

One student's take on award applications

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Every fall brings on the dreaded scholarship application process for a new group of students. I originally wrote a version of this article right before I began the federal scholarship application process as a second year Masters student. As a student now nearing the end of my graduate school career, my intention is to share things I learned and things I wish I had known about the process.

Start early and apply broadly:

Spend time surfing the web, looking through information compiled in your department /university and see what awards upper year students are winning. You'll be surprised at how quickly an afternoon of searching can pay off. If you are a part of any professional organization, chances are they will have some type of student award. If you find an award whose deadline has passed, write the deadline in your agenda for next year. It may be delusional thinking, but it seems logical that the more awards you win, the easier it is to win. Every time you win an award, you increase your chances of winning the next award because you are that much more qualified. Remember there is no section on your vitae for "Awards Lost" so aside from the time investment you have nothing to lose. Besides, many people find that award applications are easier to fill out once you have done a few. You learn to quickly cut and paste from previous applications, update required pieces such as your vitae and your referees will already have letters on file.

Grades:

My advice in this area is to quickly snap out of the undergraduate obsession with grades. My research supervisor told me when I began graduate school to do well in my course-work (aim for the "A") but to keep my focus on research. I think that as a whole graduate students can be a bit obsessive (who us?) but my suggestion is not to spend the extra hours getting a 95% in a course but to invest that time engaging in research-related activities. As a caveat, I should mention that the importance of grades appears to differ at the level of competition. New students are not expected to have research publications, thus their undergraduate and first year graduate marks can be very important. But doctoral students are expected to have a certain level of research productivity, thus marks lose some of their salience. Apparently there is life past graduate school (at least that is what they tell me) and once you leave graduate school, few people will ever ask about your marks. However having research accomplishments will aid in securing both clinical and research positions. Another point is to try and combine the two pursuits whenever possible. Choose to do your required final essay in a course on something that could be publishable down the road and maximize your energy! On a practical note, stockpile copies of your under-graduate transcripts so that you always have them on hand (don't bother doing this for your grad transcripts as they will become outdated quickly).

Research plans, statements of interest and reference letters:

The first piece of advice I would offer in this section is to very carefully read what type of person the award agency would like to fund. In the case of national research granting organizations, students are now allowed to apply to only one organization. Choosing which one best fits your research goals is important. One idea is to go for the granting agency with whom your supervisor has been most successful. Furthermore, weave award-specific information into as many aspects of your application as possible. If it is an award for doctoral students pursuing the psychology of plants, ensure your research proposal topic involves plant psychology (e.g., Are Weeping Willows really depressed?); try and describe past research experiences that suggest a previous background/interest in plant psychology (e.g., RA for your botany professor); and finally ask your referees to try and throw in specific comments regarding your suitability as a future plant psychology researcher (e.g., received highest mark in my Plant Communication Theory class). While some may disagree on the following point, I tend to provide referees with my CV and bulleted points about my experiences that they may want to highlight in their letter. My opinion is that referees are busy people who are doing me a favour by writing me a letter. If I can help make the task less difficult by providing them with additional information and their letter becomes an additional way to incorporate award-specific information, why not? I do suggest asking each referee if they want this additional information. One last point about describing your research, if you are venturing out into a new research area, try to get a more experienced person in the area to read over your research plan. Getting a more experienced perspective helps ensure

you are using the right language and that your project idea is worthwhile to propose.

Publications:

When initially compiling this article I spoke to administrative types in our department and at the university level. After hearing comments from both sources I would hazard to say the most influential component of the application is publications but that at a beginner level of research course marks will help compensate for lack of publications. Keep in mind that many judges will be turned off by students who try and make their research vitae longer for the sake of appearances. That research presentation to your honours class is best left off your research CV! If you do want to include them ensure that you classify your publications into categories like Non- Peer Reviewed Papers, Talks/Abstracts, Book Chapters, etc. Don't forget posters count too! Given deadlines can be anywhere from 4 months to 8 months before a conference, start planning early to submit abstracts for conferences. I think that abstracts that have been peer reviewed and accepted for presentation belong on your vitae even though the conference may not have happened yet. Another thing I would recommend is to be proactive. Ask your supervisor if there is a study, commentary, book chapter, etc., that you can help out on. Most supervisors would appreciate the offer and would want to aid in a student's quest for funding if they are willing to invest the time.

One last note for clinical students, do not use your clinical experience to explain why your research vitae is limited. Unfortunately, there are no special circumstances for those students expected to carry a clinical caseload. Grants are generally awarded for people expected to further research goals, not clinical ones.

In conclusion, I think a few notes must be said about an integral part of the award process-losing. As I must have missed my inoculation prior to starting graduate school, I, like most graduate students fight bouts of the “imposter syndrome”. Let’s face it-opening a rejection letter from an award agency is no morale booster. But it is important to get perspective on the fact that it is your file being judged, not you as a person. I know, I know easier said than done but the best advice I can offer is to simply keep trying. Try and figure out from the feedback you were given, why you did not win. If they did not give you official feedback and you feel it is appropriate, try to

get in contact with the agency to ask them for specific pointers. Ask to see the applications of students who did win. Then take the information you have learned and use it to improve your next application.

I hope you have found my attempt to make sense of the doctoral award application process helpful. Now on to trying to figure out what this “operating grant” thing is all about...

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