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Nineteen Ways to Prepare (Early!) for Graduate School in Psychology

Christopher M. Layne, Ph.D.
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Personal Note:

Throughout my professional career, I have mentored (as research assistants, teaching assistants, or independent study) approximately 100 undergraduate students, over 40 of whom have thus far been admitted to competitive graduate schools, including the University of Minnesota, Duke Law School, Penn State, and the University of Kansas. Given my passion for mentoring students and my joy at seeing them succeed, I have carefully observed the trajectories of students who succeeded in realizing their life dreams, and sought to identify those factors that best differentiate “succeeders” from “non-succeeders”. This guide is the result of over seven years of such careful observations. It contains many anecdotes taken directly from the lives of my students, and the distillation of hundreds of hours of one on one sessions and lab meetings with my students in which I offered practical advice, constructive feedback, encouragement, and strategies to maximize their chances of success. My primary motivation in writing this guide was to decrease the number of sad stories of missed and mismanaged opportunities I kept hearing early in my mentoring career--such as the senior student who came to a presentation sponsored by the local Psy Chi chapter entitled "How to Prepare for Graduate School". By the end she was in tears and stated, "I'm going to be graduating next semester, and what you've just told me is that I basically wasted my last two years here." Sadly, this student was so grossly unprepared that she had no idea that she was grossly unprepared. Far too often, students simply don't get to do what they most aspire to do in life, or to become the person they want to become, not because they aren't smart enough or motivated enough, but because they didn't have adequate guidance during developmentally crucial windows of opportunity in their lives to develop a winning strategy and carry it out. Even among those who eventually succeed in getting into graduate school, far too many go through their undergraduate years with the expectation that they must first obtain a terminal master's degree in order to even *become* a competitive applicant for doctoral-level study. This inefficient strategy not only turns the next two or so years of their lives into a prolonged remediation program, but also introduces additional inefficiencies (*if* it is successful) when their doctoral program requires them to retake most or all of their core courses.

I believe that a quiet crisis facing undergraduate education today is that there are far too few true mentors relative to the many tens of thousands of students who truly need and want them—mentors who not only have the passion, but also the protected professional time and administrative support to guide students in preparing for graduate school. Many colleges and universities—even those that claim undergraduate teaching and mentorship as their primary mission—often do comparatively little to rigorously measure quality mentorship and integrate those metrics into their system for evaluating faculty productivity. While acknowledging the *desirability* of quality mentoring, many institutions track (primarily or only) scholarly publications, grants, teaching, and committee/service work as evidence of faculty members’ industry and contributions. This lack of administrative acknowledgement and attention to the value of quality mentoring can create a disincentive for faculty members to take on any more students than their research or teaching labs require to be “productive” in ways that will register on the radar screen of their department’s evaluation metrics and thus be acknowledged, valued, and rewarded.

Put simply, minimal emphasis given by administrators of institutions of higher learning to quality mentorship can translate into “minimalist” mentoring by faculty. Thus, when approached by students seeking quality mentoring experiences, faculty may be incentivized to pose the question to themselves, “How few students do I need to invest my time in, in order to maximize my productivity in ways that count for something around here?” rather than the converse, “How many students can I meaningfully involve in my research and teaching projects and provide a quality mentoring experience for?” The difference between these two sets of priorities and value systems can make the difference between a modest handful versus potentially hundreds of students being mentored within a given department, depending on the size of the faculty and student body. The issue at heart here is *which academic*

products matter most in this institution? If papers and grants carry the greatest value, then comparatively few lucky students may get a chance at a quality mentored experience, while many others are left to fend for themselves as they lose precious time waiting on research or teaching lab "wait" lists or cobbling together makeshift "capstone learning experience" requirements (e.g., directed readings). Alternatively, if students matter most (or at least, matter equally), then research projects serve as training vehicles by which faculty create "hands on" mentored experiences for students. In such circumstances, the mentored students themselves, as well as the publications on which they labor, are highly valued products, and the institution acknowledges, values, and rewards faculty for producing both.

This guide thus represents my best effort at compensating for this widespread deficiency in the precious and all-too-rare human capital of dedicated mentors. Readers who peruse this guide will notice that I offer no "quick and easy" strategies for successful admission to graduate school. This is because I am unaware of any shortcuts that really work—at least those that would prepare the kind of graduate student I would want to work with as a mentor. To the contrary, many of these strategies require a year or more of diligent preparation. Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither are professional competencies, achievements, and reputations.

My rationale for prescribing "the high road" to preparing for graduate school is fourfold: First, students who adopt these strategies will not only have a good chance at being sufficiently prepared to be competitive applicants who gain entry into graduate school, but also sufficiently competent to succeed in completing it. I have seen classmates drop out of UCLA or be forced to re-take core courses because they were not prepared to tolerate the level of rigor required. These experiences were extremely stressful for them to go through and painful for the rest of us to witness. Second, students who adopt these strategies are precisely the kind of applicants whom I would want to welcome into my own research and teaching labs, because they can "hit the ground running" and deserve the best I have to offer in terms of sweat equity. Third, I am inspired by the counsel of Dr. Charles Brewer, a nationally recognized champion of undergraduate education in psychology who, when I asked him for advice on how to teach my undergraduates when many aspired to graduate study but some did not, responded with two pieces of advice: (1) "*Treat them all as if they are going to graduate school,*" and (2) "*Leave no academic butt un-kicked.*" Last, students who have the self-discipline, motivation, and stamina needed to prepare in these ways have a good chance of becoming not only the kind of professionals who truly love their work, but also serious "movers and shakers" who possess the knowledge, skills, and virtues necessary to make the world a better place.

Personally, I come from modest beginnings—I am one of seven children of poor music teachers and attended public schools all my life. I nevertheless had the good fortune of being guided by two good mentors during my undergraduate years and, after two years of diligent preparation, found myself (much to my excitement and terror) being accepted to my "long shot" graduate school. I thus love to champion the cause of the underdog. These 19 Ways to Prepare for Graduate School in Psychology are the best way I know to level the playing field for everyone. Graduate schools are (or at least should be) meritocracies, in which those most likely to succeed in making important contributions to society and to the world are given the opportunity to do so. Graduate school admissions have become increasingly competitive over the years as greater numbers of talented and accomplished students apply. This guide is intended to help you cultivate your professional knowledge, skills, and virtues in ways that will help you to stand out from the crowd and qualify you for those opportunities. In the spirit of Dr. Brewer's salty counsel, I encourage you to actively seek out mentors who will constructively kick your academic butt early in your career, so that you can kick butt for the remainder. I wish you every well-earned success in your endeavor. May you be ready when your time comes!

--Christopher M. Layne, Ph.D.
UCLA Class of 1996 (Clinical Psychology)
Los Angeles, CA, September 2013

About this Preparation Guide:

This guide was created as a tool to help students who are motivated to pursue graduate-level study to accomplish their aspirations through ambitious goal setting and diligent, consistent preparation. The guide is divided into two sections—long term and short-term preparation. Begin your long-term preparations as early as possible; short-term preparations should be undertaken during your junior and/or senior year. As you prepare, it is critical for you to understand that *the great majority of your preparations for graduate school will take place outside of formal classroom settings*. Thus, strive for a balance between acquiring knowledge and skills in the classroom (which will be reflected primarily in your GPA and GRE scores), and obtaining experience and garnering achievements outside the classroom in research lab or community settings (which will be reflected primarily in your vita, letter of intent, and letters of recommendation). Whatever you do, and irrespective of the particular settings in which you place yourself, strive to develop your professional and personal maturity. That is, strive to develop such professional virtues as passion for your work, values, attitudes, integrity, compassion, conscientiousness, focus, determination, and other desirable attributes that will manifest themselves in your letter of intent, your letters of recommendation, your applicant interviews, and throughout your professional and personal life.

To their great regret, too many undergraduate students approach their education guided by the assumption that, by speeding through their undergraduate studies at a hectic pace, they are preparing themselves for graduate study. (Perhaps by demonstrating that they have a talent for “cramming”?) Unfortunately, speeding through your undergraduate major taps into a set of skills that is scarcely measured by the criteria used to evaluate qualified candidates for graduate school. The sad fact is that, by the time many students realize that *completing, and doing well in, their coursework is at best 25% of the total preparation they need to carry out to be competitive applicants for graduate school, they are too far along to adequately address the other 75% of their preparations*. They unfortunately find themselves on a “tractor beam to expeditious graduation” that they cannot extricate themselves from in order to, for instance, earn a minor in statistics or anthropology or sociology, spend a year or two working in a research lab, or take a graduate class or two. My best counsel is to *slow down in your preparations inside the classroom, and speed up in your preparations outside the classroom*. Thus, instead of taking 16 or 18 or 20 credits of class work each semester in your sophomore, junior, or senior years, which will almost entirely consume your time and energy and not allow you to work as an RA or TA or to volunteer or work in a community-based mental health setting, take 12 or 14 credits of classes, do exceptionally well in them, and spend the rest of your time and energy in diligent extra-curricular preparations. You can make up that time by sticking around campus for spring and/or summer terms; paying the bills while building up your vita, your professional experience, and letter of recommendation prospects by working part-time in a mental health setting; and working as an RA and/or TA for a faculty mentor. Taking online or evening courses is another means of completing your coursework.

Approach the task of preparing for graduate school as you would in conducting an 18-track horse race, where *your job is to get all your horses across the finish line in a caravan formation, at approximately the same time*. Speeding through your undergraduate courses to the exclusion of other channels of preparation is like barring most of your eighteen horses from leaving the starting gate, and then cheering wildly for just the two or three who make it out. Don’t bet on those odds! The end result will be a very imbalanced, incomplete, and unprepared applicant and, by extension, an uneven application package. Such individuals are (comparatively) overdeveloped in two or three areas, and underdeveloped in many more.

As you review each domain of preparation, keep in mind the “*pontoon boat*” theory of graduate school preparation: A pontoon boat does not need all its pontoons to float. Many applicants gain admission to top-flight graduate programs who were undistinguished or even weak in one or more areas. If you have a weak spot, do not abandon hope! Work on it, strengthen it, and do not neglect your comparatively strong areas—keep them fine-tuned as well with limited investments of your time. One or a couple of weak areas will not exclude you from many good graduate programs if you are strong or at least solid in others. Rather, the “profile” will be evaluated in its entirety. However, be aware that many graduate programs have minimal cutoffs for certain criteria, such as GRE scores and grades. Thus, if you want them to look at you, you need to fall above their threshold. Their cutoffs generally vary from

program to program—contact their Admissions Committee Chair (or his/her secretary) to find out what they are for the school of your interest.

Long-Term Preparation (Begin as Soon as Possible)

1. Develop Ambitious Goals and Aspirations

- Henry Ford stated, “Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you are right.” Deanie Francis Mills added, “I no longer think a project is worthwhile unless it scares me half to death. You must move ahead in spite of the fear, which is courage defined.” Although it is easy for us with doctoral and master’s degrees to see ourselves in you, all too often it is very difficult to see yourselves in us. But you must if you are to succeed! Do not disqualify yourself from the get-go by assuming that you do not have what it takes to become the person you truly want to be and to do the things you truly want to do. The great majority of those of us who have obtained graduate degrees will attest that it *is* worth it! Take some time to think about what you want to do with your life—how you will “spend” your talents, passions, and your precious time. Write it down as a goal, and post it where you will see and think about it often, like your bedroom mirror. Then, exercise faith and believe. Abraham Lincoln, whose life was punctuated by frequent failures, once said, “Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing.” If we did it, then you can, too!

2. Work Steadily at Your Goals with Persistence and Determination

- Calvin Coolidge said, “Nothing in the work can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.” Make a resolution to make your undergraduate experience a time in which you diligently prepare for the future. You will never have another opportunity like this one! Work with passion and persistence at your goals, even when it is hard and seemingly interminable. The adage “Everything is hard before it gets easy” applies in abundance here. You will, in many cases, have to “pay your dues” and/or work your way up from the bottom, starting out at a lower wage than you are accustomed to, before being promoted at a community mental health center, or before you are given a major responsibility in a research or teaching lab. Realize that this is the way the world works, and that such settings (especially research and teaching labs) are set up precisely to “weed out” individuals who lack the passion and determination to persist and succeed. So keep at it! In addition, keep track of your progress in a measurable form, such as your vita. Use this measured progress to motivate you. It may take a year, perhaps two, or even three (a good number of applicants for Tier 1 graduate schools spend a year or two as post-baccalaureate RA’s before applying), for you to feel confident in your qualifications and competitiveness for graduate school, and that is normal and expectable.

3. Advocate for the type of mentored environment that you and students like you need to succeed.

In light of my discussion in the overview of the scarcity of quality mentors, it is important to get actively involved in making your institution a place that truly embraces and supports quality mentorship as a central part of its mission. For example, get involved with Psy Chi and invite your representatives to meet with your department chair, Dean’s Office, etc. to advocate for quality mentorship. Discuss the extent of the need—do they (or you) have any information concerning the number of students each year who are in search of a mentored experience? How many of these students’ needs are currently being met? How large is the gap between the number of students who desire quality mentoring and the number who are receiving it? What proportion of the faculty are actually carrying not only the department’s “teaching load,” but also its “mentoring load”? Can or should anything be done to try to increase the number of faculty members who offer mentored experiences, or to increase the number of students whom they mentor? In light of the links between how faculty performance is measured and rewarded on one hand and how faculty prioritize their

time on the other, ask for details on how the department values and tracks mentorship. For example, in addition to the standard metrics of number of publications, grants, committees served on, conferences attended, and global student teacher evaluations, ask whether any specific “mentoring” metrics are incorporated into their faculty performance evaluations. These metrics may include:

- How many student clubs or organizations (e.g., Psy Chi) does the faculty member support in the role of a mentor or faculty advisor?
- How many research or teaching labs does a faculty member support in the role of a mentor?
- How many students are enrolled for credit in each research or teaching lab?
- How many students are enrolled in independent study with the faculty member as a mentor?
- How many students is the faculty member involving in academic products (e.g., as co-authors on publications, as co-authors on papers or posters presented at scientific conferences, co-presenters or co-authors in presentations to the local community)?
- How many products have the faculty member’s students as the primary author or presenter, and as a co-author (getting these into shape can take an enormous amount of time)?
- How many students have accompanied the faculty member to scientific conferences?
- How many students mentored by the faculty member have applied for scholarships that name the faculty member as a mentor? How many have received such scholarships?
- How many letters of recommendation has the faculty member written on behalf of students whom he or she has personally mentored during the past year? (writing these can take an enormous amount of time)
- How many student honors theses has the faculty mentor served as a mentor for (getting these into shape can take an enormous amount of time)
- How many students has the faculty member mentored who have successfully gained entry into graduate school (or other competitive program, e.g., law school)?
- **More broadly**, does the department track how many of its graduating students apply to graduate school, and what proportion succeed in gaining entry?
- How many donors contribute to department activities that focus on promoting quality mentorship (e.g., student scholarships, travel awards, etc.)? Can they locate donors who are willing to support more mentorship-focused activities? For example, does (or can) the department sponsor an undergraduate mentored student research conference, where mentored students present their posters? Can the department find donors to support mentoring awards to go along with any of its research and teaching awards?
- Does the department have a committee that oversees not only undergraduate education, but also undergraduate mentorship? What mentorship-related activities do they track and promote?
- Does the department promote any formal activities that not only involve faculty members, but also graduate students, in mentoring activities (e.g., speaking at Psy Chi meetings, etc.)? Graduate students are often a rich and under-utilized mentoring resource.
- How much does the department or college value mentorship (as measured by such indicators as these) relative to other metrics it uses to evaluate faculty performance and contribution to the mission of department/college/ university in other domains? (e.g., how much weight does it accord to these indicators compared to publications, teaching, committee service, etc.?)

Keep in mind that the specific metrics an administrator, such as a department chair or college dean, selects to evaluate faculty performance reflect the “true” mission of the department and university as he or she sees it. Including metrics like this in evaluations of faculty performance can incentivize faculty members to invest their time and energy in mentoring because it will count towards their productivity, prospects for career advancement, and sense of being valued and supported. Conversely, without such metrics, endorsing the desirability of and need for mentorship may amount to little more than lip service. In my experience, most students are much too passive in advocating for the type of learning environment and resources they need to succeed, focusing more on discussing which professors teach the easiest sections of which courses. Don’t waste your time and sabotage your future prospects by being a “minimalist” student, and don’t assume a passive stance when it comes to advocating for what you need right now, during these precious

and irreplaceable preparatory years. It often takes grass roots advocacy to convince faculty and administrators that you collectively need more than what your present system offers, and that you will make good use of additional resources if they are offered. Administrators are chronically dealing with limited resources, so you will need to make a compelling case if you are to convince them that a shift in how they allocate scarce faculty resources will be worth it. For example, how will supporting quality mentorship help to promote the mission of the department or university? Consider such benchmarks as producing cohorts of graduating students who successfully gain entry into graduate school, who are competitive applicants for their own graduate programs, students who attend graduate school elsewhere but then return as well-qualified applicants for post-doctoral or faculty positions, or students who will one day generously contribute to the school as successful and grateful alumni.

4. Strategize!

- The four pillars of success in graduate school consist, in order of importance, of (a) passion, (b) strategy, (c) work ethic, and (d) intelligence and cleverness. Notably, most applicants have passion, most possess or acquire the discipline necessary to be successful, and most are bright enough. In my experience, however, the majority of applicants lack good strategy in their preparations—defined as *knowledge and skill in getting the most out of your opportunities and investments as you work to achieve your goals*. Consequently, as you prepare yourself for graduate school, strategize carefully about how you can extract maximum benefit from each preparatory activity—what, precisely, are you hoping to accomplish, and when? Given that, how many goals can you accomplish with each activity? How much “bang” can you get for your buck with a given opportunity? How efficiently can you meet each goal? How many “birds can you kill” with a given stone? Strive for at least two, and preferably three, four, or five birds. Here are two brief examples:

Our clinical psychology program admissions committee received an application from a student who had worked his entire way through college in a car repair shop, investing some 20 hours per week of his time on average, and ending up as a manager with an hourly wage well above that of the average student. One of his three letters of recommendation came from the shop owner, who attested that “if he can run my repair shop as well as he does, he will certainly make a great psychologist!” Unfortunately, this letter did not sway the members of the admissions committee, and no invitation to interview was extended.

In contrast, here, in his own words, is the story of another student:

I was working about 20 hrs a week and making around \$15-\$20/hr in a water softener supply shop. I was on commission and had been promoted to office manager. Life was great and then you told me to reevaluate things. I began looking for jobs in the field and soon realized I would not make near that kind of money. I took a job at a residential treatment facility for adolescent sex offenders, which paid \$8/hr for 35 hours a week. It was very hard at first financially speaking. My wife and I had to create a completely new budget to live off. After 8 months there, I was promoted to a supervisory position and my pay increased to \$11/hr (I was there for 3 years). I soon realized the tight money situation was nothing compared to the connections and training I was receiving. I received a letter of recommendation from the clinical director. I was chosen to run groups with the kids. I had working relationships with several parole officers and other judicial officials in the area. I had a line for my vita. Of most value of all was just the experience of working in the field. I had experiences to discuss in my interviews. It promoted research ideas that I would not have had otherwise. It really paved the way for where I am. I received interviews at the top three MFT [marriage and family therapy] programs in the nation and am now attending one of them. Switching jobs was a hard transition, yet a necessary one. I really owe where I am at in my academic career to the guidance you gave me. I speak

from experience when I say that I fully endorse your “Steps for Preparing for Grad School”. It works.

Notably, both students were bright, hard-working, and passionate about becoming psychologists and therapists; both dedicated four years of their lives to undergraduate study; but the latter student acted strategically and prepared wisely, the former did not, and that made all the difference as one advanced to graduate school and one did not. By thinking strategically and leaving a job that killed only the “put bread on the table” bird, the second student gained a letter of recommendation, networking opportunities, a line in his vita, and invaluable professional experience. This experience, in turn, led to additional professional growth and maturity, which showed through in the insights, intellectual curiosity, and passion he expressed in his letter of intent and in his applicant interviews. That is five or more birds killed with one stone instead of one! Put simply, the most desirable undergraduate jobs are often lower paying, less convenient, and more demanding than “dead end” jobs that will do little more for you than put money in your pocket. Unfortunately, the best-paying, easiest, or most convenient jobs may distract you from engaging in the “extracurricular” preparations that will make your undergraduate investment actually pay off once you are ready to leave. It may boil down to the question: *Do you want to drive a nice car but end up with a weak portfolio and poor prospects for advancement to graduate school once you leave, or do you want to drive around a “beater” while developing yourself into a competitive applicant for the program of your choice?* A few years of sacrifice is a small price to pay if they open the door to doing what you really want to do for the next 30, 40, or 50 years. Think also of the opposite—do you really want to *keep* doing the very thing that kept you living in relative comfort as a student for the rest of your life, such as managing a car shop, waiting tables, or selling designer clothes?

Thus, as you consider your opportunities for preparing for graduate school applications, think from a “bang for your buck,” goal-oriented perspective. How can you attain your goals most efficiently and effectively? Which research labs, if you win their confidence, will allow you to participate in presentations that will earn you a publication credit? Which labs will allow you to learn the most skills and provide you with the most opportunities for professional advancement? Which will help you to network professionally with people you should be meeting? Which conferences should you save your pennies to attend, so that you can network and “groom” prospective mentors at programs at which you plan to apply? Which tasks can you volunteer for that will help you to gain valuable experience and network, such as serving as an assistant (e.g., helping with videotaping, setting up audiotape equipment, running errands, etc.) in a research field trip or training seminar? Which jobs will not only put money in your pocket, but will also provide you with valuable experience, supervision from a qualified mentor, a letter of recommendation, a line in your vita, a paragraph in your letter of intent, opportunities for promotion, and opportunities for professional networking? (For example, is it better to repossess cars or sell water conditioners during your spare time for \$15 or \$20/hour, or to work weekend nights in a psychiatric hospital for \$9 to \$12/hour?) Which mentor will help you apply for a student mentored learning grant and go to bat for you by writing outstanding letters of recommendation or making a phone call or two? Learning how to strategize well *now* will help you to get *into* graduate school; applying this skill in graduate school will help you to prepare for your professional life *afterwards*—it often means the difference between having zero or one publications as a graduate student and few job offers, and four, six, or more publications and many job offers. Note that productivity, such as that measured by publications, often reflects the skill of “playing your cards right” more than it does intelligence, hard work, or even passion for your chosen professional discipline.

5. Build Your GPA (three major components)

- Cumulative GPA
- Last 60 semester hours
- GPA in your major
- General guidelines: For Tier 1 (academic/research-oriented) graduate programs, try for a GPA in

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your major of at least 3.8, and an overall GPA of at least 3.7, both preferably higher. For Tier 2 (more practitioner-oriented) programs, try for a GPA in your major of at least 3.5/3.6 and an overall GPA of at least 3.5. Tier-3 programs are not quite as selective as other institutions, but good preparation is still important. Some Tier-3 programs are for-profit private schools that you will pay somewhere between \$60 to \$100 thousand, perhaps more, for the privilege of attending. (Thus, consider your likely future debt burden when considering which schools you want to aim and prepare for—higher-ranked schools generally carry not only a stronger reputation, but many also carry a lower cost if they are state-funded, such as the University of California, University of Minnesota, University of Maryland, University of Oregon, etc. schools. This is especially true if you can obtain in-state tuition and/or can qualify for scholarships or stipends. Being more prepared and more competitive can ultimately save you many tens of thousands of dollars and spare you the stress of paying off massive student loans in the future!)

6. Take Rigorous Courses in “Doable” Doses

- Find out what prospective graduate programs are looking for in the transcripts of their applicants—courses taken in abnormal psychology? Personality? Neuroanatomy? Testing and measurement? Perception? Calculus? Statistics? Strive also to take them while you are an undergraduate. It is true that, in some cases, graduate programs will grant a “provisional” acceptance to entering students who lack a mandatory course, on the condition that they make up this course(s) during their first year of graduate school. However, we strongly recommend that you avoid this situation whenever possible, because it is MUCH harder to pile on “remedial” undergraduate courses to the heavy workload of your first year of graduate school. No matter how hard or inconvenient it may be, it is almost always better to take these courses during your undergraduate years.
- Do not put off taking the hard courses until the end of your undergraduate career—remember that you will be asked for your GPA from your last 60 credit hours! Why not tackle some of the tough stuff during your sophomore year, or early in your junior year, before you hit the “final 60-hour stretch”?
- Taking some “graduate-level” courses as an advanced undergraduate is generally a plus (but do not overload yourself, burn yourself out, or lower your GPA significantly). Suggested graduate-level courses include Psychological Statistics (501 and 502), courses taught through the Statistics Department, and courses on research methods and statistics (such as an SPSS course) taught through Sociology.
- Taking honors courses is a plus; enrolling in the honors program is even better.
- Completing a senior honors project—such as a senior honors thesis, research capstone experience, or some other activity requiring advanced skills—is a plus.
- Take your statistics, methodology, and advanced writing courses early—preferably during your sophomore year, or at the latest, early in your junior year. This will furnish you with the skills needed to work in a research lab. Remember that you will be applying for graduate school by December/January of your senior year, and thus you need to join a lab at least one (and preferably two) years earlier if you are to have an adequate amount of research experience, one or more publications, and a strong letter of recommendation from your mentor(s).
- Taking advanced (300 or 400 or above) courses from departments other than psychology is generally a plus. If you are serious about a Ph.D. degree, strongly consider taking courses from the Statistics, Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, and History departments. Exposure to the hard sciences is also a plus, such as biology, chemistry, zoology, and physics. If you are serious about keeping the possibility of a research career open, strongly consider minoring in statistics. This will provide you with an excellent head start for graduate school and make you a more competitive candidate. A student of mine who was awarded the best graduate package I’ve ever seen—a full-ride tuition scholarship plus a \$22,000 a year stipend for four years at Penn State—minored in statistics and completed a number of

graduate-level statistics courses offered by the psychology department. He was the happy beneficiary of a “bidding war” between two excellent schools, each of whom had professors with large grants who desperately wanted him to come work as a graduate student research assistant on their projects. Several months after he was accepted, I received an unusual letter from the Chair of the Admissions Committee stating that they had an unusually strong incoming class of students and inviting me to send them more like him in coming years.

- If possible, take a course taught by a mentor whom you have already invited to write you a letter of recommendation, then work very hard to do well in the course. This will create opportunities for your mentor to watch you perform, appreciate your abilities outside the research lab, and groom you professionally to make you better prepared and more competitive to apply for graduate school. He or she can then draw on his/her own personal observations and direct experiences, when he/she writes you a personalized letter of recommendation, to praise your abilities and performance in a very important domain to the Graduate Admissions Committee—the classroom. Personalized letters of recommendation can carry a lot of weight by standing out from the crowd of hundreds upon hundreds of generically-praising letters that admissions committee members must wade through each spring. Give your mentor plenty of concrete details to rave about! (e.g., excellent test scores, strong papers, reliable attendance at lectures, strong peer evaluations in your group projects, regularly showing up at office hours with well-prepared questions, openness to constructive criticism when reviewing your graded papers).
- If possible, get credit for your work as a research / teaching assistant by signing up for course credit, (such as for Psychology 492r for research and 495r for independent reading). This will create “hard” evidence on your grade transcript that will substantiate the claims you make in your letter of intent regarding your work history. If possible, stretch your credit hours as an RA or TA across multiple semesters and terms, making it clear that you worked in these capacities over an extended time. This shows evidence of sustained commitment and of a mentoring relationship that took place over an extended time. Taking it for a grade and then earning an “A” will help you to boost your GPA in psychology.

Advice regarding TA and RA experiences:

Your department may offer a variety of types of teaching and research assistantships, ranging from regular TAs and RAs to “capstone” TA and RAs. If you are (a) allowed only a certain number of credits by your department and (b) you are working with a mentor over a prolonged period, such as a year or longer, consider signing up for fewer credits to make sure that your vita reflects this prolonged mentoring relationship.

Please be aware that approaching a professor, especially one whom you do not know, about completing your capstone requirement (especially if it involves concentrating all of your capstone credits into a single semester) in his or her research lab may be inadvisable. Professors who have active research labs are generally looking for students who are willing to commit to working in the lab for an extended period for three very important reasons. First, it takes a lot of time and effort to train prospective RA’s before they become truly useful and productive members of the lab; and second, retaining the same students over repeated semesters is a very effective tool for ensuring the continuity and momentum of lab activities. Third, RA’s often ask for letters of recommendation, which require your mentor to answer very specific questions relating to your character, personality, abilities in conducting research, teaching, and therapy; intelligence, creativity, and so forth. As a matter of policy, I generally do not agree to write letters of recommendation for any students who have worked as RA’s or TA’s in one of my research or teaching labs for less than six months—I generally need to have known a student for a minimum of one year before I can write a strong and confident letter of recommendation attesting to their accomplishments and virtues. For this reason, approaching a professor with a request for a 3-hour capstone research experience may carry more perceived liabilities than benefits. The outcome, more often than not, is that they must spend much of their lab time and resources on training such students during the first semester,

who will then drop out of that lab the next.

Indeed, the situation many research professors least want is to have “greenhorn” student research assistants with very few lab skills who nevertheless need to be kept busy with an integrative “capstone” experience for 6 to 9 hours a week. The end result can be mutually frustrating—a professor who spends his or her time and resources on training, loses continuity and momentum due to repeated loss of (newly!) skilled personnel, and who is asked to write letters of recommendation for students he or she knows only superficially. Conversely, students can be frustrated because they spend their limited time in training and accomplish little other than doing tedious “entry-level” duties that require few advanced skills—things like data entry and correction, that may feel more like “busywork” than a high-quality capstone experience—and this may indeed be the case.

One of the best ways to avoid such unpleasant situations is to spread your research experience over time. That is, early in your undergraduate experience, strive to find a lab that has entry-level openings, agree if you can to its time commitments, and start at with a limited time investment at a lower level (that is, 1 to 2 credits of regular RA experience in Psych 492R or 499R). At this level, obtain training, develop your skills, soak in all the knowledge you can, pay your “dues” in carrying out entry level tasks, and gain the confidence of your mentor and lab mates. Then, after a semester or two or more, boost your training experience to a capstone level, by switching from a 499R to a 430R course level. This will require your mentor’s consent and signature. Upgrading in this way will typically require that you gain skills and knowledge, demonstrate good people skills, and gain enough confidence from your mentor that you are invited to assume a leadership role on a particular task. This happy condition will ensure that you have a true “capstone” experience, in which you integrate and employ what you have learned throughout your undergraduate years, and not an intellectually empty experience that focuses primarily on getting your “ticket punched” so that you can graduate, while depriving both you and your mentor of any truly enriching experience or meaningful accomplishment. Remember, too, that prior to signing up for a capstone experience, students must have completed (or be concurrently enrolled in) Psychology 101, 111, 210, 301, 302, and 304, in addition to at least three courses from a psychology “cluster.”

7. Obtain Research Experience

- In general, the more research experience you have, the better. So start early! (It is preferable to start in your sophomore year—starting *at least* by the beginning of your junior year is very strongly recommended.) Remember that you will be applying in December-Jan of your senior year, and thus in order to have at least one year’s worth of research experience, you must start during the first semester of your junior year.
- Working in a reputable scholar’s lab for at least one year, and preferably two or more, is a strong plus. Many projects take several years to reach fruition, so it is to your advantage to stay for a lengthy time so that you can “follow” at least one project from an early phase to publication.
- Learning different skills (e.g., literature search, critical review/analysis of the literature, data entry, data correction, data analysis, scholarly writing, and presenting posters or papers at scientific forums) is a strong plus. Strive to develop a spectrum of skills to increase your potential value to a prospective mentor’s lab. Bottom line: Do not turn your nose up at tasks that seem tedious, boring, or at least “unsexy.” Instead, work to exposure yourself to *all* elements of the research process. Many good mentors will make you work yourself “from the bottom up” to see how serious you are about becoming a professional social scientist.
- Publication credit (posters, paper presentations, chapters, or peer-reviewed journals) is a strong plus but not essential. Additionally, do not assume that you will be given authorship on a presentation or paper simply because you are a member of a lab. Discuss with your mentor your interests in getting involved in publishing a product, and express your sincere commitment to invest the time and effort co-authorship will require. Publishing a product can be broken down into four phases: (a) conceptualization and design, (b) data collection, (c) data analysis, and (d) writing up the final product. A typical “rule of thumb” used by many researchers is that, in order to gain authorship on a publication, you must make a *significant* contribution to two or more of these phases. Alternatively, an *author’s acknowledgement* is often given to students and others

who significantly contribute to one of these phases, such as assisting with a literature review. Make sure you negotiate a clear agreement with your mentor up front about these important issues with respect to authorship/acknowledgement, order of authorship, etc., so that you are not surprised or disappointed and so that you know what to state in your letter of intent and vita.

- Do not obsess too much about finding “just the right” kind of research project—getting varied experience is a plus. Focus on finding a good mentor who will help you acquire a firm foundation of basic research skills, who will help you reach your goals, and who will “go to bat” for you when application time comes. Examples include writing you a strong letter of recommendation, making phone calls, and creating networking opportunities for you, such as helping you to attend conferences and meet people you may want to work with at a graduate level.
- Taking the lead role on some portion of a project—especially if it results in a publication—is a strong plus. For example, consider doing a senior Honor’s Thesis on some portion of your research lab’s data and presenting it at a conference.
- Assuming a responsible role in the lab is a plus (i.e., being a “team leader” who is in charge of an aspect of the project; serving as a lab coordinator who is responsible for overseeing the work of other lab members).
- Generally, it is good to be involved and busy, but it is very bad to become overextended to the point that you become flaky and unreliable (this also applies to work you conduct as a TA or as a psychology trainee in a community setting or clinic). Therefore, be very honest and up-front with your mentor about what tasks/assignments you can realistically complete by the requested deadlines—if you can’t do it, say “no”, if you can’t do it in time, inform your mentor ASAP with a revised due date or request for additional support. Remember that dropping the ball or making lame excuses after the fact is far worse than turning down requests/invitations up front! It is also one of the fastest ways around to torpedo your prospects for a good letter of recommendation.
- One of the most important skills that you can learn in a research lab is that of *conscientiousness*. This extraordinary, and highly valued, personal attribute is comprised of a number of desirable characteristics. These include *productivity* (getting things done), *diligence*, *reliability* (getting things done on time, being your mentor’s “go-to” guy or gal—someone he or she can rely on to produce when the chips are down), and *work quality* (doing things carefully, thoroughly, and well, so that people do not have to clean up after you). Conscientiousness also involves an often rarer quality—*follow-through*. That is, once you take on a task and do your part, *follow through* with others to make sure that the task is completed successfully. Examples of following through include:
 - After sending off an attachment to someone, thus “passing the baton,” contact them to ensure that they received it, and that they have a clear idea of what to do and where to send the product once they have completed their part.
 - If you are a team leader, monitor the course of a project while it is being implemented. Check for problems, confusion over what to do, when the due date is, where to send it, and so forth. Problem-solve difficulties as soon as possible after they arise.
 - Keep your mentor or team leader regularly informed about the progress of your project. This is important when things are going well and according to plan, and *even more important when they are not*.
 - If you have received an assignment and need additional support in order to complete it, such as when questions arise as to how to do it correctly or well, contact your team leader or mentor ASAP for assistance. If he or she is too busy and does not respond soon, then *contact them again—don’t just drop the ball because you’ve “done my part and they didn’t get back with me.” Persist, persist, persist!* Send them reminder emails, drop them a quick phone call, drop by their office, be a “squeaky wheel” at lab meetings. Your mentor has probably got 20 other projects going on, and 100 things inside his or her head, and occasionally needs *reminding and prompting*. Remember that you are a steward over your project until it is completed to your mentor’s satisfaction. Don’t let projects fail on your watch!
 - Please do not treat your RAship as if it is “just another class.” That is, projects you assume

- responsibilities for in a research lab almost never end exactly when a semester ends. You are responsible for a project until you officially pass the baton to someone else and your mentor and lab coordinator know it! Too many students, for instance, assume important—even leadership—roles in a research lab, and then suddenly take off for the summer without even notifying their mentors or lab coordinators in advance so that adequate arrangements can be made to cover their absence. Thus, if you plan to leave for a summer job or honeymoon or vacation or internship, *notify your mentor and lab coordinator as soon as possible*. Do not drop them a line after the fact and tell them you decided to move to Houston for the summer and then offer to help out via the internet. Dropping the ball by simply disappearing—especially when you hold a position of responsibility and people are counting on you—is one of the quickest ways to undermine what could have been a strong letter of recommendation.
- Strongly consider applying for a student mentored learning grant, which will provide funding for undergraduate research. Don't worry too much about the amount and whether the amount makes the effort worthwhile. Any scholarship or grant can look great on your vita, build your confidence, and introduce you to the important skill of learning to write grants and other funding requests.

8. Obtain Teaching Assistant Experience

- Serving as a teaching assistant is not mandatory, but is a plus nevertheless, because it reflects on the broadness of your background, your reliability, your motivation, and your familiarity with a topic area. Because many programs financially support their graduate students through TAs, demonstrating that you have TA experience can make you a more attractive candidate. “Teaching ability” is also a dimension along which many graduate programs ask your letter-writers to evaluate you.
- Working as an undergraduate TA will help you develop teaching skills (such as preparing lectures, test construction, grading, etc.) —skills that you will likely use as you work your way through graduate school as a TA or teacher. This can save you a lot of preparatory time and help you to get good teaching evaluations from the start!
- Sign up for university credit, so that this work shows on your transcript.
- If possible, sign up as a TA in areas that will challenge your abilities in graduate school, such as statistics, research methods, or an area of interest/emphasis such as child development. This will help you learn the material better, help you to refine and hone your professional interests, and thus make you better prepared and more confident in your abilities.
- Working as a TA for professors who will be writing you a letter of recommendation—particularly if you are also working with them in another capacity, such as a research assistant—will place them in a stronger position to comment on how well they know you, your reliability and talents, etc.
- Look for opportunities that will help you to develop/demonstrate your leadership skills, organizational skills, problem-solving ability, and overall reliability, such as serving as a Master Teaching Assistant. In this capacity, you will train and monitor/supervise the work of other students and demonstrate that you can be trusted with major responsibilities.

9. Obtain Clinical Experience (if you are interested in a clinical career)

- If you are interested in a clinical career at the masters or doctoral level, then strongly consider gaining experience in a clinical setting. There may be a number of local agencies (such as a State Mental Hospital) where these types of opportunities are available.
- If you need money to support yourself, consider obtaining a part- or full-time paid position in a clinical setting. This will allow you to “kill two birds with one stone.”
- Supervised work with a licensed practitioner is strongly preferable.
- Formal training (e.g., seminars in hotline work, crisis management, etc.) is a plus. Remember to record it in your vita!
- An appropriate ratio of direct clinical contact hours to supervision hours is strongly recommended. This supervision can take the form of training seminars, expert consultations,

direct supervision, and observing professionals work (such as by co-leading a group led by a licensed psychologist or social worker or assisting with an art therapy activity led by a certified art therapist). Unsupervised client contact hours, although they provide you with experience, will teach you much less about how to acquire and use professional skills.

- Experience with assessment (e.g., behavioral observation, report-writing), treatment planning, and clinical intervention (e.g., co-leading groups, one-on-one work with a troubled youth) are a plus.
- A caution: Do not go overboard with clinical experience at the expense of research experience! You *can* get into most programs with strong research experience and relatively little clinical experience. Conversely, you *cannot* get into Tier 1 (and many Tier 2) programs with little research experience, no matter how much clinical experience you have. Many programs want to *train you* to be a good clinician according to their model, and therefore are wary about applicants who claim to be well-trained already.

10. Join a Professional Organization

- Strongly consider joining a student organization on campus, such as Psi Chi, which sponsors speakers and otherwise fosters opportunities for professional development. This will look good on your vita and will give you more professional experience.
- Strongly consider joining a professional organization, such as APA (American Psychological Association) or an organization in a field in which you hold particular interest. Almost all professional organizations provide lower-cost opportunities for students to join as student affiliates. This will look good on your vita; in that it will help you present yourself as a serious student of the field. It will also allow you to start participating in your field as a budding professional.
- Strongly consider attending at least one scientific conference, preferably with your advisor/mentor. Many conferences allow students to attend for a reduced fee if they “man” the registration desks for several hours. This is both an inexpensive way to attend a conference and a way of meeting some of the luminaries in your field—people whose names appear on the publications you have been reading. Attending conferences is an excellent method for networking, for meeting prospective mentors at graduate schools at which you wish to apply, for deepening your knowledge about what your field has to offer, and for refining your professional interests. The BEST way to attend a conference is to be a co-author on a poster or paper that you help to present. Check on whether you can apply for department funds to help with the cost of travel, room, and board.

11. Build Your Vita

- Create and consistently update your vita (i.e., resume), in which you will record your accomplishments and preparations during your undergraduate career.
- Keep *ongoing, regularly updated* records about your contributions (e.g., time worked as a TA or RA, tasks performed, projects worked on), your achievements, and your skills. Do not rely on your memory to serve as a reliable source while you are arranging for letters of recommendation—you are likely to forget or, worse, to fabricate things. Include a fact sheet detailing your accomplishments in the material packet you give to your letter writers. Do not be bashful about your accomplishments! Remember that your letter writers are busy, forgetful, and easily distracted; thus, it is your job to remind them in specific ways about what you have done and the skills you have acquired while working as their student, TA, or RA. Never assume that your mentors will keep careful track of all of the things you have done in their lab or clinic—they are too busy and distracted. That is your job.

12. Build, Cherish, and Safeguard Your Reputation

- Although your vita and your reputation are related, they are not the same thing, and the one is not a guarantee of the presence of the other (some people with serious

character deficiencies and compromised ethics nevertheless have impressive-looking vitas). Learn to value and protect your reputation as the very precious thing it is—something that can take many months, years, and indeed a lifetime to build, yet can be damaged or lost very quickly through poor performance, poor decisions, or unprofessional or unethical conduct. Early in my graduate school training, I asked one of my mentors, Dr. David Foy, what mattered to him most at this point in his career (he was a well-established senior scholar and faculty member at the time). His unequivocal response was “my reputation in the eyes of my peers”. At the time, I thought his response betrayed an uncharacteristic vanity. However, as the years have passed, I have come to believe that he was dead right. If you believe in good and bad karma, or the law of the harvest (i.e., you plant what you sow), look no further than reputation as an arena where these cosmic principles often come into play. People who lie, cheat, conceal or misrepresent the facts, unfairly suppress or distort others’ work, plagiarize, steal others’ intellectual property by making superficial changes to others’ products and then represent it as original work (while cutting out the originators of the work from the credit and the profits), fail to gratefully thank and share credit with their collaborators, exclude people from projects that are rightfully theirs, break their commitments and promises, exploit or betray other peoples’ trust or vulnerability, selfishly profit at others’ expense, exploit contractual loopholes to weasel out of their obligations, fail to respect and work with local cultural mores and institutions, attempt to undermine others’ work by writing biased or unfair reviews, take unfair advantage of the peer review process to unethically snoop on and steal and undermine others’ ideas, are “minimalists” who contribute only the bare minimum to get their name on a publication and then make themselves scarce, prima donnas demanding special treatment, pretentious people whose sense of entitlement on a project exceeds what they have rightfully earned, arrogant know-it-alls who act without consulting others, lazy freeloaders, bullies, people who use abusive language, enablers of others’ unethical behavior, backstabbers, jealous or vindictive people who seek to humiliate others, wishy washy opportunists who are your best buddy one day and worst enemy the next depending on what serves their interests at the moment—all of these may reap some short-term (albeit ill-gotten) gain of one sort or another from their behavior. However, eventually (and often very soon), karma catches up with them as others get wise to what is going on and get turned off by being exploited, abused, scooped, and manipulated. Some ill-treated people file formal complaints requesting an ethical inquiry, which can be a real reputation-buster. Thus, when it comes to ranking professional priorities, building and preserving a good reputation tops the list, in part because so many crucially important fundamentals must be in place for it to grow and flourish—like being professional in how you perform and comport yourself, competent, honest, conscientious, reliable, trustworthy, disciplined, smart, hard-working, generous, considerate, supportive, creative, passionate about the work, and pleasant to work with. People with good reputations generally build and enjoy lasting friendships, loyal followers, and productive collaborative partnerships because they keep getting invited again and again to join fun, interesting, and rewarding projects. So if you are invited to join a lab or collaborate on a project as a supporting member, ask not what your team can do for *you*—ask what *you* can do for your team. Drop any sense of greed, entitlement, or dirty tricks you have acquired for the character flaws and unprofessional liabilities they are, and instead look for the ‘win-win.’

Conscientiously do what is asked of you, submit your best-quality work without requiring someone to look over your shoulder or clean up after you, and go the extra mile. Seek to do your share of the work and then some--don’t pull a “prima donna” by announcing that you’ll really commit yourself to working hard *only* if you’re

made a high-ranking author. Once submitted, follow through on your assignments by contacting the lead authors and graciously inquiring whether your work is satisfactory and whether more assistance is needed. Leading a project, making deadlines, etc. is often a stressful business, and it is especially when the chips are down that you will prove to your colleagues what a loyal, trustworthy friend and reliable collaborator you are. They will be slow to forget such acts of kindness and will often reward you by reciprocating and speaking well of you—to your face as well as behind your back. Remember that a *vita* is something that *you* build that represents in large part what *you* think of yourself and your work. A reputation is something that *you* build that represents more of what *others* think of you and your work. *Vitas* and reputations are precious complementary resources that are well worth investing in, building, preserving, and growing.

Short Term (Junior and Senior Year) Preparation

13. Nail the GRE

- Most schools focus on quantitative and verbal subscales; some also include the analytical subscale and the psychology subject test. Contact the graduate admissions counselor at schools you are interested in applying to and ask for their admissions criteria and the profile of their recent applicants/accepted students.
- A combined quantitative + verbal score of > (greater than) 1200 is preferred for at least Tier 2 schools; and a score of >1300 to > 1350 is preferred for Tier 1 schools (depending on the school).
- It is virtually impossible to “cram” for the GRE. Rather, begin studying for the GRE EARLY—say at least three to six months beforehand. Buy the book and put it in a convenient place, such as next to your bedside or in the bathroom, and memorize words, practice math exercises, etc. on a regular basis. In addition, taking a course in informal logic may boost your GRE scores.
- Work persistently on your weak points (revealed in the practice tests, etc.) rather than try to reassure yourself by working primarily on your strengths.
- Consider taking a GRE prep course.

Comments about the new GRE writing subtest:

This subscale can provide useful information relating to the selection of potential doctoral students. It ranges from 0-6, with ½ point increments. Scores are based upon two separate essays with total subscale score being an average of the two. Essay 1 is a 45-minute analysis of an issue. An issue is presented, and the test respondent takes a position, supports it, and provides examples. Essay 2 is a 30-minute analysis of an argument. An argument is presented and the respondent assesses the argument and provides a critique. The overall objective is to assess writing ability and critical thinking. The test is read as a first draft, in which minor spelling and grammatical errors are admissible. How to interpret your scores:

- Scores of 3 and below **may** indicate a problem with one’s writing and critical thinking abilities. This may prompt the selection committee to carefully scrutinize an applicant’s materials before extending an offer to interview.
- 3 ½: low acceptable range
- 4-5: adequate range
- 5 ½ to 6: indicates unusual strength in writing and critical thinking that might overcome other deficiencies in an applicant’s file.
- A more elaborate description of how this score can be interpreted can be found online at <http://www.gre.org/descriptor.html>

14. Target the Programs You Want to Apply to

- Although you are encouraged herein to seek out undergraduate (and perhaps post-baccalaureate) experiences that will provide you with a general, broad base of preparatory experiences, pay close

attention to those aspects of the field that you find interesting and that you feel some passion about. What motivates you to learn more, to study more about a given topic or application, even when a test or class points are not affixed to it? What could you dedicate a lot of time to and still conclude, as you look back on your life, that your precious time was well invested? What area of study and application do you think you can make a lasting difference in for the betterment of humankind? And so forth.

- As you think over career choices, consult the people who know you and your abilities well— your mentors, family, friends, your colleagues, and Providence if you are a person of faith. Ask for frank feedback regarding what they see as your strengths, weaknesses, motivations, talents, passions, and the like. Remember to be humble here regarding their feedback—as Carl Rogers stated, “The facts are friendly”—even when people are not telling you exactly what you want to hear.
- In your discussions with your mentor(s), ask in specific terms about career options, program choices, and the like. This conversation is helped when you have your GPA and GRE scores in hand, which will give him or her a clearer idea about your degree of preparedness and competitiveness for various programs. Second, as you target specific programs, consider ways in which you can network to meet and interact with faculty at your programs of choice. Can you present a poster at a conference and network, or accompany your mentor to a scientific meeting? Can your mentor introduce you in other ways to the faculty there, to get your name in their heads? Third, after identifying specific programs, seek to develop a strategy for some additional fine-tuning. Are there areas of your preparations that will need some additional work in order to make you competitive?
- Consult reference books regarding graduate programs in your area of study to gain a better idea of their faculty, areas of emphasis, and admissions criteria. Here are several sources as of 2006 (look for the most recent editions):
 - Directory of Graduate Programs in Clinical Child and Pediatric Psychology, 3rd Edition
Authors: Kenneth J. Tarnowski (Editor), Susan J. Simonian (Editor)
Publication Date: November 1999
ISBN: 0805835962
 - Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology: 2004/2005 Edition
Authors: Michael A. Sayette, John C. Norcross, Tracy J. Mayne
Publication Date: February 2004
ISBN: 1572309784
 - Graduate Programs in Psychology 2004 (Peterson's Decision Guides: Graduate Programs)
Authors: Petersons
Publication Date: May 2003
ISBN: 076891194X
- As you develop your list of potential schools, keep in mind some basic principles. First, applying to many schools may well increase your likelihood of gaining admission to at least one. However, applying takes time (including that of your letter-writers!), money (sometimes up to \$50 each), and time and money to travel for interviews. Second, it is wise to develop a “three tiered” strategy for applying, consisting of “long shots,” “reasonable shots,” and “sure things.” That is, pick one or several “long shots”—these are your dream programs that *just might* accept you if all of your stars align. However, do not be foolish: To apply *exclusively* to these locations suggests that you do not understand how competitive the applications process actually is. It is usually a smart thing to shoot for some “dream” schools (10 to 30% of applications), to shoot for many “reasonable chance” programs (50 to 80%), and to include a few “sure thing” schools (10 to 30% of your applications) as a backup plan. For someone who is highly motivated to obtain a Ph.D., a “sure thing” school may consist of a terminal master’s program, wherein he or she can gain additional training and experience, or a plan to stay and work another year or two in a research lab as a post-baccalaureate research assistant.

15. Obtain Strong Letters of Recommendation (This advice should be modified for programs that utilize electronic letters of recommendation)

- Most programs will require three letters of recommendation; including a fourth or fifth letter is an option in some programs. When this is possible, including an extra optional letter is generally a plus, if it is a strong letter.
- Try to get letters from at least two professionals who have supervised/mentored your research / teaching assistant / clinical work.
- Letters from professionals who have *known you personally* for an extended period (preferably one year or longer—two is better) carry much more weight. This is one of the most important reasons why getting involved as an RA or TA relatively early in your career is so vitally important—letter writers who have known you for only a short time, and in only one setting, can say only a limited amount about you—often a couple of paragraphs or so. Almost invariably, recommendation forms ask how long, and in what capacities, and how well, the letter writer knows you. Thus, letters of recommendation in which the person endorsing your application can state with confidence that he/she has known you for over a year, in multiple settings (RA, TA, student, etc.), and that he/she knows you “very well,” will carry the most weight.
- Letters from professionals who *know your work*—your reliability, your professionalism, your conscientiousness, your intelligence and talents, your work ethic, and your interpersonal skills—carry more weight. It is a good idea to let her/him see you work in different settings—that is, your work in the lab, in the classroom, in a community setting, etc., to provide them with a “fleshed out” view of who you are. Thus, try to take classes from professors who supervise your research/clinical work. (Taking a class or two from them, doing very well, and being invited by them to serve as a TA will also look very good in their letter of recommendation for you, as well as your vita.)
- Be aware that most graduate programs will ask that your recommender rate you (typically in comparison to senior students in psychology or to first year graduate students) along a variety of dimensions that extend well beyond your classroom behavior. These include academic ability, intellectual ability, research skills/potential, teaching potential, general knowledge, independence/originality, emotional maturity/stability, oral and written expressive skills, ethics/honesty/integrity, leadership, ability to work well with others, judgment/common sense, conscientiousness/reliability/industry, motivation/personal initiative, analytical thinking, social awareness/concern, and clinical skill (where relevant).
- Because your mentor writing your letter of recommendation will be asked to evaluate you across a broad range of abilities/characteristics, seek out a variety of different experiences to develop (and demonstrate!) your well-roundedness and the breadth of your “foundational” preparations. If you are a member of a research lab, try to get involved in as many aspects of research as you can—data entry/correction, literature searches, coding, data analysis, preparing posters and presentations, preparing articles for submission, etc. If you are a member of a teaching lab, volunteer for as many duties as you can—grading assignments, grading tests, posting test scores, analyzing and posting data, evaluating test items, preparing tests, assisting with review sessions, etc. Don’t let pride or anything else get in the way of volunteering for unsexy, low-profile work that is fundamental to the practice of good science (e.g., data entry and correction, coding/rating tapes, conducting literature reviews, etc.). Expose yourself to the entire spectrum of tasks and associated skills, from the ground up. Productive research or teaching labs do not have room for “Prima Donnas” whose sense of entitlement for special treatment or special privileges creates resentment and disruption. Instead, strive to pull your own weight and then some. This will make you a true asset to your lab, and will likely be reflected in a strong letter from a grateful mentor.
- Do not expect that a good letter of recommendation will compensate to a large extent for a low GPA or low GRE scores. For example, a letter writer cannot, if he/she wishes to appear credible, generally assert that you have “outstanding” “top 5th percentile” academic or intellectual potential if you are sporting a 3.5 GPA. At times, a writer can comment that your academic/intellectual

abilities may not be accurately represented by low GRE scores (implying that you had a bad day or are perhaps not a good test-taker). However, GPA in particular is forged over many years and many testing occasions and methods, and therefore will be evaluated quite independently of what your letters of recommendation assert. There are no short cuts to good preparation! Many letter-writers will be as generous in their evaluations of you as your GPA and GRE scores will warrant. However, if you have low scores, they cannot firmly attest to your stupendous intelligence, creativity, work ethic, and academic abilities without calling into question their own credibility as evaluators.

- It is fair to say that most mentors write positive letters of recommendation. However, not all letters are created equal. Many letters are quite generic and convey little unique information that suggests that your mentor really knows you and your abilities on an individual basis (follow the advice below to furnish her with as much “individualizing” information as you can). Moreover, it is not only what your mentor *does* say, but what she *doesn't* say about you, that conveys meaning. For example, a mentor might write that you were regular in your lab attendance and that you contributed meaningfully to lab discussions about various topics. However, the Admissions Committee Members who read her letter will likely notice if she does not comment on your work quality, conscientiousness, work ethic, and reliability. Many letter writers will generally follow the adage that “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all” unless there is a real problem with your behavior. But this does not mean that they will rave about mediocre work quality or performance, having to be repeatedly reminded to get things done, or failing to follow through with assignments until well after the deadline. Such behavior will likely garner *short, generic* letters of recommendation with few strengths highlighted, and a conspicuous absence of comments like “can be trusted to deal in an ethical and professional manner with sensitive issues”—things a letter-writer is likely to say only if you have truly gained her trust. And it is these very comments that make a letter stand out!
- Letters from professors in whose classes you have done well carry comparatively less weight. Two possible exceptions are (a) professors of honors courses, and (b) professors with whom you have taken several classes. In both these cases, the professor is likely to have had an opportunity to become sufficiently familiar with you and your talents that he or she can write about them in depth and with some confidence. Thus, if you choose to invite a professor to write a letter for you, try to take honors courses with him/her, or at least make comments in class, speak to him/her before and after class, and come in to office hours. This will help him or her to know your passions, interests, aspirations, talents, and abilities personally, so that he or she can write something other than a generic form letter of recommendation that lists little else than the grade you earned in the class. (Beware of unremarkable, vanilla letters of recommendation that will “damn you with faint praise”!) A general rule of thumb is, if you passed this professor by in the hallway, would he or she recognize you and greet you by name? If not, work harder to be known, appreciated, and remembered! In general, however, letters written by classroom instructors are not perceived as being as informative or valuable as letters written by mentors for whom you have worked as a TA, RA, or as a staff member in a clinical/community setting.
- Professionals who have ties to the faculty of institutions to which you are applying can give you additional leverage. For example, your mentor may know one or more researchers at a prospective graduate school, and thus be able to make a phone call, introduce you to him/her at a conference, write a “heads-up” e-mail, and so forth. These can be an important “foot in the door.” This is one of the most important reasons why you should strive to attend a conference with your mentor—he or she can help you network by introducing you to other professionals and can make nice comments about you to them (and sometimes right in front of you—a nice way to get some positive strokes as well).
- Professionals who are grateful to you for your contributions to their labs or clinics will more likely “go the extra mile” for you in the application process, such as by writing you a strong letter of recommendation, helping you to network with other professionals, place a phone call for you, etc. I, personally, really go to bat for my “go to guys.”

- Cultivate your relationships with prospective mentors early (at least one year before applying) so that they can keep an eye on you and provide you with opportunities to make you a more competitive candidate. Meet with them individually, express to them what your goals are, and ask them to help you achieve your goals by letting you RA/TA for them, etc. Let them know early on that you will be asking them to write you a letter of recommendation, so that they can observe you, create high-quality preparatory experiences for you, and develop a personal relationship with you.
- Look actively for professionals who are (a) well respected in their fields, and (b) willing to mentor you. This means that they recognize how important your goals are to you, and that they will provide opportunities, resources, encouragement, and the occasional boot in the fanny that you will need to develop into a qualified and competitive candidate.
- Mind your manners! Approach and formally ask your mentor to write you a letter of recommendation—do not simply leave off a pile of material in his mailbox one day with the (seemingly entitled) expectation that he or she will do it. In addition, it is *your* job to go out of your way to make your mentor's job easier, such as by furnishing and pre-addressing the envelopes, stamping them, furnishing the names of the contact person to whom letters should be addressed, and so forth. Remember that working as a TA or RA for course credit constitutes a formal class. As such, your mentor *owes you* only an educational experience and a letter grade on your transcript—not a letter of recommendation. Treat this process like a favor from him to you, and a privilege—for so it is. Writing a good-quality letter of recommendation and filling out a pile of applications to different schools amounts to a late evening at the office or a good chunk out of a weekend for each student for whom a mentor writes a letter. In addition, with a letter of recommendation, your mentor is placing his reputation on the line on your behalf. The respect of one's peers is a highly valued commodity in scientific circles and is not a thing that should be taken lightly. Both of you are signing your names to an implicit contract—he is staking his reputation on the assertion that you will actually perform in graduate school in accordance with his predictions and assurances, and you are obligating yourself to live up to or exceed those expectations. As you approach your mentor about writing a letter, make sure you comport yourself in a manner that reflects your understanding and appreciation of what you are asking him to do on your behalf.
- In general, strive to make your mentor's job of writing letters as easy as possible. *Furnish him/her with the following when you drop off your application materials in a lovely, clearly labeled, and well-organized packet.* (These materials should function as a convenient template for writing your letters, and will jog his/her memory about how truly wonderful, accomplished, and invaluable you are. *Drop your entire application materials packet in hard copy*, and not in the form of an email that will be quickly lost and forgotten in the 50+ emails he/she receives each day.) It is imperative that you understand that your mentor will make a little time for your letter, sit down, rub her hands together, pick up your clearly-labeled packet of materials, and expect *everything* to be contained therein, in a lovely, well-organized format. She will want to be able to dump its contents onto her desk, sort them, quickly read over your vita, transcript, GRE scores, letter of intent, and the details of all that you have done in her lab and classes, be struck with a zephyr of inspiration from his or her writing muses, and promptly start writing a letter of recommendation. Thus, sloppily organized materials, incomplete materials, sending “supplementary” information (unless absolutely necessary) in multiple emails or shoving it under her door, and so forth, should be avoided, given that it sabotages this process and because supplementary materials may well get lost in the voluminous emails or piles of paper that clutter her computer and office. Bend over backwards to make things convenient and easy for your mentor. Do not force her to remind you to send any letter-writing materials she has asked for—doing so may lower her perception of your ability to “stay on top of things” and organize yourself at exactly the time you want that perception to be at its most favorable.
Include the following in your list:
 - Total length of time and dates he or she has known you, and in what capacities (student? RA? TA? Advisee on a senior honor's thesis? Etc.). Be specific here—when did you take a class

from this professor? When did you join his/her research lab?

- A description of all coursework you completed with him/her (classes taken, semester/year taken, grade earned, any special activities undertaken, etc.)
- Your vita
- Your academic transcript (an informal version “given to student” or printed off the internet will suffice, provided it is exactly similar to the version that the institutions will receive). *Use a highlighter to highlight all courses (classes, teaching assistantship credits, research assistantship credits, independent readings, etc.) that you took from your letter writer.*
- Your statement of intent, supplemented if needed by a clear description of your professional plans and aspirations
- Overall GPA, major GPA, last 60 semester hours GPA (highlight these in your transcripts)
- GRE scores (accompany this with a description of extenuating circumstances if you believe that these scores were too low). *Provide the exact scores obtained and the percentile rankings of each score*, if possible. If you have just taken the GRE and are waiting for your scores to arrive, inform your letter-writers to that effect and then follow through by relaying the information on to them as soon as you receive it—don’t forget and make them remind you!
- Any other scores (TOEFL, etc.) and percentile rankings if available.
- A listing of others who are writing letters for you, based on what types of experiences (e.g., Randy Sternberg, Ph.D., based on my testing for him at the State Prison with sex offenders)
- A detailed, exhaustive listing of all activities conducted as his/her TA or RA. These should include:
 - Dates/duration of involvement (beginning time, end time, total length)
 - All activities/accomplishments carried out in the lab
 - Any publications, presentations, or other formal recognition
 - Any service activities conducted through the lab (e.g., community presentations, etc.)
- A factual reminder of any nice things he or she has said to you or about you, your abilities, and your performance as a TA, RA, or student (e.g., “you got the highest score on my final”)
- Stamped pre-addressed envelopes (stamp the ones that he should send directly, and place only your name and the institution to which you are applying on the envelopes that should be returned to you)
- A table giving a breakdown of which universities, and which courses of study, you are applying to. The table should look something like this:

University/ Program	Name/Title of the Program (be specific! This will help your letter writers to address their letters properly!)	When are Letters Due?	Where Should the Letter Be Sent?
UCLA	Ph.D., clinical psychology (addressed to Director of Admissions, Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program)	December 31 st	To them (envelope and stamps included)
USC	Ph.D., family therapy (addressed to Director of Admissions, Family Therapy Doctoral Program)	January 15 th	To them (envelope and stamps included)
University of North Texas	M.A., marriage and family therapy (addressed to Director of Admissions, Master’s Program in Marriage and Family Therapy)	Jan 15 th	To them (submitted electronically—they will contact you by email)
University of Montana	M.S. in general psychology (addressed to Director of Admissions, Master’s Program in General Psychology)	January 1 st	To me (envelope and stamps included); I need to pick this up from you no later than December 20 th .

- Please remember that it is a professional (but too often forgotten) courtesy to write to your letter writers to inform them about what happened with your application and to thank them for their assistance. They care about you and will wonder what became of you. This is true even if you did not make it into or accept an offer from any program—they can console you, help you figure out how to prepare to be a stronger candidate next year or come up with a different life plan, and you may ask them for a letter in the future. Your mentors can also be of assistance if you are accepted at multiple programs and facing the dilemma of deciding which program to enter. In general, stay in touch with your undergraduate mentors over the years. They can generate opportunities for publishing papers, help you network, serve as friends, guides, and cheerleaders, and even provide a free hotel room to crash during annual scientific conferences.

16. Write (and Re-Write) Your Letter of Intent

- Your letter of intent is probably the portion of your application materials that the Admissions Committee will read most closely, so work on it well in advance. Invite your mentor and others to read and provide constructive feedback. The most impressive letters of intent often go through between 4-10 drafts before they are polished and ready to submit.
- Keep your letter brief (about 2 pages, sometimes longer) and *focused*.
- Your letter of intent, above all else, should portray your professional interests and goals. Although these need not sound as “mature” and solidified as a statement that a graduating Ph.D. might write in applying for a post-doctoral fellowship, your letter should nevertheless portray a clear picture of your interests as they currently exist, along with a sense of passion, motivation, and clear purpose. In light of this observation, remember that a primary purpose of doing research as an undergraduate is to help you to refine and clarify your interests. Your goal is to sound mature enough in your letter of intent that an admissions committee can judge whether your accomplishments, preparations, interests, and aspirations are a good fit for their program, and if so, which advisor they should assign you to work with.
- Here is an example of a statement of intent that did not impress our Admissions Committee: “I want to come to (School X) because I want to study the brain. I’ve been studying the brain in Dr. (Y’s) lab for 8 months and I’ve become fascinated by the brain and how it works. It just seems so complex and intricate. Everything about it is interesting to me. I hope to attend your program because you have a strong brain research program.” Although enthusiastic, such statements fail to convey a clear sense of your specific areas of interest and of the questions and problems that you hope to work on while in graduate school. We as professors are delighted to hear such bubbly, undirected, raw enthusiasm in undergraduate students who ask to *join* our research labs, but we much less impressed when we hear the same unrefined, vague, directionless, and otherwise professionally immature expressions from graduate school applicants who are *leaving* their undergraduate mentored relationships.
- If you have participated in an internship/externship or as a TA, then “sell” this experience in your letter of intent in order to highlight yourself as a motivated, diligent, and well-rounded candidate.
- If you have a number of different work-related experiences, then present them in a way that will emphasize your continuing efforts to prepare yourself, and how these experiences have “added up” to clarify and refine your professional interests. For example, describe your experiences in chronological order, discussing your job duties and responsibilities (to highlight the development of skills and understanding) and the ways in which these experiences have helped you to develop your own professional interests, goals, knowledge, and professional skills. Describe how each significant experience shaped your career path and helped you to mature and develop as a person. In particular, do not simply list what you did there, or what the lab produced in terms of work products—that is boring and only moderately informative. Instead, discuss *how this experience has influenced your own professional preparations, goals, motivation, interests, and ambitions*. Remember that your purpose in describing your lab activities is not simply to detail that you helped me as your mentor, but rather to draw attention to the skills, knowledge, values, goals, interests, and character attributes that participation has helped you to develop and refine.

Moreover, do not settle for passionate and enthusiastic descriptions of topic areas alone (e.g., “I am fascinated by the brain and really want to study it.”) Spend some quality time and space on describing particular research questions and problems that you want to study and address in graduate school and as a professional (e.g., why do some youth resist the effects of severe stress, some recovery quickly following stress exposure, and some exhibit severe persisting distress?)

- Do not call attention to standard undergraduate courses you have taken as convincing evidence that you are prepared for the rigors of graduate school (e.g., “I completed and got A’s in statistics, methods, and measurement courses”). Committees are most impressed by outside preparation (RAships, TAs, externships/internships) or by your taking *advanced* courses in psychology or related fields, (e.g., minoring in statistics, completing an honors thesis, taking an SPSS course, taking graduate level psychology courses, etc.)
- Keep the language in your letter of intent formal. Such phrasings as “getting things ready for journal articles” do not sound very professional and will not likely impress your readers.
- If you are applying to a local school, make a compelling case for yourself. Do not cite how wonderful it is here, how you feel comfortable with the environment, or how convenient it would be if you could be accepted given how you are already “settled in,” or having a romantic relationship as strong evidence for why you belong here. Talk about how the school will help you towards your goal of learning what you want to learn, acquiring skills, knowledge, and values that will help you to tackle the problems you want to tackle. Name names—who would you want to work with here, and on which problems? How do you think you could contribute to their research agendas, and to the quality of the learning environment here?
- Last, do not attempt to convince your readers about the momentous impact that your entry into the field will bring about. Such language as mentioning that you will “contribute tremendously to the field” and that you will be “able to make a great impact in those areas since I am passionate about them” should be avoided. Such enthusiastic assertions, if they are to be said, (and they are said only rarely) should be recounted *only* by one’s letter-writers. Keep your self-descriptions primarily on the descriptive level by describing your interests, preparations, goals, activities, and plans for graduate school. As the saying goes, “You’re a poet only when *someone else* says you’re a poet.”

17. Target Whom You Want to Work With at Each School to Which You Apply

- Graduate school applications often require you to identify specific faculty members with whom you are interested in working. Thus, familiarize yourself with the work and interests of potential mentors at each school to which you apply. You can do this in a variety of ways. These include (a) meeting/networking with them at professional conferences (this is why presenting posters as a student is such a great idea), (b) volunteering to conduct a literature search in their area of interest as part of your role in a research lab, (c) conducting your own independent literature search of their work (try to read at least two to four of their recent publications if you are serious about working with them), and (d) communicating with them directly via email or phone (ask your mentor for advice on whether and how to get in touch with them).
- A common mistake made by applicants is to read a few brochures about a program to which they are applying and/or to look up the Department’s website with its (often outdated) little mini-descriptions of professor’s areas of professional interest. Our clinical psychology area admissions committee often receives letters of intent from students who are asking to work with professors who have retired or taken a position at another institution. We also receive letters of intent expressing interest in working with us in areas in which we have not conducted research or published in many years. Unfortunately, although they brim with enthusiasm, such statements come across as superficial, uninformed, and reflective of someone who has not done their homework.

18. Prepare for Your Applicant Interview

Last, if you prepare well, chances are excellent that you will be invited to interview with one or more

programs at which you have applied. Before arriving at your applicant interviews, spend some time formulating thoughtful, sincere responses to questions that you will likely be asked. These include¹:

- Please tell me a little about yourself as a person, and why you wish to be a psychologist.
- What attributes do you have that you believe will make you a successful psychologist?
- Why have you chosen to apply to *our* program? How well, and in what ways, does our program match up with your interests? How will we help you prepare yourself to do what you hope to accomplish professionally?
- What strengths and skills do you possess that you believe will significantly contribute to the quality of the learning environment here?
- What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses? What are your plans for addressing your weaknesses, before you come and in graduate school?
- Have you ever had personal therapy? If yes, what sort of issues did you work on? If no, why not?
- What are your current research interests? Tell me about your research projects/honors thesis. How do you plan to integrate them, if at all, with what you hope to do here in this program? (It is wise to bring materials to illustrate your work as a research assistant—these can be articles in which you are acknowledged or share authorship, poster presentations, coding manuals, subject data protocols with identifying information removed, and the like. This will concretely illustrate what you have been doing and can often get a good conversation going.)
- Which of our faculty members do you think you would work with if you were to come? What about his/her work most interests you, and why?
- Members of our faculty have active research labs and thus have a “selfish” interest in recruiting students to keep our work moving forward. What qualifications do you have that would allow you to “hit the ground running” in your mentor’s research lab (e.g., people skills, organizational skills, statistical/methodological skills, literature review skills, writing skills, software skills, conscientiousness, etc.)?
- What is your theoretical orientation, and why? Can you tell me about a recent clinical encounter? How did you conceptualize or treat your last client?
- Where else have you applied or interviewed?
- If you obtain the type of training you are hoping for, what are your future professional plans and goals? For example, 10 years from now, which settings do you see yourself working in? Which populations would you like to be working with? Which questions or problems would you like to be working on?
- Imagine you receive one million dollars to conduct your “dream” study. What question or problem would you like to focus on? Describe your method and design. What are your hypotheses? What are your independent and dependent variables? What is the study’s relevance and what questions or social problems would it help to address?
- What topics or questions involving psychology do you think about when no one has asked you to or handed out as an assignment. That is, things you think about on your own? What things are you most passionate about? What vexing problems do you want to figure out a solution to, or a better way of accomplishing?
- What are your hobbies, avocations, favorite books, and interests outside of psychology? How would you keep your sanity, health, and productivity going during our long and rigorous program?
- What questions do you have for me regarding our program or the opportunities that are available here? (It is always good to have one or more questions prepared for your interviewers, such as “What research opportunities are available here?” “Can you describe any of your recent projects?” “Do students receive financial support for attending professional conferences?” “Can students submit publications as a graduation requirement in place of a formal thesis or dissertation?” etc.)

19. Graciously Pass it On

As a post-script to this advice, let me offer this: No matter how things turn out, remember to be gracious towards your fellow applicants as you go on the “interview circuit”. Sincerely congratulate

your peers who succeed. But especially remember to thank your mentors. Remember that many of them go the extra mile many times over for their students, with little thanks or recognition for their efforts. Your thanks may be the only thanks they ever receive; it will certainly be the thanks that matters most. Keep in touch with your mentors over the years. Keep them apprised of your activities and of your life (I have a scrapbook of thank you notes and “developmental transition update” emails from my former students that I treasure). This will not only be an expression of gratitude, but may also pay off in other ways as you call on them in the future to write letters of recommendations, collaborate on projects, help you celebrate your wedding, commiserate with you in your challenges and setbacks, give you wise advice, and create opportunities to professionally network. Remember the real reasons behind why they chose to invest in you, and pass that love, dedication, and passion for learning on to your clients, your students, and especially to the rising and aspiring generation. Mentoring is a gift that one repays forwards. My life experience has taught me that mentoring, even more than teaching alone, is the noblest of professions. Try it for yourself and see.

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¹Adapted from Norcross, J. C., Sayette, M. A., & Mayne, T. J. (2002). *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology: 2002/2003 Edition*. New York: Guilford. ISSN 1086-2099.

Appendix A: The Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal

Hi everyone—I wanted to let you know that we have launched the Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal (<http://www.psychgrad.org>) and it is designed to be of assistance to students who are applying to graduate programs. I have included a brief description of the Portal below and I hope that you will take a look at it. If you have undergraduates who are applying to graduate school in psychology you may want to let them know about it.

Abstract

Applying to graduate school in psychology can be an intimidating process. Many obstacles must be overcome, such as applying to a program appropriate to the specific applicant, getting good GRE scores, submitting a clear and well-written statement of purpose, and obtaining letters of recommendation, to name just a few. Much information is available to assist applicants in these tasks, but finding this information can be problematic even for experienced internet users. The goal of this project is to create a clearing house of information on applying to graduate school in psychology, and to make this knowledge easily accessible on a single website. This website, called the Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal, contains targeted links to other webpages with valuable information, book recommendations on the application process, polls to improve the site, site-unique advice on graduate programs, a message board to exchange information and experiences, and other information relevant to the application process.

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