

Applying for graduate studies in psychology: A 12-step program

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Anyone applying for graduate school must be suffering from some form of psychosis, and if not they soon will be. The pay is low, hours are long, and the rejection rate is very high! But fear not, for I have developed an intensive 12-step program to assist even the most mediocre of students. Be forewarned these suggestions are based on my own research into graduate studies and may not accurately depict all graduate programs.

1. The first step is asking yourself why you want to attend graduate studies? Graduate school is a challenging and rewarding career alternative for many students. However, it requires a serious commitment, and can be a difficult and time consuming process. Do some soul searching and pursue what you love.

2. The next phase is determining which route you find most interesting. The four primary categories of graduate study in psychology include Counseling, Clinical, Applied, and Experimental programs. Each of these categories encompasses several sub-categories such as Cognitive, Industrial/Organizational, Cultural, Social, Behavioral, Developmental, Theoretical, Quantitative, Environmental, Personality, etc. The earlier in your undergraduate degree, and the more specific interests you can define, the more successful your application will be. If possible, take an independent study or volunteer for a professor to explore your interest in an area.

3. Buy a calendar during your third year if possible, and create a timeline for your application. Start by collecting the deadlines for applications, which for most programs, will range between December 15th and March 1st. Work backwards from this date to create a timeline. Remember to account for things like submitting your application at least a week in advance (the earlier the better). Use the guidelines for attaining admission criteria (see steps 6 to 10) to develop a timeline that works for you. Remain mindful of GRE deadlines, reference letters, and \$\$\$ (application fees range between \$35-\$65).

4. Do your research! I cannot stress this point enough. Graduate school requires an intensive investment of time and energy, and to enhance your success and happiness it is essential that you make an informed choice. The CPA provides direct links to psychology and educational psychology departments across Canada (www.cpa.ca/graduate/guide.html). Alternative sources of information include graduate students, professors, and graduate or undergraduate student advisors. I recommend adopting a local graduate student – most are a long way from home and will enjoy your inquiries and companionship.

5. Learn to love admission criteria. Most departments post the minimum criteria in terms of Grade Point Average or GPA (over the last two years), Graduate Records Exam

(GRE) percentiles, and non-objective criteria (e.g., reference letters, statement of interests, previous research activity, work/clinical experience, and extracurricular activity). Minimum requirements are deceiving, so it may be more insightful to compare the median score of students entering the previous year. Median GPA and GRE scores are published in the CPA Graduate Guide (www.cpa.ca/graduate/guide.pdf) and the annual APA Graduate Study in Psychology.

6. Most programs in psychology require a GPA of roughly 3.5/4.0 (80%) or higher. While a high GPA is critical for acceptance, it is not as difficult as it appears. Most departments focus on GPA over the last two years of University. This excludes courses during the last semester of University for those students who apply during their final year on their undergraduate degree. Graduate admission committees also look carefully at trends in GPA, and prefer an recent upward trend. They also focus on grades in psychology, statistics, research, and methodology courses. For admission into Clinical or Counseling programs it may be important to demonstrate success in related courses (i.e., Clinical Psychology and Counseling). Getting to know your professors, understanding the system, and addressing your own weaknesses are important for academic success. If you tend to procrastinate, like myself, try to counter this limitation by using a day planner for all your activities, and impose deadlines for small sections of large projects.

7. Beating the dreaded GRE is especially important for Clinical and Experimental Programs. The first step is to determine if you need to complete the GRE General, the GRE Subject, or both. Next, determine when you need to complete the GRE(s) so that your final score will be delivered to the

department(s) before the admission deadline(s). Scores will take about 4-6 weeks for the paper test and 10-15 days for the computerized test (see <http://www.gre.org/getscore.html>). Bring the names of four departments to which you intent to apply, to the GRE test and they will send your scores at no cost. The GRE is a timed standardized test used as the basis for comparison with other students. Your raw score (between 200-800) is converted to a percentile based on how you compare to other students. Scoring in the 80th percentile indicates that you scored above 80% of previous students on a particular scale. The GRE General is divided into three scales: Verbal, Quantitative, and Analytical. Psychology departments usually focus on Verbal and Quantitative scores. The GRE Subject asks questions directly related to psychology, so try studying an introductory psychology text. The key to success is to become familiar with the testing situation and practice questions from study guides. Expensive training sessions are available if you find the study guide challenging.

8. Obtaining great letters of reference is an essential aspect of most applications. Most programs request at least three (or possibly two) referees who can speak about your potential as a graduate student. It usually best to select referees who know you well, either through research or through small, intensive classes. Make an office appointment with your selected referees at least one month before your application deadline(s). During the meeting ask if they are able to provide you with a 'good reference', if so, proceed to supply them with the appropriate application materials and deadlines for each institution to which you are applying. Include any stamped and addressed envelopes. Take the time during your meeting to review your transcript, GRE scores, resume or CV, letter of intent, a

sample of your writing, and any other relevant material. Be gracious, drop by a week later with a dozen new pencils and a small thank you card – you might need references again next year.

9. Writing an excellent statement of intent is an opportunity to distinguish your application from others. Carefully tailor your statement for each program by highlighting specific aspects that interest you. Outline which faculty member you intend to work with, what research you hope to conduct, and why you would make a great fit at that institution. Outline your personal background and professional objectives in a crisp, clear, and brief format (roughly two typed pages). If possible, ask two professors to review and edit your statement of intent before you submit your application. Take as much time as possible to craft a professional statement that objectively describes your own merit and potential. Remember to identify any potential supervisors in the department, especially if you have made contact with them prior to your application (see step 10). No, this is not a good place for blackmail from the after-conference party!

10. Other non-objective criteria, with importance in parenthesis, include interviews (medium), previous research activity (high), work experience (medium), extracurricular activity (low), and clinically related public service (medium), which is usually considered in clinical and counselling programs. While these criteria are often less significant to admissions committees, than GPA or references, strong applications usually include research activity and professional activities. Get involved with your local undergraduate psychology students association, register with professional organizations, and get a relevant part-time or summer job. Not only will these experiences enhance your

application; they will expand your understanding of psychology.

11. Another tip, especially for experimental programs, is to contact researchers prior to your application. Professors accept few graduate students and invest heavily in them. Accordingly, they will only accept students who appear to be a ‘good fit’. Therefore you should peruse web sites and program information packages to assess the research activities and interests of faculty. Try to identify one or two researchers at each institution to create a short list, and contact them to determine if they will be accepting any graduate students. Critically assess publication records of potential supervisors, that is, multiple authorship is indicative of collaborative research with colleagues and graduate students. And a collaborative relationship with a supervisor is crucial for success. Research conferences are an excellent setting to learn about research activities and network with potential supervisors. It helps to prepare by reading some of their recent publications in academic journals – your conversation will be informed and impressive (for a change).

12. Collect and submit all materials to each of your selected programs. Ensure that the application represents you in the best possible manner by submitting them on time, presenting neatly typed material, and avoiding spelling or grammatical mistakes. The best bet is to apply to a broad selection of institutions – your short list. A local Ph.D. student indicated to me that he only applied to institutions in cities with NHL franchises. A more balanced approach would include application to roughly nine Universities, including three ‘good’ institutions, where you surpass the competitive admission criteria, three ‘great’ institutions, where you roughly match the competitive admission criteria, and three

'excellent' institutions, where you fall slightly below the competitive admission criteria. Make a call to each department a week later to ensure they received your application. If not, go back to step one. Upon completion of this program you will hopefully receive several offers of acceptance. Applicants have until April 15th to accept or reject an offer of admission. There are serious consequences for accepting more than one offer, so carefully consider each offer and inquire about funding opportunities. If you receive more than one offer, decide which is the best and politely notify the other offer of your refusal. Repeat this process until you have received notice from each application or until you have confirmed admission from your preferred institution. Once you have

accepted an offer you should start applying for scholarships, fellowships, TA funding, a tuition waiver, and a research assistantship. Be prepared to find alternative forms of funding, such as a student loan or a part-time job. Now is not the time to relax and enjoy your success - you need to get started on a thesis!

Jay Van Bavel will be graduating in June 2002 with a BA in Psychology at the University of Alberta. He will be attending the CPA annual conference in Vancouver as a presenter, moderator, and an undergraduate campus representative. Also, he will be applying to MA and Ph.D. programs in Social Psychology across Canada in 2003.