the applicant and the program, and how it's up to the applicant to make clear how and why that match exists. It's much better if applicants can be very specific about their interests than if they write something general, like "you have an excellent clinical child program, and I want to be a part of that clinical child

program." It would be better if they could describe something about that graduate program's experiences or the mentors who are there as being important for furthering what that person wants to do in his or her career.

Once you are in the field of psychology, what sustains you?

La Greca: Well, being a professional psychologist is definitely not a nine-to-five job, so if you're looking for that type of environment, you probably don't want to consider graduate training in psychology. But, there are a number of things that sustain me [and others]. I've always been someone who's really curious and eager to learn; I like learning new things, so it's probably great that I'm a professor. Being within an academic environment, you're always learning something new!

Another thing that sustains me is having a diversity of interests. I enjoy doing a lot of things, which is feasible in psychology, because it's such a diverse field. If you get tired of studying child health, for example, you can move on to study child psychopathology. There are many different things you can look at.

Another thing I value highly is my independence. It really is up to me to determine what I want to work on. I could totally change my interests tomorrow and it would be perfectly fine. You don't feel like you're "stuck in a rut," the way you can at a job where you have very specific duties that don't change over time. I have a lot of freedom to choose what I want to work on and how I spend my time.

Yet another thing that's sustaining is the ability to interact with others who have similar interests and goals. I find that people in psychology are very like-minded. They're enthusiastic about similar things. People in psychology—whether they're researchers, clinicians, or in administrative roles—often have a genuine caring for people or desire to make people's lives better. People within psychology also value diversity, and it's nice to be in a profession where many people hold similar perspectives and values. I have friends who are in careers outside of psychology, and, after a while, a number of them feel like they're stuck or stagnant. I've never felt that way in psychology; there's always something interesting and always some new development. And the people in the field are great. So, all those things sustain me. Plus, I get to attend meetings that are sometimes in great locations, and that helps since I like to travel.

Look for Part II of this series in an upcoming issue of *Eye on Psi Chi*. Don't miss Dr. La Greca's advice regarding the experiences and qualifications an ideal prospective graduate school applicant should have.



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Betty Lai, PhD, MST, is a child psychologist currently completing a postdoctoral fellowship with the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine. She graduated from the clinical psychology program at the University of Miami (Child Track), and she completed her clinical internship at the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford/Children's Health Council.





Preparing for Your Career

With a Psychology Degree

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A psychology degree can provide an outstanding background for almost any career you choose to pursue. However, some of these career opportunities may not be obvious, and finding an optimal way to prepare for these opportunities may be challenging. Let's look at some of these career opportunities and how to prepare for them.

Helping Professions

Careers in the helping professions provide an excellent opportunity to help people and organizations, to contribute to basic science, to improve the quality of life and possibly even save lives. Choices are varied and include working as a researcher, practitioner or both in psychology (clinical, counseling, community, school) and social work. The psychology of aging and neuropsychology may well be the most promising career opportunities in the helping professions.

Significant growth oriented positions require advanced degrees such as a PhD, a PsyD or possibly a Master's (in psychology or social work). Although you also can pursue a career in these areas with a bachelor's degree, positions typically are not growth oriented, even though they might be enjoyable positions for a few years. In the long term, it may be very frustrating to watch colleagues with advanced degrees grow in the field while you do not. If you select a bachelor's level undergraduate degree job in psychology, do so with the intent of moving to either graduate school or another career within two to three years.

Teaching

Teaching at the elementary or secondary school level is another option. Knowledge of psychology is helpful throughout a teaching career. For a public school position, you must achieve certification by taking the requisite courses and completing the required practicums. To teach psychology you must, in most cases, also be certified to teach social studies.

You might also teach at the college level. If you chose to do so full time, you will most likely have research, teaching and service responsibilities at your college or university. Different schools will weigh these three areas differently in terms of importance. In most cases, the most important of these three areas for hiring, retention and promotion is research—establishing a track record of publishing your work in refereed journals.

Securing your own funding from contracts and grants is becoming increasingly important at many academic institutions. You might also do part time teaching at a college or university in addition to your full time professional position.

Industry

There are numerous career opportunities available in industry. Two of these areas—industrial/organizational psychology and human factors/ergonomics/applied experimental psychology/engineering psychology—have established career paths and are likely to be growth areas as well.

Industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology. In this field, there are a variety of opportunities:

- Design corporate structures and programs to help an organization achieve its full potential.
- Assess employee productivity and morale through observation and surveys, and make recommendations based upon your findings.
- Develop new techniques or improve existing techniques to assess job applicants, candidates for promotion, management candidates, and executive candidates.
- Design assessment and/or training programs to help employees, managers and executives to improve their job performance.

By improving corporate performance, the corporate working environment and morale, you might help more people than a private practitioner in a community psychology practice.

To learn more about I/O Psychology take I/O classes offered in most psychology departments and check the websites of the following American Psychological Association (APA) divisions:

- Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychologists (14; www.sio.org)
- Society for Consumer Psychology (23; www.apa.org/about/division/div23.aspx).
- Practice as Consultants (13; www.apa.org/about/division/div13.aspx).

Human factors/ergonomics/applied experimental psychology/engineering psychology. The opportunities in this area include:

- Basic research: Develop theory to explain human behavior which practitioners might use to design, develop, and evaluate products and systems to be safer, easier, and more fun to use.
- Practice: Interact with engineers and other technical and business professionals to design, develop, and evaluate products and systems based upon the scientific literature.

Specialties include design of aircraft, air traffic control systems, hospitals, medical devices, automobiles, trains, military systems, home design for aging populations, computers, cell phones, other portable electronic devices, games, web sites, building layout, and educational systems.

In this field you would potentially save more lives and improve the quality of life for more people than if you were a clinician in private practice because your design improvement might, for example, prevent an airplane from crashing. One huge difference between saving lives as a human factors/ergonomics professional and saving lives as a helping professional in private practice is that you will not know whose life you saved as a HF/E professional (it may be your own), much as a medical professional who develops a vaccine that saves numerous thousands of lives would not know whose life they saved.

To learn more about this area of psychology, take an introductory course if one is offered, or read Donald Norman's *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (also published as *The Design of Everyday Things*). The book may be borrowed from most libraries and is easily read in a single evening. Check the following websites.

- Human Factors and Ergonomics Society (www.hfes.org)
- APA Division 21: Applied Experimental and Engineering Psychology (www.apa21.org)
- presentation prepared by Division 21 for high school psychology teachers: Applying Psychology to Real World Problems (www.apa.org/education/k12/powerpoint.aspx)
- APA Division 19: Society for Military Psychology (www.apa.org/about/division/div19.aspx)

Other industrial careers. The psychology degree is also excellent preparation for many



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Getting involved early during my undergraduate career changed my life. Taking research methods and advanced research methods as a sophomore opened many doors for my undergraduate research career. From there, I was able to learn the research process, but most of all figure out exactly what I wanted to research and what I wanted to do with my life. Don't be afraid to explore different research ideas. Just because faculty members are not doing particular research doesn't mean they aren't interested in an area you are interested in. Don't ever get discouraged. Be proactive. Never give up on your dreams. You create your own undergraduate experience, so make the best of it.

Melissa

Author Note. Ms. Robin is an outstanding example of a student who is maximizing the value of her quest for a psychology degree (and maintaining an excellent school-work-life balance). As a sophomore in 2009, she was already an active participant in a research lab and attending programs intended for graduate students and faculty. Ms. Robin has presented at the Association for Psychological Sciences Convention and the APA Annual Meeting, in addition to developing several articles for publication. She is currently serving as president of UCF Psi Chi for 2011–12.

other careers. Although the psychology degree may not be essential or even suggested for an entry-level position, the knowledge of how people think and behave can be beneficial for better job performance. Some of these careers are listed below.

- management
- executive
- marketing
- sales
- customer relations
- systems engineering
- systems development
- software engineering
- IT
- systems analysis
- project management
- human resources
- industrial education
- urban planning
- architecture
- communications
- journalism
- industrial engineering
- systems architecture
- animal behavior
- zoology

For the above careers additional training (and possibly a dual major) in the specific subject matter would be an asset, if not essential to obtain an initial job. The psychology degree will help you to become established and to grow in the field.

Freedom vs Supervision in Course Work

Perhaps one of the greatest attractions to selecting a psychology major is that you have a tremendous amount of freedom in selecting your course work. You can learn about the breadth of the field of psychology as well as pursue in great depth one or two areas of interest. Unfortunately, most students do not do this, and as a result, these students may not achieve as much as they might like. Indeed, some of them even complain that their degree was of very limited value (or worthless). Since there is freedom rather than supervision in course selection, psychology majors have the obligation to do planning that would often be done for them if they had selected a degree in another discipline such as electrical engineering or chemistry.

Maximizing the Value of Your Psychology Degree

You can maximize the value of your psychology degree by heeding the following suggestions:

- Take research methods and statistics courses as early as possible in your academic career.
- Attend psychology department seminars from day one.
- Get to know selected faculty members well. Can you describe their research in a manner that they would consider satisfactory? If the faculty member has children, do you know their names?
- Become involved in at least one if not two faculty members research to the point that they would consider that you were a very valuable member of their research team.
- Aim for publication (or in press) as a first or second author on an article or two (or at least a published acknowledgement in several articles) before graduation.
- Become actively involved in Psi Beta or Psi Chi and your psychology club. If your school does not have an active Psi Beta or a Psi Chi chapter, you have the opportunity to work with your department chair to organize or reactivate one.
- Seek out elected or appointed leadership positions. Once you achieve these positions, you should work to achieve a few significant accomplishments.

By following this path you will have learned how to:

- understand and predict human behavior;
- interpret very complex data;
- work in and lead a team (which includes more senior members);
- develop proposals;
- deliver technical talks; and
- write clear prose.

You will have an excellent story to tell as you prepare for graduate school or work applications. Most likely, you also will have among the best recommendations from faculty, which should help you secure a well-funded position in graduate school or an excellent position in industry. And, all of this can be done while still maintaining an excellent school-work-life balance.

Minimizing the Value of Your Psychology Degree

On occasion you may hear students or graduates with an undergraduate psychology degree complain that their degree did not help them at all. Chances are they did everything possible to minimize the value of their degree while in school.

Some of the behaviors exhibited by students which minimize the value of their degree include:

- taking research methods and statistics late in their academic career, perhaps senior year;
- selecting primarily large lecture classes, so that they never really meet the faculty;
- choosing to spend their out-of-class time away from the psychology department;
- avoiding meaningful involvement in Psi Chi, Psi Beta, psychology club and other similar programs, although they may belong and attend an occasional program;
- completing Introduction To Psychology research participation without asking any questions or getting to understand the underlying research;
- avoiding involvement in psychology research beyond course requirements;
- selling their psychology textbooks as the semester ends;
- studying primarily only a few days before exams; and
- visiting faculty members during office hours only if they are arguing about an exam result, trying to recover from their poor academic performance, or trying to schedule a make-up exam.

Preparing Your Career Plan and Resume

Having a career plan or career plans and up to date resume are beneficial for students from middle school to graduate school. If you are not sure what career you would like to explore, prepare a plan for each career. The planning process alone may help you to make intelligent choices.

1. **Exploration.** As a first step explore the careers mentioned earlier in this article. Check with your school counseling office. They will have lists of all sorts of careers (as well as measurement instruments which may help you to narrow some of your choices). Look over the lists and

derive your own list of potential careers.

2. **Basic Research and Investigation—Reading.** Read literature on what people do in the careers. For psychology careers check out the above websites. For other disciplines check out their professional organization websites.
3. **Advanced Investigation—Networking.** Network (i.e., meet and talk) with people in the various careers. Faculty and your college/university placement office should be able to help you find alumni or colleagues in the professions you may be interested in exploring.
4. **Initial Ideal Resume Development.** Once you narrow your choice to a single career (or a few careers) prepare a resume for the ideal entry-level job candidate for that profession in the next few years. Write your name at the top of the page. Include a very clear objectives section that explains why the job candidate is the ideal fit for the job. Include lots of meaningful academic and internship experiences. Be very specific about the accomplishments for each of the positions listed. Wherever possible, write in true experiences you have had to strengthen the resume. Review the resume and verify with at least one or two professionals in the field that this resume would belong to the absolutely ideal job candidate.
5. **Preparation of Your Action Plan.** Highlight all of the items in your ideal job candidate resume that do not yet apply to you. Now prepare an action plan which will assure that when you graduate with your terminal degree, be it a bachelors, masters or doctoral degree, the resume will be a true reflection of you.
6. **Completion of Your Action Plan.** Complete your action plan over the next several years, revising and editing the action plan and ideal candidate resume as necessary as you achieve your results. Be sure to keep track of everything you accomplish including the project name, a brief description of the project, an in-depth description of what you did that made the project a success, and how you know it was successful. Include this information on your ideal candidate resume as well as on an actual resume.
7. **Summers.** If your plans call for a career in industry, be sure to spend a summer

or two doing an industrial internship, doing work similar to what you would do in your profession. If your plans call for a career in service, spend a summer or two doing a service-related internship. If your plans call for graduate school (other than possibly an MBA), spend your other summers working in a research environment. Now listen carefully! While you would like to get paid well for doing these experiences, it is possible that you may not get paid at all. In any case, do them!!! Long term, financially, completing these types of summer experiences will most likely pay off far better than doing a typical student summer job.

Go for It

Your psychology degree can and should provide you with an outstanding background for a career in academics, government, industry and/or community service. Remember to develop an effective career plan, become involved in research, your psychology department, and Psi Chi so that it will. Let me know if I can be of help to you. Best wishes for a bright future.



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