

Preparing for Graduate Studies

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Coursework considerations:

- Work hard to maintain good grades in all of your classes, because your GPA will be used as part of the graduate school's admission criteria.
- Consider taking more than one class with a professor that you work well with. This will allow him or her to get to know you better and therefore be in a position to write a stronger letter of recommendation on your behalf (see below). You can learn more about the faculty and other valuable information by visiting their websites or seeing them during office hours.
- Be sure to use your electives wisely. Taking additional courses beyond the electives required by the psychology major will better prepare you to excel in graduate studies. I recommend taking PSYC 221, 223, 224, PSYC 390 (Research Design & Interpretation), and PSYC 370 (Tests and Measurements). In addition, I strongly suggest taking PSYC 392 (Scientific Foundations of Clinical Psychology) if interested in clinical, counseling, or school psychology. Although a minority, some programs require History and Systems (PSYC 394) and many students feel that this course was helpful for preparing for the Psychology Subject GRE exam. Other very useful courses for students interested in careers as a mental health practitioner include: PSYC 372 (Applied Behavior Analysis), PSYC 389 (Child Psychopathology), and PSYC 386 (Psychopharmacology).
- Remember to pace yourself; some individuals need to put themselves on a different timeline for graduation, or take summer coursework to best prepare for graduate studies. Taking fewer classes at a time will allow you to maintain high grades as you attempt to simultaneously acquire intensive research experience, volunteer experience, and study for the GRE, investigate graduate programs and complete all of the necessary application materials. (Note. This is a lot of work to do concurrently over 1 or 2 semesters during your senior year, so plan ahead).

Extra-curricular considerations:

- Become involved in psychology department events and activities (e.g., Psych Club, *Psi Chi*). This will give you immediate access to a support group as well as important information about department happenings and other resources. Academic accomplishments (e.g., *Psi Chi* honor society membership) are something that you can list on your resume or vitae.
- Begin to cultivate relationships with psychology department faculty. They are an invaluable resource for advice about graduate school, letters of recommendation, research opportunities, etc.
- Consider joining scientific organizations as a student affiliate (e.g., APA, APS). Again, this will put you into contact with more resources such as newsletters about trends in training and job placement. These professional memberships are also accomplishments that you can list on your resume or vitae.

- Start a file to put important information and documents related to any accomplishments that you might include on your resume (attending conferences, research and volunteer experiences, etc.).
- Begin reading and acquiring resources about particular program areas (Cognitive, Clinical, Developmental, Social, I/O, etc.) and the professional activities associated with each so you may start to focus your interests toward a field. For example, if interested in working as a mental health professional, it is important that you explore the differences between clinical, counseling, school psychology, and social work.

Other Essentials: (...and I do mean essential!)

- Seek out some form of research experience with our faculty or those at MUSC. Having acquired research experience will attest to your motivation to pursue graduate studies, your capacity to conduct research, and it will put you in a position for an important letter of recommendation. This might involve a supervised independent study or Bachelor's Essay, or simply assisting faculty with their research for 1 or 2 semesters. Try to seek out an intensive experience that will provide opportunities to acquire important research skills that will allow you to succeed in graduate school, and try to be involved in the presentation of research findings of possible (e.g., co-author on poster or paper presentations).
- Seek out some form of volunteer experience(s) for the same reasons as mentioned above. In addition, it will help you to decide if this field is really right for you. Moreover, it puts you into direct contact with professionals who are currently working in the field. Try to acquire experience in an area (e.g., clinical) or with a population (e.g., children) that is most relevant to the field of graduate studies to which you are applying.
- Seek out three or four individuals (typically faculty) who will serve as your referees. Ideally, they should be people that know you well and can attest to your strong performance in the classroom, research experience, and/or volunteer experiences. Most importantly, these individuals should be able to speak about your character (e.g., dependability, maturity) and your capacity to excel in graduate studies.

Important practical considerations:

- Plan ahead and do so carefully. Most graduate programs only admit students during the fall. Doctoral programs typically have application deadlines in December or January, whereas Master's programs are more likely to have deadlines in March, April or May.
- It is never too early to begin investigating prospective graduate programs. Based on your credentials and your career goals, you will need to decide which type of graduate program (Master's vs. Ph.D. vs. Psy.D.) is right for you. Moreover, you need to decide which programs have requirements in line with your credentials and which have philosophies of training that are in line with your goals (teaching/research vs. clinical practice).
- You will need to find out where your type of preferred graduate program is being offered as well as the admission requirements. Because schools are competitive, plan to apply to at least ten programs. I recommend purchasing the most recent edition of Graduate Studies in Psychology, published by the American Psychological Association. It's a

great starting point, but you should contact faculty at these programs directly to find out more details.

- Keep in mind that the applications require essay responses to several questions, so they take considerable time to complete. Get feedback from others about your essays and proof read them carefully! Research each graduate program carefully and tailor your essays to each program. Also, be prepared to send a copy of your CV in addition to the applications to each graduate program.
- You will need to take the GRE General test and the Psychology subject test. Moreover, you need to have the scores sent to the graduate programs prior to the application deadline. The general test is offered several times during the year, but the Psychology subject test is offered less frequently so plan ahead. Don't forget to take advantage of study resources at the CofC Center for Student Learning or professional resources (e.g., Kaplan course, practice software).
- Give your referees as much notice as possible regarding application deadlines. Provide them with all of the important information that you would like them to mention in their letters of recommendation (e.g., copy of unofficial transcripts, GPA, GRE scores, research and volunteer experiences). Many professors will want a copy of your resume. Take the time to provide them with all of the addressed and stamped envelopes they need, as well as a self-addressed postcard to inform you when they have completed their task. Complete your portion of the recommendation forms, and be sure to check the box that will waive your right to review your application file. This act will let the graduate program selection committee know that the person writing your letter of recommendation was free to write a candid appraisal of your strengths and weaknesses. Recommendations letters written under these circumstances are given more weight or importance.

Other personal considerations:

- Graduate school is a huge personal sacrifice. It may require that you move a long distance from your friends and family, perhaps even more than once (e.g., Master's and Ph.D., internship and postdoctoral fellowship).
- Sometimes the need to move away places considerable (sometimes irreparable) strain on romantic relationships. Alternatively, you will meet many wonderful people who have a lot in common with.
- You may have to go into considerable debt and survive on modest training stipends for several years. My advice is to live as modestly as possible during this time so that your first paychecks can go towards new cars and homes, rather than old credit-card expenditures.
- Often, a decision to pursue graduate training requires that you postpone home ownership and family planning until it is financially and/or logistically feasible.

Note.

This document is not an exhaustive list. Some aspects of this document were adapted from "The complete guide to graduate school admission: Psychology, and related fields," by Patricia Keith-Spiegel, Ph.D.