

Belmont University **Psychology Department**

PsychSource #4

Applying to Graduate School: Some Strategies and a Timeline

1. Complete required courses in Statistics, and the two Research Methods by the end of your sophomore or junior year. Graduate schools will look especially closely at your grades in these courses, so you will want to do very well. Carrying out an independent research project under the supervision of a faculty member before your senior year is also an excellent idea. Presenting your research at the Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS) and other professional meetings will greatly enhance your chances for graduate admission.

In planning your course schedule, keep in mind that you will want to have completed Statistics and the two Research Methods courses by the end of your sophomore or junior year. These courses will help you increase your analytical reasoning abilities. The History and Systems course is also a very good choice if you are to do well on the psychology section of the Graduate Record Exam (which some schools may require you to take). Remember that graduate schools will be evaluating your transcripts in January and February of your senior year so they won't know about your work in the Spring semester.

2. Plan to take one or more courses from the professors from whom you will want recommendations by the end of the Fall semester of your senior year. Also, take time to talk with them outside of class so they can get to know you. This will ensure that they will know you and be familiar with your work before they write letters (typically in January). You will usually need letters of recommendations from three faculty members. (See PsychSource #6 - Letters of Recommendation.)

3. Read about selected occupations in the Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) published every two years by the U.S. Department Labor Statistics. This book is a comprehensive guide to occupations. It includes job descriptions, education and training requirements, advancement possibilities, salaries, and employment outlooks for 250 occupations .

Go to the index at the back of the book and look up the page references for the occupations you are interested in--e.g., psychologist, social worker, counselor. Note the titles of related jobs listed at the end of each occupational description, find these job titles in the index, and then read about them. Reading the OOH can give you lots of information about a wide range of jobs in a short time with relatively little expenditure of effort. This experience will help you clarify your career interests and inform you about the graduate educational requirements necessary for specific careers.

4. Do some serious reflection on the areas in psychology that most interest you. When you apply to graduate school, you must apply to programs in specific areas (clinical, developmental, experimental, social, etc.) so you will need to be getting clear about your focus. There are numerous professional opportunities in psychology of which you may be unaware.

5. Read the book, *Not for Seniors Only: Preparing for Graduate Study in Psychology*. You can check this out from the library. This book will help you decide whether you want to apply to graduate school in psychology and inform you about the various things involved in this process. [Please keep in mind that this book does not tell you about applying to graduate or professional school in other areas such as medicine (psychiatry), social work, education, psychiatric nursing, law, or business.]

6. Strive to meet the requirements for membership in Psi Chi, the national honor society in psychology, so that you can list this on your application materials. (See the PsychSource #8 - Student Organizations for Psychology Majors and Minors.)

7. Review the latest edition of the book, *Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields*. Copies of this book are available in the library. This book describes the programs, admissions requirements, and application deadlines for almost every graduate school in the U.S. and Canada.

You can save yourself a lot of time by reviewing all the possible programs in which you might be interested. Include schools that represent a range of quality and level of degree (doctorate/masters). When you narrow your list down to about 20, you should write to these schools to get their catalogs and the latest, detailed information about their programs and deadlines. The summer before your senior year is a good time to begin collecting this information.

8. Try to attend some professional meetings in psychology (e.g., American Psychological Association (APA), Southeastern Psychological Association (SEPA), Tennessee Psychological Association (TPA), Middle Tennessee Psychological Association (MTPA)). Many of these meetings offer programs of direct interest to students. In addition, you can get a clearer sense of the professional role of various types of psychologists.

9. Make an effort to obtain relevant experience outside the classroom--e.g., independent research, volunteer work, the psychology practicum. Presenting your own independent research at BURS and other professional meetings in psychology is one of the most useful and educational experiences.

10. Don't hesitate to talk with your faculty advisor about specific questions that arise.

Preparing to go to Graduate School - A Time Line

The following schedule is directed to students who plan to begin graduate school in September. Students seeking admission for January will need to adjust the schedule accordingly.

Freshman Year

1. Schedule a meeting with your academic advisor to discuss your career interests and options. This meeting should not simply focus on what courses to take during the next quarter.

2. Become a student member of the American Psychological Association (APA) and request your free copy of APA's Careers in Psychology.
3. Take PSY 1200, MTH 1150, and other core curriculum course work.

Sophomore Year

1. Read the book Preparing for Graduate Study in Psychology: Not for Seniors Only. This book is available through the library.
2. Begin the process of narrowing down your specific interests in the field of psychology and considering the type of employment setting you wish to be employed in upon completion of your studies.
3. Find out about the research interests of the faculty. Contact those that have research interests similar to your interests and volunteer to assist them with their research.
4. Attend a professional meeting in psychology or an undergraduate research conference.
5. Contact a graduate student in psychology. Discuss what graduate school is like and get their advice about preparation and application strategies.
6. Begin the required sequence in psychology (PSY 2400, PSY 2600) so that it is completed early in your junior year. Completing PSY 260, which requires independent research by the end of your sophomore year, will prepare you to do additional research before you graduate.
7. Meet with your academic advisor to discuss your progress toward degree completion and your career plans and options. You should discuss upper level course offerings in psychology that will best prepare you for your career. Also discuss your selection of a minor.

Junior Year

1. Review the latest edition of the APA book, Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields. You will need to begin the process of narrowing down the programs to which you will apply. Also, talk to faculty members about programs that they would recommend.
2. Complete the required sequence in psychology (PSY 2400, PSY 2600).
3. Get involved in a research project during your sophomore, junior and senior year. Plan on presenting your research at BURS, MTPA, SEPA, TPA and other professional conferences.
4. Meet with your academic advisor to discuss your progress toward degree completion and your career plans and options. Review your course selections for the major field in psychology and your minor.

Summer Between Junior and Senior Year

1. Early in the summer, write to the 20 schools you are interested in to request catalogs and application materials. Be sure to request information about an application for financial aid if these are not sent with the application materials.
2. When the materials arrive, use the rest of the summer to review the information. (Among other things look at the research interests of faculty members to see if there are some matches with yours.) Reduce your list of prospective programs to 10 to 15. Of the 10-15 schools on your list, 2 could be programs that are "long shots" (schools whose entrance requirements--GRE and GPA--you don't meet); 2-3 could be "borderline" programs (you meet the GRE requirement, but not the GPA or vice-versa); 3-5 could be "good match" programs (those whose average scores match yours); and 1-2 could be "almost sure bets" (programs whose requirements you clearly exceed).
3. Once you know the schools to which you will apply, prepare a chart with information on all the schools, the application materials required (application form, GRE scores, autobiographical statement--if required, letters of recommendation, etc.), financial aid application information, and all relevant deadlines. Use the chart to help you gather these materials in time to meet your deadlines.
4. Use the summer months to prepare for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and the Miller Analogies Test (MAT) if you need to take it. More than anything else, your admission to graduate school will depend on your scores on the verbal and quantitative sections of the GRE (not the Subject Test in psychology). To do your best on these exams, you must prepare for them.
5. Use the summer months to prepare a draft of your autobiographical statement. Most schools require such a statement as a way to find out about your personal and educational background, your interests in psychology, the reasons you want a graduate degree in psychology, and your career goals. Strive to be honest, objective, and brief (3 pages). Be sure to customize the statement for each program to which you are applying.
6. Send in your registration materials and fees for the GRE by late August. Since the registration deadline for the October test will probably be prior to your arrival on campus for the Fall Quarter. You will need to obtain a copy of the GRE Information Bulletin (which contains the registration form) by writing to: GRE, CN 6000, Princeton, NJ 08541-6000. Tests are now given on the computer and in addition to the "official" test dates, you may be able to take at a learning center at a time convenient to you.

Note: Not all schools require applicants to take the Subject Test in psychology, but if you need to take it, you might consider registering for the verbal and quantitative tests in October (it will take all morning to complete these) and registering for the Subject Test in December (given in the afternoon). Splitting the testing will lessen your fatigue and also allow you to use the Fall semester to take psychology courses such as History and Systems and one of the required senior level courses (these should enhance your performance on the Test). On the other hand, remember that it takes about six weeks after you have taken the GRE for the scores to be

reported to institutions. If taking any part of the GRE in December means that your application will be incomplete at the time departments are reviewing applications, be forewarned that your application will not be given the same consideration as will complete applications.

Senior Year

1. Take the Senior Seminar course or in the Fall Semester and submit your paper to one of the undergraduate research conferences or a regional psychology meeting (e.g., Southeastern Psychological Association). Being able to list such a course and your participation in a research conference will enhance your application.
2. Investigate the possibility of enrolling in the Psychology Practicum course.
3. Meet with your academic advisor during fall semester to discuss your progress toward degree completion and your career plans and options. Review your course selections for the major field in psychology and your minor.

Fall Semester

1. Obtain a copy of your transcript from the Registrar and review it carefully for any errors.
2. Identify three faculty members who are willing and able to write **STRONG** letters of recommendations for you. (See PsychSource #8 - Letters of Recommendation)
3. Work some more on your autobiographical statement.
4. Take the verbal and quantitative sections of the GRE in October. If you have decided not to take these in October, then register now for the GRE given in December. If you will be taking the Subject Test in psychology in December, then register for it now.
5. Ask faculty members to review the draft of your autobiographical statement. Make revisions as necessary.
6. If you want GRE scores sent to institutions other than the ones you listed when you registered for the GRE in August, write and make these arrangements.
7. Give the recommendation forms and related materials to the faculty who will be writing recommendations for you by early in November.
8. By the beginning of December request that transcripts be sent to programs from all colleges attended--it will take Belmont's Registrar's Office at least two weeks to send these. Be sure to have at hand the addresses of the institutions to which you want transcripts sent.
9. Complete applications with January deadlines and mail them with several weeks to spare. Make and use a check sheet to be sure that you have included all necessary information in your envelope: application form, autobiographical statement (if required), application fee, request for financial aid, and a **SELF-ADDRESSED POSTCARD FOR VERIFICATION OF RECEIPT OF**

YOUR MATERIALS. Also, be sure to: (1) **TYPE** all application materials, (2) **PROOFREAD** all materials for grammatical errors and misspellings, and (3) **XEROX COPIES** of all materials before you send them.

Spring Semester

1. Call the departments to which you have applied to be sure that they have received your GRE scores and all letters of recommendation. (Most schools will not consider incomplete applications.)
2. If there are any outstanding letters of recommendation, check with faculty to be sure that they have been sent.
3. Most schools will notify you of your status (regular acceptance, provisional acceptance, on waiting list, application denied) on or around April 15.
4. Upon receiving notification of acceptance(s), consult with faculty in making your final decision. Once you have notified this school, be sure to notify any other school that accepted you that you will not be coming so that they can offer your place to another student.
5. If all of your applications are rejected, consult with faculty about your options. For example, you might: (1) work for a year, prepare for the GRE, and re-apply to psychology programs, (2) enter a master's program in psychology to strengthen your critical thinking and research skills, re-take the GRE, and reapply to doctoral programs, or (3) think about applying to degree programs in fields similar to psychology such as social work (M.S.W.) or education (M.Ed. or Ed.D.) if you have not already explored these options.

Portions of this information were adapted from Handbook of the Marian College Psychology Department (Appleby, 1990), the Psychology Major Handbook for Students Majoring in Psychology at James Madison University, and PSYC SERIES from Kennesaw State University, Marietta, Georgia.