

## So You're Applying to Graduate School...

Here's some advice that I WISH someone would have shared with me when I was going through this process:

### DO:

- **Find a program that will suit your needs.** Do you want a thesis-track program? Do you want an internship experience? Will you need an assistantship to make it feasible? Are assistantships guaranteed or do you have to apply for one? What kind of stipends or benefits does each assistantship offer? If it's a PhD program, what do their internship placement rates look like in the past couple years? Are there resources (hospitals, clinics, etc.) in the institution's community you can utilize? Do you want a program more research-focused? More client-focused? A mix of both? Once you know what level of degree you're after (Terminal MA, MA/PhD, PsyD, etc.) and what area of Psychology you'd like to go into (Social, Clinical, Counseling, Experimental, Industrial Organizational, Community, etc.), you'll still have a lot of work to do.
- **Talk to other graduate students before applying.** All grad students have gone through the application process before. Ask what their tips are. If you can find a current student or recent graduate in the university's program you're interested in, even better!
- **Research an advisor.** Graduate students will often work with a research advisor. THIS PERSON DOES NOT HAVE TO BE IN YOUR PROGRAM'S FACULTY. Program advisors and research advisors are different. It does help if your research advisor is a member of your program's faculty or has a knowledge of your program's requirements, though. You want the best fit for you. This is a HUGE part of being accepted to a graduate program. If there isn't a faculty member in that department in your area of interest, regardless of how awesome you may be, you still may be passed over for a lack of fit.
- **Be familiar with the program's faculty.** Who will be teaching your classes? What have they contributed to their respective fields? How do their contributions and expertise set this program apart? How can they be resources to you? A program's faculty can say a lot about the quality of the program itself.
- **Start with the LITERATURE.** Some students make the mistake of applying to a graduate program without having found an advisor willing to accept them to their lab and they'll wait until they're on campus to start the search. If you know what kind of research you're interested in doing, dive into the literature FIRST before even looking at programs. Who's researched what you want to research? What institution are they working at? Does the institution have a program that suits your needs? Are they taking on graduate students? (this usually involves an email, although it's sometimes listed on their faculty bio.)
- **Make first contact.** Email prospective advisors EARLY in the fall (August isn't too early if your Application Deadline is December 1!) to clarify that they're taking a student(s). Once you have those reassurances, make contact again a month or two before your deadline and express your interest in working with them. Let them know that you know

something about their work AND the program you're applying to. You want your name to remain somewhat salient in their mind when your application comes across their desk.

- **Contact your References EARLY.** You should have an idea of who you want to write a letter of reference for you at the beginning of the fall semester. It's not a bad plan to ask a couple months before your deadline for a letter. HOWEVER, you will need to know what programs you're applying to before they can write a good letter for you.
- **Make it as easy for your References as possible.** When you ask someone to write a letter for you, they're doing you the favor so you want them to do as little work as possible. Find out what each one will require from you- Resume, Personal Statement, a list of the classes you took from them, descriptions of your contributions to their labs, a list of the programs you're applying to, instructions for where to send their letters etc. If your program requires that they send a hard copy to the school, provide them with a pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelope. Put all of those materials in a folder with your name on it (the brighter the folder, the better) and follow up to make sure they've received it. Follow up to make sure they've submitted their reference letters at least a couple weeks before your deadline so in case they've forgotten, they have a little bit of time left.

#### **DON'T:**

- **Start too late.** Applying to grad school is like having a part time job. Just researching programs and schools can take hours out of your week. The summer before your senior year is the best time to start this process because your course-load is likely minimal. If you're thinking of doing your own research in grad school, what really makes this process easier is having an idea of what area you'd like to go into by the end of your junior year. This makes researching professors and programs a lot easier in the summer.
- **Neglect your resources.** Your current and past professors and advisors are treasure-troves of information. They will have advice for how to contact prospective advisors, how to prepare for interviews and on what they look for when they're taking on graduate students.
- **Be unorganized.** Once you have a list of the programs you want to apply to, MAKE A SPREADSHEET. Make a system that will allow you to keep track of the progress you've made on each application. You want to keep track of basic information: School, Faculty of Interest, Program & Program Type, Deadlines, etc. You also want to keep track of Application Fees, Where/When to Send Transcripts, A CHECKLIST TO MAKE SURE YOU SENT ALL YOUR TRANSCRIPTS, Recommenders for Each Program, Reference Letter Submission Dates, and anything else you think is important.
- **Do a phone interview, if it's feasible.** If you are invited to interview for a program, try to go in person. If you have to do a phone or skype interview due to time or money, so be it. Going in person allows you to get familiar with the campus and campus community, the faculty, your research advisor and/or their lab, and the resources offered to graduate students at that institution. Plus, it also makes a bit more of a lasting impression.

- **Go without questions.** You know at job interviews where they ask if you have any questions? You better have questions.
- **Forget the Thank You's!** Once you've completed your interviews, go the extra mile and send either thank you cards or thank you emails, whatever seems appropriate. Be appreciative. Interviewers likely had to read through way too many applications just like yours and interviewed way too many other applicants just like you. Find an extra way to stand out, even if it's after the fact.

#### **What you won't know until you've made it...**

- **Classes are not as important as you think.** You've been taught that your grades are the most important thing. They'll help get you into college, and then into graduate school, but after that they're not your top priority. Your top priority is your research and your internship or clinical hours. A well-rounded student is more appealing than one who only focuses on his/her classes. As a professor once told me, "If you're getting all A's by the end of your first year, you're doing something wrong."
- **The work-load is significantly larger.** This one may have been obvious, but nothing can really prepare you for the high expectations placed on you by your graduate professors. Classes are longer, they typically meet once a week, and you're essentially responsible for everything listed on the syllabus and then some.
- **Your professors may treat you differently.** Don't be surprised if your professors ask or allow you to call them by their first name. As a graduate student you may find that you're often more of a "junior-colleague" than you are a student at times.
- **You still have to make an effort to get to know faculty.** Just because you're in a small cohort (usually) and there are less names for your professors to memorize, you could only see a professor *in class* once a week for one semester for a grand total of 12 times. You still have to go to office hours, ask questions in and outside of class, and make professional connections in order to get to really know your instructors and more importantly, for them to get to know you.