Lesson 19:
Grad School—Some People Never Learn

Should You Go to Grad School?
A Wee Test

☐ I am a compulsive neurotic.
☐ I like my imagination crushed into dust.
☐ I enjoy being a professor's slave.
☐ My idea of a good time is using jargon and citing authorities.
☐ I feel a deep need to continue the process of avoiding life.

Meet the Bitterest Person in the World
The Grad School Dropout

Spent 4 long years living wretchedly
Worked late into the night
Repressed all anger
Had a series of low-paying, depressing jobs
Finally gave up after being unable to finish a thesis
Currently unable to enjoy anything

The 5 Secrets of Grad School Success

1. Do not annoy the professor.
2. Be consistently mediocre.
3. Avoid anything smacking of originality.
4. Do exactly what you are told.
5. Stop reading this cartoon right now and get back to work.

The Simple Way to Avoid the Stomach-Churning Agony of Having to Finish Your Thesis

Read another book.
Repeat when necessary.

Will Your Research Make the World a Better Place?

Congratulations!! You did it!!! You finally finished your dissertation!!!

Eh? Speak up, Sonny.
THIS IS IMPORTANT...

• Getting into a doctoral program in any subfield of psychology ranges from extremely difficult (e.g., 7%) to challenging (e.g., 21%)

• In recent years, only 7-14% of all applicants to the six most sought after PhD subfield programs in psychology (i.e., clinical, cognitive, counseling, developmental, neuroscience, and social) are accepted.¹

• **On the bright side:** Even though there are many more applicants than graduate student positions annually in the US, **there are MANY things you can do to increase your chances of success!**

The BRIGHT SIDE:

• **YOU** have the RESOURCES at UNT to assist you in pursuing your goals!
  
  • One-on-one academic advising
  • High-quality classes for a solid foundation in psychology
  • Honors classes to prepare you for graduate school
  • A wide diversity of classes to meet your needs
  • Active research labs to provide research experience
  • Faculty mentors in nearly every sub-discipline
  • An *Honors Thesis* option with direct mentoring from a faculty member
The BRIGHT SIDE:

• YOU have the RESOURCES at UNT to assist you in pursuing your goals!
  • An active, student-led Psi Chi organization
  • Opportunities for leadership positions in the Psychology Department and Psi Chi
  • Opportunities to attend local and regional conferences with other department members
  • Support in applying for local, regional, and national awards, scholarships, and honors
  • The possibility to co-author conference posters & presentations
Nearly all of the ways you can prepare yourself to become a highly competitive applicant are within your control:

* Access reliable information, such as that in this presentation/document

* Work hard and focus on immediate goals and get organized about longer-term goals

* Enjoy yourself – if you are not liking most of the information or tasks you need to do to prepare for a doctorate in psychology, perhaps that vocation is not for you!
Nearly all of the ways you can prepare yourself to become a highly competitive applicant are within your control:

*Persist! Planning 8-12 years ahead will feel like a very long plan for a person who is 18-24 years old, but, when you achieve your dream and look back, the time and energy you spent will feel more than worth it
During the 1st Semester that you Decide to Pursue a Career in Psychology...

- Meet with one of the undergraduate psychology advisor (their office is on the 3rd floor of Terrill Hall—just turn right {east} after climbing to the 3rd floor on the Sycamore{south}-side of Terrill Hall) to understand the requirements and complete a degree plan form.

- Maintain a high GPA (i.e., >= 3.7) {Nearly all A’s with an occasional B}

- Aim for a perfect GPA in psychology (i.e., all A’s, a 4.0)
During the 1st through 3rd Semesters that you are pursuing a Career in Psychology...

- Finish your core psychology classes (Psyc 1630, 1650, 2317 & 2950); double-check with an Undergrad Advisor because the requirements sometimes change.

- Work on your completing the core classes required by UNT and the Department of Psychology.

- Go to office hours in psychology classes! Even if you are making an “A” you want profs to know your face and remember you. Ask questions during class. These are the people who could write you a letter of recommendation, but they have to know who you are!
After your 3rd Semester of pursuing a Career in Psychology...

• Join PSI CHI as soon as you are eligible (3 semesters of coursework, 9 psychology hours, >= 3.0 overall GPA and >= 3.0 psych GPA)

• Begin working on your upper level psychology courses

• If you are unsure of the graduate specialty in psychology you wish to pursue, consider taking social, developmental, personality, abnormal, physiological, learning, and perception and cognition, as these are considered ‘foundational’ for many graduate programs

• If you know the subspecialty to which you are leaning, speak directly with a UNT professor with a PhD in that area for advice on course to take as well as other activities and experiences needed to become an excellent applicant for graduate school in that subspecialty.
During your “Junior Year” (when you have at least 3 or 4 more semesters at UNT)

• If you haven’t already, join a research team.

• Volunteer as a paraprofessional

• Begin studying for the GRE

• Make a list of schools you want to apply to for each potential degree (see APA’s Graduate Study in Psychology, Insider’s Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical or Counseling Psychology or equivalent)

• Continue making and maintaining relationships with professors, especially if you are doing research with them.
• ASAP - Decide which research team you want to join and contact professor about credit (Special Problems - Psyc 4900). Also, enroll in a class taught by that professor and try to get an “A” in the class.

• Work hard in your lab. Not only are you gaining valuable experience, but this will go on your resume and the professor will likely write one of your letters of recommendation.

• Try to present a poster at a conference such as APA or APS, even if you aren’t first author.
Volunteer

- Suicide and Crisis Center of Dallas
  214.824.7020
- Denton County MHMR
  940.565.5282
- Denton County Friends of the Family
  940.387.5131 x231
- University Behavioral Health
  940.320.8100
- Irving Family Advocacy Center
  972.721.6555

*When calling, please ask to speak to the volunteer coordinator*
Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

- Verbal, quantitative, and analytic writing sections
- Psychology section (Before you take the Subject test, make sure you need to take it!)
- Take a class through a community college, Princeton, Kaplan, etc.
- Get a practice book
- Make flash cards
- Study! Study! Study!
7 Ways to Raise Your Score On The GRE

1. **Study for it.** Winging the GRE is a terrible waste of time, money, and self-esteem.

2. **Learn the directions for each section of the GRE ahead of time.** Because of the adaptive nature of this computerized test, the **first five questions in each section are the most important** for that section's score.

3. On the GRE-General, always guess rather than trying to find a way to skip a question. There is always a chance that you will guess right.

4. **Find and study high-frequency word lists.**

5. **In the reading comprehension section, read for structure, not details.**

6. **If a problem-solving math question stumps you, work backwards from the answers.**

7. **If you encounter logical reasoning questions, start by finding the conclusion and work backward while examining the premises.**
What are the differences in the degrees?

• Masters (MA or MS)
  • Master's degree is generally 2 years. According to the APA, only about 1/3 of those with a Master's degree in psychology find work in the field. Generally, work with a Master’s degree is not as highly paid as work with a Ph.D. degree. People with Master’s degrees work in a variety of settings. Many conduct research, work in health settings, businesses, and schools. Many people with Master's degrees and state licenses work as therapists in community clinics and medical settings, or as counselors, supervisors, and administrators of residential treatment facilities. Some work under the direction of a Doctoral psychologist, especially in clinical, counseling, and school settings, where they may be involved in testing and assessment.

• Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD)
  • PhD programs invest a lot in their students to train them as competent practitioners and researchers, so they expect you to be interested in research. PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) is the traditional psychology degree which places an equal emphasis on research and clinical training. PhD programs are offered by traditional universities and are highly competitive, most programs select only 6-8 students per year.

• Doctorate of Psychology (PsyD)
  • The PsyD is less research-oriented than the PhD. Some PsyD programs do not require a dissertation. If you are interested strictly in being a practicing psychologist and have no interest in teaching and research, you should seriously consider the PsyD. PsyD programs are often less selective than PhD programs.
What types of Programs are there?

- Clinical
- Counseling
- Health
- Experimental
- Industrial/Organizational
- Developmental
- Behavioral Analysis
- Child psychology
- Social
- Cognitive
- Educational
- Forensic
- Marriage and Family
- Learning
- Neuropsychology
- Neuroscience
- Pediatric
- School

AND THE LIST GOES ON . . .

- Choose what interests you and what you would be happy working in possibly for the next 20+ years.
- Luckily, psychology areas overlap a lot, so if you are trained in one specialty, you can *sometimes* switch specialties later on with more education and experience in the new specialty.
Summer before Senior Year

- **Take the GRE.** This allows you to take it again if you need to, giving you enough time to get your scores sent to your schools.

- Decide which professors you are going to ask for letters of recommendation and ask them if they would be willing and able to write a good letter for you. Make sure to **do this as early as possible** in order to give the professor enough time to put together a well-written letter.

- Make a final decision on which degree you want to pursue, what schools you are going to apply to, and identify potential mentors/advisors.

- Continue doing research.

- Increase your GPA and make sure you do well in ALL of your psychology courses.

- Begin writing your personal statement.

- Begin saving money for travel expenses to interviews.
Letters of Recommendation

• Be careful of who you select. You want someone who knows you fairly well and you know will write you a strong letter of recommendation. Get the most prestigious faculty you can to write your letters. Psychology faculty are typically preferred, but you can ask other instructors.

• It is best to ask professors for letters in person during their office hours.

• Often times graduate students write the letter and the professor signs them – so be nice to your graduate students!

• Give the professors writing your letters very brief and clear instructions.

• Tell your professors that your deadlines are earlier than they really are and then give them what they need in an organized and timely way.

• Provide EVERYTHING the professor/graduate student will need:
  • A list of all the schools and programs you are applying to
  • Personal Statement
  • Resume
  • Any additional information they ask for or you think important
    • Copy of your transcripts (highlight the class you took with them)
    • A copy of a paper where they gave you very complimentary comments
Picking a Mentor/Advisor

• Pick a mentor/advisor from each school you are applying to, read their publications, and then make them think you worship them (j/k)!

• If you're interested in working with a particular faculty member in graduate school, look up that professor's articles and familiarize yourself with what that professor does.

• Visit their program website and lab website

• Send them each an email saying which of their recent articles you’ve read (2 or 3 is plenty), what interests you about their work, and whether they will be taking on any new students next year.

• From that point forward, play it by ear. Sometimes professors right back and ask you to stay in touch and tell them a little bit more about yourself. Other times, they just politely answer your question and leave it at that. Above all, respect professors' limited time, and only write them repeated emails if they have encouraged you to do so.
Personal Statement

• Plan on spending a **lot** of time on this essay. This will probably be the most difficult 1-2 page essay you've ever written.

• You want to stand out, but you don’t want it to be too long or overly personal.

• *Never* say “I want to get into psychology because I like to help people”

• Let others read over it – parents, graduate students, professors, friends, etc.

• Make it at least somewhat personal to each school. You can have a generic outline, but **make it individual to every school**.
What a Personal Statement May Look Like

1. Your beginning can be original, but don't make it ridiculous.

2. Your first paragraph might address any themes you can identify in your life that have pointed you toward your interests in psychology. (Caution: talking about your own mental health problems is almost never a good idea.)

3. College experiences that are relevant to your intended career.

4. Talk about your research experience, especially if you're applying to a PhD program. Mention the kind of responsibilities you had, who you worked for, what you learned through this experience, etc.

5. Talk about how you think your past research (or work) experience is specifically relevant to the field you are interested in for graduate school.

6. Comment on your GPA or GRE scores if there is a genuine reason they do not reflect your ability.

7. Then talk about your goals in graduate school and what you hope to learn and gain while you're there. Express confidence in your ability to be successful in graduate school, but be careful not to sound egotistical.

8. Why the program you're applying to is a good choice for your career goals (fit).
Senior Year

• Most PhD applications are due November-December and Masters programs are due shortly after that, so make sure EVERYTHING is turned in on time. Call the schools to verify this.

• Keep doing research. You don’t want to have to explain in your interview why you suddenly just stopped doing research.

• Keep doing well in your classes. They may find out if you blow them off and then deny you acceptance.

• Make plans to go on any interviews that you are invited to (January through March). This may require saving up money well in advance for any needed traveling.

• You will usually be notified of your acceptance or rejection before April 15th. You must accept or reject an offer, in writing, by or on April 15th.
Information on Accreditation

• Doctoral graduate programs in:
  • Clinical
  • Counseling,
  • School psychology, and
  • Other developed practice areas

• Accreditation provides public notification that an institution or program meets standards of quality set forth by an accrediting agency.

• If you wish to pursue licensure, it is important to know that some states require that students have a degree from an APA-accredited program. You should check with the licensing body in the state(s) in which you intend to practice (visit the ASPPB website at www.asppb.org).

• In addition, some agencies of the federal government only hire graduates of APA-accredited programs. If you wish to work for such an agency, please contact them directly for further information on hiring requirements.
Research versus Practice?

• Are you primarily interested in becoming a practitioner and wish to have only minimal research training? (maybe consider a Psy. D.)

• Are you interested in a program that is primarily research oriented? (PhD in multiple fields, i.e., experimental)

• There are programs who also do both, such as UNT’s counseling, clinical and clinical health programs. This allows you to get extensive training before making any life altering decisions.
• How long does graduate school take? – Depends: most Masters take about 2-3 years and Ph.D. takes typically between 5-8 years

• How expensive is it?
  • Private vs. Public university
  • PhD vs. PsyD vs. Master’s
  • How long it takes you to complete the requirements
  • Cost of living in various geographic area

• Can I get in?
  • Here are some very general guidelines about grades: all else being excellent, students who have above a 3.6 can expect to be admitted to some PsyD or PhD programs; students who have a 3.0-3.3 can expect to be admitted to some very respectable Masters programs and perhaps some PsyD programs; students who have a GPA 2.8 can expect to be admitted to some Masters programs if their more recent grades are higher.
Important Websites/Books

• [www.apa.org/students](http://www.apa.org/students)
• [https://accreditation.apa.org/accredited-programs](http://https://accreditation.apa.org/accredited-programs)
• [https://www.gradschools.com/programs/psychology](http://https://www.gradschools.com/programs/psychology)
• [www.ets.org/gre](http://www.ets.org/gre)
• The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission: Psychology, Counseling, and Related Professions by Patricia Keith-Spiegel & Michael W. Wiederman