A Suggested Plan of Action for Graduate School Admission

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[The material in this article on graduate school admission has been presented as part of several Psi Chi programs held during annual conventions of the Southeastern Psychological Association.]

The following article provides a timetable of things to do while in college to ensure employment or graduate school acceptance. Post a copy of this article in an obvious place and write the date of completion beside activities as you finish them. The publications listed in the timetable and the references at the end of the article provide extensive and valuable information concerning careers in psychology and are highly recommended.

**Sophomore Year**

1. Contact psychology professors who conduct research and/or clinical activities of interest to you and discuss the possibility of your becoming involved in these.

2. Attend psychology-related seminars at your school and surrounding institutions and document your attendance. Join the Psi Chi chapter or psychology club on your campus.

3. Find out what psychology meetings are held in your region that students can attend (state, regional, student conferences, etc.). Check the American Psychologist (found in your school library or in a psychology faculty member’s office) or the Psi Chi Newsletter for the locations and dates (usually in the spring), and attend as many as possible.

4. Talk to graduate students on your campus and on other campuses (preferably students in the field of psychology) or to those at the meetings in item #3 about graduate school life, finances, and work loads. In addition, ask them about psychology-related seminars or meetings they might be aware of (see items #2 and #3 above).

5. Order the APA publication *Preparing for Graduate Study in Psychology: Not for Seniors Only!* Read for an overview. Locate a copy of *Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology*, and read.

6. Maintain a grade of “B” or better in all psychology courses. This will greatly enhance your chances of graduate school acceptance or employment in the field of psychology. While maintaining this level of performance, do not lose sight of the goal of obtaining knowledge through your courses, research, volunteer activities, contacts with faculty, and meetings you attend.

**Junior Year**

1. Become involved in a research project as part of a course requirement, do an independent study project, or work with a faculty member on his/her research project.

2. Prepare a resume as described in the APA publication *Preparing for Graduate Study in Psychology: Not for Seniors Only!* Follow the suggested guidelines, even if the resume is to be submitted to potential employers and not to graduate schools. Emphasize psychology-related extracurricular activities, meetings, volunteer work, etc. If you are a minority student, emphasize your ethnic identification. This will be to your advantage because of the shortage of minority psychologists and because there are additional sources of financial assistance for minority students.

3. Obtain experience through volunteer work, if you are interested in clinical or counseling psychology. Possibly do some research in connection with your volunteer activities.

4. Submit your research for presentation at student conferences and continue item #4 from sophomore year.

5. Investigate summer jobs or educational/research opportunities related to psychology. Many summer internships are available through laboratories or professional organizations. If you are a minority student, investigate the minority summer programs, such as those at the University of South Carolina and the University of Georgia, or the minority summer research experience offered by Bell Laboratories. Check with your department faculty on a regular basis concerning available opportunities, and apply early.

6. Prepare and register for and, in the spring, take the aptitude test of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and the Miller Analogies Test (MAT), even if you have not yet decided to apply for graduate school.

7. Check with the campus placement office for dates of on-campus visits by recruiters and with your department chair for dates of visits by graduate school representatives. Determine the types of opportunities available and list the ones of greatest interest to you for future contact.

**Summer Before Your Senior Year**

1. Obtain summer employment, experience, or education related to psychology. If you are seriously considering graduate school, retake in summer school any courses in which you received a grade below a “B.” Of special importance are Statistics and Research Methods or Experimental Methodology.

2. Decide if you are going to graduate school (and, if so, in what field) or if you plan to work immediately following graduation. However, do not do anything that would prevent you from changing your decision later or from pursuing the other option if existing plans fail. The books mentioned in item #3 below should aid you in your decision.

3. Consult the APA publication *Graduate Studies in Psychology* for requirements and information on graduate programs in psychology. List schools of interest to you, and request from them bulletins, brochures, financial aid forms, and department application forms. For job ideas, descriptions, skills needed, and interview techniques, consult the following APA publications: (a) *The Psychology Major: Training and Employment Strategies*, (b) *Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School*, and (continued on page 12)
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DATE

School in Psychology, and (c) Career Opportunities for Psychologists. List job areas to pursue and investigate sources of any additional training you will need.

4. Prepare for the advanced GRE test in psychology by studying the commercially available books and software and by rereading a good advanced general psychology textbook, including the sections on statistics and methodology. Register for the early fall offerings of the aptitude and the advanced tests. Repeated testing should improve your scores. Also, register for the Miller Analogies Test (MAT) and study the types of items contained in it as they represent your knowledge on a comparative basis.

5. Revise and update your resume to include new experiences. Remember neatness and organization create a good first impression, which is lasting.

6. Save money for graduate school application fees, resumes, and transcript costs.

FALL SEMESTER OF SENIOR YEAR

1. Be certain you take (and pass) all courses needed to graduate as planned. Obtain a statement of standing from your registrar to verify this. You don’t want any surprises next semester when you apply for graduation!

2. Discuss with your advisor and other psychology faculty members the graduate programs or jobs of interest to you. Show them your resume so they may better counsel you and determine if your expectations are realistic, and obtain a list of additional suggestions from them. Discuss the performance of other students from your department in the graduate programs or business settings of potential interest to you. Also discuss, especially with faculty, the socioeconomic conditions that might affect you at the schools (or universities), industries, clinics, hospitals, etc. in which you are interested, and in the regions or cities in which they are located.

3. Actually visit the schools, industries, or agencies of greatest interest, if possible, and establish personal contact with several key people at each. Obtain impressions of the institution or organization from others having similar backgrounds and qualifications. Even if there are no existing vacancies at the places visited, the expression of interest and establishment of personal contact will give you an added advantage should a vacancy occur.

4. Prepare for and take the aptitude and advanced tests of the GRE in October if possible, and no later than December. Also take the MAT.

5. Register to take the advanced test again in December, or January at the latest. Note the possibility that the January test date may be too late for your scores to be considered for fellowships at some institutions.

6. Obtain information on available fellowships, scholarships, assistantships, and loans not associated with the institutions to which you plan to apply. This information is available from your financial aid office or department chair (check with both).

7. Request a student copy of your transcript from every institution that you have attended and check for errors. This process may take longer than you think, especially if there are errors, so allow ample time.

8. Duplicate your resume and transcripts for distribution. If you plan to apply to graduate school, remember there are application fees (which may be waived, so ask) and charges for mailing official transcripts (which should follow as soon as the fall semester’s grades are included). Even resume duplications and mailing can be expensive for a student budget.

9. Check the latest copy of Graduate Study in Psychology to obtain requirements and deadlines for various graduate school applications and fellowships. Check the campus placement office for dates of visiting recruiters who will conduct job interviews on campus. Follow through on these early.

10. Write to the personnel office of the states in which you wish to apply for jobs, and request descriptions of positions related to psychology. If you need to take the civil service or other exams to qualify for these positions, register for the required exams. Put your name on mailing lists for job announcements.

11. Narrow down your list of schools to 10 or so, including at least two where you are confident you will be accepted. If you are job-oriented or are uncertain that you will be accepted into any graduate program, list in order of preference the types of jobs, and if possible, the specific agencies with whom you would consider accepting employment. Remember, both job and admission competitions are keen, and you may not be able to obtain your first or second choice. Be prepared to be flexible. Post any deadlines for applications where you will constantly see them.

12. Determine from whom you wish to obtain letters of recommendation, and notify these people at least three weeks before the deadline for your application. Supply them with necessary forms, addresses, information about your qualifications and due dates, along with jobs or programs for which you are applying. Include a stamped addressed envelope to each school or agency they must write. Follow up one week before each deadline with a thank-you note (a “friendly” reminder to ensure that your information has been sent).

13. Request that GRE and MAT scores be sent to all schools or employers requiring them. If your scores are high and will be considered an asset, mail them to all places you are applying. Request that transcripts be mailed to all schools and agencies.

14. Check before Christmas to be certain all materials, especially recommendations, have been sent. Most incomplete applications result from missing letters of recommendation. Be persistent!

15. Include in your application package to all graduate schools or employers on your preference list materials requested by the institution or organization, a resume, copies of transcripts and test scores, and names of those sending recommendations. Indicate what additional material is to follow (official tran-
scripts with your fall grades, revised test scores, etc.). Follow application instructions exactly. For job seekers, contact local community service agencies, local chambers of commerce, state employment agencies, hospitals, research institutes, public relations firms, test or survey developers, and market research departments. Send them a letter of inquiry for position vacancies and a summary of your credentials. Make these contacts as personal as possible. Keep a record of all contacts made and all materials sent to each employer or school.

**SPRING SEMESTER OF SENIOR YEAR**

1. Verify in January that all materials needed for your applications were received at every place you applied.

2. Send additional GRE results (if higher) and fall semester grade report to update your applications.

3. Expect first choice offers to be made by graduate schools before April 1; however, vacancies may occur any time prior to the fall semester, due to changes in plans of those already accepted. If you have not been accepted anywhere by April 15 you should:
   a. Call everywhere you applied, asking them to keep your application active through the summer, as you are still interested, even in last-minute acceptance.
   b. Call admissions offices of schools whose requirements you easily meet but to which you did not apply to see if they are still considering applicants. If so, apply.
   c. Check Graduate Study in Psychology for schools with late or no deadlines and apply.
   d. Apply to master’s degree programs with late or open admission dates, if you were rejected for doctoral programs.
   e. Job hunt, using the guidelines given above. You may need to postpone graduate school for a year and reapply. A good job related to psychology will enhance your credentials.
   f. Contact psychology faculty whom you have met from other institutions, requesting their advice (keep network lines open).

4. Follow up with a phone call or letter on job applications submitted and continue to make as many contacts with agencies and industries as possible. Often “word-of-mouth” among personnel managers results in unexpected employment.

5. Purchase and keep your most important psychology textbooks, as they will come in handy later, whether in graduate school or on the job.

"I’VE GRADUATED AND DIDN’T GET ACCEPTED, SO NOW WHAT?"

If you were not accepted into a graduate school, after checking all institutions for last minute openings and applying to several master’s degree programs, don’t give up yet! Seek employment, preferably related to psychology, and try to be admitted as a special graduate student at the nearest institution offering graduate courses in psychology. Enroll in one or two courses per semester that won’t conflict with your work sched-

ule and commit yourself to making an “A” in these courses. The more experimentally oriented the course, the better (an “A” in graduate statistics will be quite valuable in convincing evaluation committees to ignore a “C” in undergraduate statistics). When you reapply to graduate school next year, these efforts will assist in persuading the review committee that you are persistent, capable of performing at the graduate level, and motivated to continue study in psychology. These graduate credits may be transferred later toward a degree. You may even seek at midterm to be admitted to the graduate program in psychology where you are taking the graduate work (although you may still wish to transfer to another program later). But, to reap these benefits, you must perform well in any graduate courses you attempt! If you cannot take graduate courses, repeat any relevant undergraduate courses in which you received a grade lower than “B.” Mention in future applications your revised GPA, as it will not be reflected on your original undergraduate transcript. You should then update your resume, correcting weaknesses if possible. Review those places to which you applied the previous spring, realistically determining why you were rejected, and reapply to those for which you feel you are qualified. You may have been rejected because the particular applicants against whom you were compared were all exceptional; the next year this may not happen. Apply to a few new places, too. Follow the senior year timetable again, and consider retaking the GRE and MAT if your scores were low. Save what money you can while working so the availability of financial aid will not dictate if you are to attend graduate school.

**A LIST OF REFERENCES FOR THOSE WANTING TO ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL**

Your department faculty or campus library may have these.


The address to order any of the above from the American Psychological Association is: American Psychological Association, Order Department, P. O. Box 2710, Hyattsville, MD 20784.

* "must" to read.