

Applying to Graduate School in Clinical Psychology: Advice for the Aspiring Applicant

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Applying to doctoral programs in clinical psychology is a time-intensive and often mystifying process. This article outlines the steps involved in successful applications: gaining necessary experience, choosing programs, submitting applications, and following up on submitted materials. Prior to the application process, students should focus on coursework and grades as well as research and work experiences. The application process should begin about 18 months before the date of enrollment. Several sources and strategies are given that are helpful in selecting programs to apply to. We also describe strategies for collecting the relevant application materials, including application forms, GRE scores, undergraduate transcripts, a vita, a personal statement, and letters of recommendation. Following-up to be sure that all materials have arrived is essential.

Facing the graduate school application process can feel intimidating and overwhelming. While navigating this process, it seems that there is never enough information or advice on how to proceed or succeed. While this article provides information on applying specifically to clinical psychology doctoral programs, much of this information may prove useful for applicants to other psychology doctoral programs (e.g., cognitive, social, counseling, etc.). It is no secret that the competition during the graduate school application process is fierce in clinical programs. Most APA-accredited clinical psychology doctoral programs receive over 200 applications a

year and accept approximately 6 to 8% of these (Norcross, 2000). The following information is meant to help demystify the application process and offer guidance to the aspiring applicant on how to become prepared and qualified.

Gaining Experience

The majority of successful applicants will have been working on their own professional development for numerous years, whether they are aware of it or not. For some, the experience that is gained in coursework, research, and work prior to applying for graduate school is just a normal part of undergraduate or career activities. For others, however, opportunities may be less abundant, collaboration with faculty may be more difficult, or the decision to apply may come later, so professional development activities will have to be actively sought out. There are three important areas of experience that, if properly cultivated, will improve your

graduate school applications: courses, research, and work.

Coursework and grades. Taking a variety of psychology courses shows a breadth of education within the discipline. In addition, having earned good grades and maintained a high grade point average (GPA) is essential. Graduate programs examine your overall undergraduate GPA, your psychology GPA, and your GPA over the final two years of college. There is no strict cutoff for deciding what qualifies as an adequate GPA. Sometimes those with weaker GPAs still have effective applications if they are strong in other areas. Most graduate programs publish the average GPA (and GRE) statistics for accepted applicants in past years, which can usually be found on program websites or in program recruitment material. This may be a good guideline you can use to evaluate the quality of your own GPA.

Research experience. It is essential to have gained research experience prior to graduate school. All graduate programs, except perhaps those in professional

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schools of psychology, involve research activities as a core element of graduate education. Furthermore, most graduate school advisors want students who will be capable of conducting research and contributing ideas relatively independently. An applicant who has been involved in research projects, even if the projects are not in the desired area of graduate study, is an applicant who has gained knowledge and experience in research processes and methodology, and who can work collaboratively with faculty and peers. To become an even better applicant, it is impressive to have presented research at scientific conferences prior to graduate school.

Work experience. It is not essential to have worked in a clinical psychology setting prior to applying to graduate school. However, some relevant background is always beneficial, so look into paid or volunteer work experience—or take a psychology internship class as an undergraduate—that will allow you to work in an applied psychology setting. Whether you chose a medical hospital, psychiatric hospital, group home, clinic, after-school program for children, research setting that involves clinical participants, or any other setting that allows you to work with people and gain experience, it will help your application.

Choosing Graduate School Programs

It is beneficial to begin “comparison shopping” for graduate programs about a year-and-a-half prior to your desired start date. Therefore, if you wish to begin graduate school in September 2007, then you should begin examining graduate programs in January or February 2006. There are two excellent resources that thoroughly profile accredited clinical psychology doctoral programs, including information on admissions criteria, acceptance rates, faculty research interests, and clinical opportunities. The *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology* (Sayette, Mayne, & Norcross, 2004) is updated nearly every year with a rotation of the authorship order. In addition, the American Psychological Association (APA) publishes a yearly review of accredited programs (APA, 2005).

Narrowing the list of potential schools. Research interests, clinical opportunities, program reputation, and geography are common factors used to narrow the pool of programs to which you apply. If you have clearly defined research interests, such as forensic psy-

chology and risk assessment, then you will need to locate programs that have faculty working in this area. The above-mentioned books offering department profiles can help in this respect. Another method for finding faculty in your desired area is to take note of who is publishing related material and where they hold faculty positions. Similarly, if you wish to gain specific clinical experience in graduate school, such as learning certain therapeutic orientations or working with specific populations, then you will require programs that meet these needs. Again, refer to department profiles, program websites, and printed recruitment material.

A program's reputation is more difficult to assess and can be done in numerous ways. Internet searches yield a variety of program rankings. For example, the Social Psychology Network (1997) ranks clinical psychology programs using average scores of graduates based on the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (www.socialpsychology.org/clinrank.htm). In addition, *U.S. News & World Report* (2004) sells their rankings of graduate programs (www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/rankings/hea/brief/cps_brief.php). Faculty in your desired specialty area may know which graduate programs are highly regarded in the field. Finally, the role of geography may or may not impact your choice of potential graduate schools. Applicants must evaluate their own preferences in this regard.

Requesting materials. An increasing number of programs offer all of their

recruitment information over the Internet and require applicants to submit their applications online. Other programs have not yet gone paperless, and so you will have to request their materials through the mail. Discovering which graduate programs operate in which manner is currently a matter of looking through a large number of websites. As the submission date approaches, it is also essential that you confirm that the application materials you initially downloaded or requested are the most updated versions, as most programs update their forms periodically.

Submitting the Application

Each program will clearly list all the required application materials. This typically includes an application form, official grade transcripts, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, a curriculum vita, a personal statement, and multiple letters of recommendation, though more may be required. Given that the competition for clinical psychology doctoral programs is so steep, it is recommended that you apply to numerous programs. Based on the odds alone the 6 to 8% acceptance rate an applicant who applies to 20 schools should get accepted to 1 or 2. However, applicants must evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses based on comparisons to a program's average statistics and by soliciting feedback from undergraduate faculty. Then, applicants should choose which programs and how many to apply to based on their own qualifications. ➤ 45



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The application form. Make sure all of your information is accurate and professional. If your email address or telephone number changes in the middle of application reviews, you will either have to call every program to update your contact information or you will not be accessible. Also, should the graduate faculty choose to invite you to an interview or conduct a phone interview, it makes a much better impression if your outgoing telephone answering machine is professional and your email address is tasteful. For example, having "hotbabe" or "partyanimal" in your email address is not going to present a mature and professional image.

Graduate Record Examinations (GREs) and transcripts. Take the GREs as early as possible so that there is plenty of time to retake them, if necessary, and to have your scores submitted to the graduate programs. A minimum of six months in advance of the application deadlines is recommended. Nearly all clinical psychology graduate programs require the General GRE, while only some require the Psychology Subject GRE. Official grade transcripts should be requested from your undergraduate institution at least two months before the application deadline. Finally, you should never assume that these official documents will successfully make it to their destination. In other words, always call the graduate program to confirm that they have received your GRE scores and grade transcripts with enough time to have them resent if they did not arrive.

Curriculum vita. Your vita is your professional résumé—a record of your professional experiences thus far. Polish it, get feedback from undergraduate faculty and on-campus writing and career centers, and revise it accordingly (e.g., see Landrum, 2005, for advice on preparing a curriculum vita).

Personal statement. Begin writing your personal statement early so that you have plenty of time to solicit feedback and make changes repeatedly (e.g., see Bottoms & Nysse, 1999, for information pertaining to writing a personal statement). This statement should be personalized (but not overly personal) and professional. You should highlight your experience and qualifications in a manner that sells yourself. It is essential to identify your specific goals for graduate school and the specific faculty with whom you'd like to work. Your statement is also a reflection of your writing skills and organizational skills. Again, get

feedback on your drafts from faculty advisors and campus resources such as writing centers and career placement offices.

Letters of recommendation.

Recommendation letters may be one of the most important elements of your application to graduate school programs because they reflect your ability to work professionally with peers and faculty, thus hinting at how you will work as a graduate student. It is essential to have strong letters of recommendation from faculty with whom you have worked closely; a mediocre letter does just as much damage as a bad letter (e.g., see Rewey, 2000, for guidance on securing good letters of recommendation). Therefore, it is essential that you get involved in projects outside of the classroom so that professors can get to know you individually. Graduate programs require multiple letters and most of them should come from people within the field of psychology.

Following Up After Submission

Once you've sent your application, either electronically over the Internet or by track-and-confirm postal mail, your work is not done. First, it is essential that you track everything you've submitted and not assume that it will arrive safely in the correct location. This means that you should call the school and ask if your file is complete. Only when a real person tells you that all required documents and forms have been received and are in your file can you trust that it is true. In the meantime, keep tracking, keep resending if necessary, and keep calling.

In addition, the applicant to clinical psychology doctoral programs hopes to make the first cut and be invited for an interview. Nearly every clinical program requires an interview; most do this in person while a few allow telephone interviews. If you are invited to interview, it means that you appeared to be qualified on your paper application. The interview is a way for the program to evaluate you in person and make the final decision on whom to accept into the program. It also allows you to evaluate the department and faculty first hand. All costs associated with getting to the interview are usually the responsibility of the applicant. Some programs will have current graduate students host applicants, while others will require that applicants pay for their own lodging. Interview etiquette is important, as this is your first and sometimes only chance to make a good impression. It is a professional and an academic situation. Be polite. Wear a

suit. Ask questions. And despite your exhaustion and stress, attend to the things around you: Try to get a feel for the program, the mood of the current graduate students, the level of collaboration among the faculty, and the locale. The program is interviewing you but you are also interviewing the program.

If at First You Don't Succeed ...

... definitely consider trying again. But first, evaluate your application credentials and materials with an objective second party. Then use the time you have until the next application deadlines to turn any weaknesses into strengths. In particular, it may be beneficial to get a paid or volunteer position as a research assistant at a local university or medical center. There is no such thing as too much research experience, and it pays to cultivate relationships with other potential writers of strong letters of recommendation.

The "Finish Line"

Applying to doctoral programs in clinical psychology is hard work, requiring many hours of dedication, attention to detail, and persistence. In this way, the application process is a lot like graduate school. When you have negotiated all of the challenges of the application process, you will have accomplished something: congratulate yourself. Then, get ready to take on your new challenges. ☺

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