Psi Chi/UPO Meeting Minutes

Faculty and graduate student perspectives on graduate school

11/9/2016

Faculty panelists:

* Dr. Tim Nelson, Associate Professor of Psychology (Clinical program)
* Dr. Jeff Stevens, Assistant Professor of Psychology (Neuroscience and Behavior program)
* Dr. Brian Bornstein, Professor of Psychology (Law-Psychology program)
* Dr. Cynthia Willis-Esqueda, Associate Professor of Psychology (Social-Cognitive program)
* Dr. Lisa Crockett, Professor of Psychology (Developmental program)

Graduate student panelists:

* Hanna Grandgenett (Clinical program, 1st year)
* Chelsie Temmen (Developmental program, 5th year)
* Kimberly Dellapaolera (Law-Psychology program, 5th year)
* Catie Brown (Neuroscience and Behavior program, 2nd year)

**The faculty panelists spoke first, from 4:00-4:30pm.**

1. How selective are your graduate programs?
   1. The UNL PhD programs in experimental psychology (i.e., law-psychology, social-cognitive, developmental, and neuroscience and behavior) typically each get 30-50 applicants per year and admit 2-5 students per program, for a total of 8-12 incoming graduate students in experimental psychology each year.
   2. The UNL PhD program in clinical psychology is extremely competitive, typically receiving between 200-300 applications per year and admitting 6-8 students.
   3. Important to note that other institutions may be more or less selective and may have more or fewer programs.
2. What are some common “red flags” in graduate school applications that you have reviewed?
   1. The personal statement being *too* personal—e.g., oversharing details of personal experiences with abuse, mental illness, etc.
   2. Letters of recommendation from therapists, pastors, or other people unfamiliar with the applicant as a developing professional
      1. Also letters of rec from people who don’t know the applicant very well or who have only known them for a brief period
   3. Applicant indicating they chose the program because of its geographic region (e.g., a desire to live somewhere warm) rather than because of its academic excellence
   4. Inattention to mechanics—e.g., typos, grammatical errors, content errors, referring in your personal statement to something in the CV that doesn’t appear there
   5. Unprofessional web presence—many potential mentors will look at your social media presence, and in a highly competitive environment may not accept you if your profile pics appear inappropriate
   6. Unprofessional emails that accompany your application. Assume *all* of your correspondence (including envelopes, emails, sticky notes, etc.) will be saved, and make sure it is all professional.
   7. Applications and personal statements that are not tailored to the mentor/program/institution to which the student is applying.
      1. You’re not applying to the psychology department and you’re not applying to the institution. You’re applying to work with a particular person within a particular program within the department.
      2. Don’t apply to work with everyone in the program; select 1-2 people in the program you’d like to work with and say *specifically why* you’d like to work with them.
      3. It also looks strange if you say you want to work with a couple of people who do very different things—it implies you haven’t done much research on their work and/or you don’t know what you really want to do.
3. What are characteristics of successful graduate school applications that you have reviewed?
   1. The personal statement as a “professional statement” about the applicant’s professional strengths and what will make them a successful graduate student
      1. The personal statement should *highlight and underscore* the strongest/most relevant aspects of your curriculum vitae. The CV tells your accomplishments; the personal statement should tell the story of how you developed your interests and achieved those accomplishments.
      2. Link what you’ve done in the past to where you’re going in the future.
   2. Lots of relevant experience, particularly for more competitive programs
      1. Fewer and fewer students are admitted to graduate programs straight out of college—particularly for clinical psychology.
   3. Research experience demonstrating that you have the necessary *skills* to be successful in graduate school.
      1. You don’t have to have conducted research in the particular area you’re applying to, but you should have some research experience, preferably in increasing levels of complexity and responsibility.
      2. It’s preferable to work in one lab for two years than four labs in four semesters. Show your *trajectory* of increasing responsibility and varied experiences.
   4. A strong research statement describing specific research questions to demonstrate you’ve thought carefully about what you want to study.
      1. This does *not* have to be an exact replica of the research program of the person you’re applying to work with, as faculty typically want students with a broad range of ideas and experiences, rather than someone who is a clone of themselves.
   5. Your letters of recommendation should include at least one person who can discuss your research experiences.
   6. GPA, GRE scores, and other “numbers” matter, but that alone is not everything.
      1. Grades in research methods and statistics, as well as grades in upper-level courses in the area to which you are applying, are the most important.
      2. It looks really good if you’ve gone “above and beyond” to take non-required stats or methods classes and/or applied your research skills in thesis or other research programs.
   7. Leadership in extracurriculars looks good
      1. For clinical psychology, you will not have any formal experience as a clinician or a counselor, but you can get experience working with clinical populations to demonstrate that you understand them and you know you really do want to work with them.
   8. Ultimately, getting accepted into graduate school is about *fit* between the institution, the program, the mentor, and the applicant. You may be an excellent applicant, but if you don’t fit the program and the mentor you won’t get in.
4. How are applications processed in your program?
   1. Smaller programs (e.g., social-cognitive psychology program) may have all faculty members review all applications, rate/rank them, and pass them on to the specific faculty member to whom the student addressed their application.
   2. Larger programs (e.g., clinical psychology program) may do an initial round of culling done by a committee of faculty members. Then faculty members may review/cull all applications that are addressed to them specifically, and then the entire program will vote yes/no on all applications to make final determinations.
   3. Either way, the entire program will likely review your application, not just the one person you’re applying to work with. If the department is small, the entire department may review your application.
   4. Many institutions require a campus interview before acceptance; others may conduct the interview after extending an offer. Either way, be sure to conduct yourself professionally, as offers have been rescinded after inappropriate behavior during interviews.
5. How can a student benefit from a “gap year” between college and graduate school?
   1. Note: Most clinical psychology applicants have 1, 2, or 3 years of experience between college and graduate school.
   2. Research experience in a strong lab
   3. Publishing and/or presenting research from a senior thesis or other research project
   4. Build up strong letters of recommendation from people who know your academic strengths very well over a period of several years
   5. If you just take the year off to save up money (waiting tables, mowing lawns, etc.) it may hurt your application.

**The graduate student panelists spoke from 4:30-5:00pm.**

1. How did you figure out which graduate schools to apply to?
   1. Read the book *Applying to Graduate School in Psychology: Advice from Successful Students and Prominent Psychologists*
   2. UNL library also has many print books and ebooks about graduate school applications and how to be successful in graduate school
   3. Psychology Advising office has the book *Graduate Study in Psychology*
      1. Winnow based on what’s important to you—geographic region, programs, your research interests, faculty profiles
   4. Find the particular *person* you want to work with, not where you want to live.
   5. Talk to current graduate students in the departments/programs you’re interested in. They are often more willing to talk than the faculty members, and will answer questions about what life is like there, what their faculty mentor is like to work with, what their application looked like, etc.
   6. Apply to several programs, but only to programs you actually would attend. Our panelists applied to 4, 4, 9, and 10-12 graduate programs.
      1. Don’t apply to places you’re not passionate about. Even if you get in, you will have a miserable 4-6 years.
2. What was your application process like?
   1. The summer before applying, contact the potential faculty mentors and see if they are accepting graduate students in the upcoming year
      1. This tells you which places are a waste of your time (and money) to apply to
      2. Also lets you begin building a relationship with your potential faculty mentor to boost your chances they will want to work with you
   2. Early in the academic year (August-September), contact current graduate students in the program you want to attend
   3. Ask for letters of recommendation well in advance, and remind your letter-writers of deadlines
3. What funding is available?
   1. Most PhD programs have tuition waivers and stipends. Most MA programs and PsyD programs do not. But don’t choose a program just based on its financials; you should choose something you really care about even if you have to take on (some) debt, rather than attending a graduate program that is awful but pays the bills.
      1. If you have low expenses, live frugally, and live in an area with a reasonable cost of living, many programs’ stipends are enough to live on just fine. (Others… not so much.)
   2. Some programs have funding for conference travel, research moneys, etc. Some of these funds are given to anyone who needs them and other funds are competitive. When you go for your interview, ask about this funding.
      1. Also ask about the expectation for presenting research. If you are expected to travel to 2 conferences a year but don’t have access to travel funds, you will have to pay entirely out of pocket. (Note that most graduate students will have to pay *some* travel expenses out of pocket.)
4. What other advice do you have?
   1. If you’re not sure which area/program you want to go into, take a gap year, talk to people who are doing it, and be really sure it’s what you want. It’s better to take a year now than to have to go back to school and change careers later on.
   2. Be sure your personal statement mirrors what you really want to do and where you’re applying. Don’t apply to a program/area just because that’s what you’ve been doing research in—feel free to branch out to something new.
      1. Be clear in your personal statement about your specific research responsibilities/skills and how those skills will help you moving forward even if you’re going to be working in a different area.