Before You Apply to Graduate Programs in Psychology:
Knowing When You're Ready and Gaining Post-Baccalaureate Experiences

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Abstract: This guide is intended to assist aspiring graduate school applicants interested in opportunities to gather information about potential careers in psychology. Instead of focusing on the differences between the various types of graduate programs (or the process of applying), the content herein focuses on the process of assessing one's personal interests while maximizing post-baccalaureate learning experiences. More specifically, this guide begins with a discussion of the often difficult decision regarding whether to take "time off" before applying to graduate school. Then, personal and professional development opportunities are reviewed, including volunteer positions, research assistant positions, and national conferences. I conclude with an autobiographical account of my own pre- and post-baccalaureate experiences.

Do you want to go to graduate school to study psychology? If so, when? These extremely important decisions can be very difficult to consider for undergraduate students who are interested in psychology as a potential focus for their career. Unfortunately, little information is available to guide students through this difficult decision, and even less seems to be available to help students navigate the time between the receipt of their undergraduate degree and the time they decide to apply (i.e., "the post-baccalaureate years"). This chapter focuses on the process of assessing one's personal interests while maximizing post-baccalaureate learning experiences. First, it is important to think about whether to take "time off" from school before applying. Next, how does one get a "post-bacc" research job? Last, how can one use these years most effectively to help inform an application decision? Admittedly, this chapter is likely biased towards research-oriented options; however, most of the information may be relevant to students with more applied interests as well.

Of course, before addressing each of these questions in detail, it is important to remind the reader that no single source of advice should be relied upon exclusively when making such difficult and personal decisions, including the advice in this chapter. Seek out information from people within your field of interest as well as from those who offer an outside perspective. Keep in mind during this process that opinions can sometimes be highly skewed and informants' levels of enthusiasm and conviction can unjustly bias your predictions of personal happiness. Collect perspectives, compare them to your own, and make decisions with the acknowledgement of individual differences.

Given that the process of collecting perspectives and developing personal interests can take a substantial amount of time, it is recommended that students initiate the process early to make a well-informed decision about their choice of program and avoid taking multiple years off unnecessarily before applying to grad school. As an undergraduate, it is easy to become consumed by classes and avoid, or miss, additional opportunities to learn. However, time spent investigating the field before graduation will pay off in a more efficient decision-making process.

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Should I Take Time "Off"?

You may be "burnt out" after 17 years of schooling. Your parents may be worried that you are "delaying" your career path by taking time away. You may not know what will "look good" on your application. Indeed, many factors may influence your decision regarding the post-bacc years and whether to take time away from school before applying to doctoral programs in psychology. Yet, this is a very important decision. Graduate school (and even just the application process to get in) is a long, arduous, difficult endeavor.

Are you ready now?

Some students transition directly from undergraduate schooling to graduate programs and are very pleased with their decision. These well-prepared students have usually spoken with many people, worked in and outside of school to establish their interests, and have a good idea of what to expect in graduate school before applying. In other words, they have worked hard during their time as an undergraduate to develop their resume and determine which program best matches their interests. These students usually have identified an area of research that they are truly passionate about. It is something they could imagine spending every day thinking about for the next 40 years, and they are excited about the opportunity to get started now. They have a clear sense of a few possible career options post-degree, and they are feeling energetic.

On the other hand, there are also students who make the direct transition from undergraduate to graduate school, and realize that they are not as happy as they had hoped. They often report that they got "wrapped up" in the application process, followed the crowd (i.e., falling in with departmental trends or those of lab mates), or hastily guessed their interests instead of adequately evaluating them. They may have been pressured by parents or scared to enter the "real world." For these students, graduate school isn't quite what they expected and/or isn't quite as enjoyable as they had hoped.

Do you want to wait?

At many top graduate programs in psychology, a growing trend is evident. About 50% of short-listed applicants (a higher proportion each year, it seems) have taken a year or more "off" before applying to graduate school. Students who have taken time off to gain research experience are also somewhat over-represented in the proportion of successful applicants who ultimately gain admission. Taking time off is not required, but it is becoming the norm. Why do students take time off? There are at least three good reasons. First, many students take time off to learn more about the field. Most students find that as they gain more experience, they generate more questions about the field, their own capabilities, and their own interests. Students interested in applied areas of psychology, for instance, may wish to get more experience working with people within the age range, diagnostic group, or in the setting that they would like to specialize in during their graduate training..

Second, students take time off hoping to develop increased confidence that they will make the correct decision of graduate program. Taking time off won't necessarily guarantee that you will make the *correct* decision when applying to graduate school, but it can help you make a *better*, more well-informed decision if you use the time wisely. Third, and perhaps most common, many students take time off to help improve the strength of their application. Indeed, it may be good for students to take time off if their GPA or GRE score is considerably lower than posted averages, and/or if they are applying to research-oriented programs but do not have adequate research experience (and/or do not know their personal research interests). In addition to these main reasons, many students simply take time off because they want to save money for graduate school, they are exhausted from their undergraduate studies, or they have another opportunity that seems too good to pass up (e.g., Teach for America, Peace Corps, etc).

Ultimately, students should realize that their graduate school application can always be improved and that they will never fully gain all of the knowledge that they need before applying. To some extent, the decision to apply eventually will require a leap of faith that is informed by previous experiences. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated towards a discussion of opportunities that are available during the "post-bacc" years for students who have decided to take time off before applying to graduate school and would like to use that time most wisely.

What Should I Do During my Time Off?

If you decide that you need to acquire more knowledge and skills, or further explore your personal interests, there are various opportunities that may help you accomplish these goals. Such opportunities include volunteering, working as a research assistant, and attending national psychology conferences. A brief discussion of each opportunity is offered below.

Volunteer Positions

There are various ways to volunteer in the field of psychology, and the opportunity that someone chooses should depend on their personal goals and intentions for graduate school. Volunteer positions broadly include assisting with psychological research, working with specific populations in the community (e.g., special needs children, at-risk individuals, etc.), or assisting clinicians in their practice (these are more rare). Students interested in pursuing a research-oriented program in graduate school should *primarily* focus on gaining experience in research labs. Doing so will provide opportunity to more thoroughly develop your knowledge of the scientific process and, more specifically, how it applies to psychology (see the Research Assistant section below for more details). Students interested in pursuing a more "clinically-oriented" program (i.e., programs that focus more on working directly with and/or treating a specific population in the absence of a research training emphasis), may wish to gain experience *primarily* in applied clinical settings. In such clinical positions, volunteers are not expected to become an expert in treating people with psychological difficulties. Instead, they are often asked to provide basic treatment services, serve as advocates, intervene in crisis situations, or simply spend time with individuals afflicted with mental illness. These positions offer excellent opportunities for students to practice their rapport-building skills, begin to understand the life of a person with a mental illness, and develop passion for continuing to work in the field.

The term "primarily" was used above, when referring to the pursuit of research and clinical opportunities, because experience in each area (research and applied) offers invaluable information that supports the scientist-practitioner model of applied psychology. In other words, research-oriented students can become better researchers by gaining personal experience with the same populations that they plan to research, and clinically-oriented students can become better clinicians by incorporating evidence-based methods of assessment and treatment into future practice. Admission committees do not always share this sentiment regarding the importance of acquiring both research and clinical volunteer experiences, but students generally find that each type of experience significantly contributes to the development of their interests and their eventual choice of graduate program.

The unique opportunities of volunteering are often overlooked, but in fact, there are several aspects of volunteer positions that do not necessarily apply to paid positions. These include: availability of positions, time commitment, and evaluation without compensation.

Availability of Positions. The first benefit of volunteer positions is that they are more readily available than paid positions. Students can generally find advertisements for available volunteer positions posted on bulletin boards in the psychology department or on the department's website. Students may also contact local inpatient and outpatient treatment centers, crisis centers, mental health agencies, research centers, or individual researchers to inquire about volunteer positions. As students begin to narrow their interests, it is commonly found that paid positions offering experience in the particular area of interest are extremely rare and competitive. Additionally, those students who succeed in acquiring a paid position often have a great deal of volunteer experience and accompanying skill sets to reference during their interviews for the positions. In some situations, volunteer positions can even serve as preliminary screening for paid positions.

Time Commitment. Second, a student's commitment to volunteer positions is more negotiable than time committed to paid positions. Unless you have made a commitment to work in a lab for a specified period of time, you can reassess your interests in the position after a pre-established period of time and choose to stay or move on to a different opportunity. Your commitment to the position should be clearly stated in the beginning so that if you decide to leave, you do so with early notification and respect for your supervisor. If after a semester, or a few months, you decide that you would like to pursue a different area of psychology, it is highly recommended that you follow your interests. A semester spent in a position deemed uninteresting is a semester that you could

have spent testing out a different potential interest. Given that the majority of students want to take off as little time as possible, this can prove to be a more efficient way of determining which area you want to pursue at the graduate level. Along these lines, don't make the mistake of guessing the topics that you will enjoy studying/researching in graduate school; pursue them fervently before applying.

Evaluation without Compensation. A final benefit to volunteering is the substantial opportunity to stand out and make an impression. Supervisors and graduate school admissions committees are especially taken with someone who is excited and committed to performing their duties without direct compensation. Similarly, the volunteer setting allows you to assess your own motivation about a particular area without the influence of a paycheck. To set yourself apart from other volunteers, it is important to demonstrate initiative and go beyond the basic duties of the position. Be sure to demonstrate your commitment to detail, reliability, and knowledge about the particular area of research or clinical work. This will ensure that your performance and enjoyment for the project is being assessed under optimal conditions. Also, be aggressive in your development of skills. Try to master the simple tasks quickly so that you can advance to the more sought-after skills that are often a bit more difficult to acquire. A supervisor will not always explicitly offer such opportunities, so sometimes it is necessary for you to ask if more advanced training or tasks are available. Additionally, keep in mind during your volunteer experience that you will most likely ask your supervisor to write a letter of recommendation for other volunteer positions, jobs, and/or graduate school. The letter will be much more impressive if your supervisor can state that you excelled in your position and sought additional learning opportunities.

Research Assistant Positions

A post-baccalaureate research assistant (sometimes referred to as a post-bacc, RA, or project coordinator) can refer to an employee or student who assists with one or multiple aspects of a research study. Note that some investigators may use these terms differently to refer to different roles within a similar project (e.g., sometimes a project coordinator is a post-doctoral fellow, sometimes an RA is an undergraduate assistant receiving course credit, etc.). Also note that different labs may have different constellations of RAs, PCs, post-baccs, etc. all working together, or in a hierarchical relationship among one another. For clarity in this chapter, we will refer to this kind of a position as an RA.

Finding an RA Position. As implied in the section above, paid RA positions can be more difficult to find and secure. Unfortunately, it is very rare that a study directly related to your area of interest will exist at your university (if so, then great!); it is even more rare that the study's principal investigator will be hiring RAs. Therefore, when looking for a paid position that will help you accomplish your career goals, it is often necessary to broaden your scope and search for positions in different cities and universities. Of course not everyone is willing to move to a different location, and in this situation, you should seek out a local position that is most closely related to your interests. If a paid position is not available in an appealing lab, you can always volunteer in that lab and receive compensation from a different source, which is highly recommended for all of the reasons mentioned earlier.

There are several different methods for locating paid RA positions. Students with less well-defined interests, or those who are intent on staying in a particular geographic region, may want to begin by searching for RA positions on the human resources (HR) websites of universities and local research centers that they are willing to consider. Generally, HR websites will have a "Jobs" or "Employment" page that allows you to search for jobs specifically relating to research. Such a search is less likely to reveal positions that are a perfect match for a student's specific interests, but positions in any research lab provide opportunity to become familiar with the scientific process and the general framework of research. Keep in mind that each university may have this type of position "classified" under a very specific job title (e.g., clinical research assistant, research cleric, etc.), and it may not be immediately obvious which types of jobs match the traditional RA position you are likely looking for.

Post-baccalaureate students with more well-defined interests, especially those who may be able and willing to relocate, would likely benefit most from conducting a much geographically broader, yet more

content specific search that begins by determining which researchers are currently conducting research in their line of interest. Unfortunately, no centralized service is available to locate RA positions; however, there are several recommended steps one can take to find a position well-suited for their interests and career goals.

1) The search should begin by entering your research interests as search parameters in PsycINFO. When reviewing the literature, note the researchers who appear multiple times in recent publications and those who are tied to the present theories related to their particular area of interest; these are often the researchers who are conducting great research. Use the name list generated in PsycINFO to go a step further and search for personal or lab websites for each of the research faculty; here, the researcher may have the most current information about their ongoing research projects. It is possible that the current projects listed on the researcher's website will remain highly related to your interests. On the other hand, it is also possible that the researcher is currently working on projects that are not as relevant to your interests. If the researcher does not have a website, or their website does not present information on current projects, it may be necessary to send a brief, professional email to gather more information about their current research.

2) To find investigators that likely have current funds available to hire an RA, search the NIH REPORTER website. This database will offer a list of active NIH-funded grants by area, name, or even university.

3) Investigators often post job ads on listservs sponsored by the professional society or association most closely aligned to their area of interest. Ask your professors to recommend professional societies that may be important for you to join so that you may subscribe to their listserv, or ask someone who may have extra time to forward you relevant postings from listservs they are on.

Professional Communication. When contacting professors, it is extremely important that students convey professionalism and maturity at all times. Professors often form initial impressions by considering the manner in which a student approaches them, the content of what the student says or writes, the effort the student puts forward, and the student's excitement for working with them. A professor is much less likely to hire someone who sends an email with multiple spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, or obnoxious font or colors; this demonstrates a lack of effort, a lack of maturity, a lack of competence, or some combination of these factors (none of which are well-suited for the position). Similarly, a professor is not likely to form a favorable impression of a student who is disrespectful or demanding in an email. It often works in your best interest to have someone read through a draft of your emails to ensure their professionalism before you send them to a potential employer.

In short, emails should be polite and concise. Acknowledge that the professor receives many (sometimes hundreds) of emails daily and expect that the professor will likely not respond immediately. With this in mind, keep emails short and to the point. Introduce yourself, briefly express your interest in their research, and ask your question(s). In your self-introduction, state who you are (i.e., name and status) and your collegiate affiliation. It could also be helpful to mention your ties to previous faculty supervisors that the professor may know. If your previous supervisor has a collegial relationship with the professor you plan to email, you may ask him or her to send the professor a note prefacing your email; this may help to ensure that your email is acknowledged more quickly and that you are given consideration for available positions. Feel free to include your curriculum vitae (or resume) as an attachment to the email but do not list all of your accomplishments within the body of your message; if the professor wants to review your accolades and previous experiences, he or she can always review the attachment. After expressing interest in the professor's research, politely ask if they could provide information on their current projects and/or if they may have any available paid RA positions. Avoid asking questions that are clearly answered on the professor's website.

Interviewing for RA Positions. Interviews for RA positions are a great opportunity for a student to practice their interviewing skills for potential grad school interviews. For the interviews, bring your CV (or resume) and be prepared to answer questions about your previous experiences, why you want the position,

and your career goals. Importantly, avoid the temptation to overstate your knowledge, and instead, confidently communicate your enthusiasm for the opportunity to learn.

Also, don't forget to assess the supervisor and the position. You could ask questions about the requirements of the position, additional opportunities to excel (see below), time commitments (both regarding weekly hours and start/stop dates for the position), and compensation. Additionally, your intentions should be clearly stated upfront so that there is no confusion later; if you would like a position that offers advanced tasks (after mastering the more basic ones) or independent research projects, make sure that these opportunities exist and that the supervisor is aware of your determination to pursue them. At the conclusion of the interview, be sure to thank the supervisor for spending the time to consider you for the position; it is polite to send a follow-up email conveying your appreciation.

Duties of an RA. The duties of an RA vary greatly based on the requirements of a research study, the responsibility given to you by your supervisor, and your personal efforts to acquire knowledge and skills. RA duties could include: conducting literature reviews, drafting/submitting IRB applications (i.e., ensuring that your study meets the ethical requirements dictated by your school's Institutional Review Board), administering therapies (i.e., drug or psychological), leading subjects/participants through an experimental or observational protocol, collecting data, managing data, coding data (i.e., transforming observed behaviors, written statements, and other interpretive constructs into quantitative variables), developing coding systems, conducting statistical analyses, and assisting with the dissemination of findings (in posters, presentations, or manuscripts). For research involving human participants, RAs may have the additional responsibilities of recruiting participants, scheduling lab visits, arranging participant compensation, or assisting with measure/survey development. Data collection in human-based research often involves administering surveys or measures, collecting physiological or observational data, or conducting clinical assessments. RAs in animal-based research may have the additional responsibilities of providing animal care and performing medical procedures necessary for their particular field of study. The RA duties mentioned here are certainly not an exhaustive list. The needs, goals, and protocols of every lab are variable and require RAs to perform different, and sometimes exceptionally unique, duties for each project.

While performing your duties as an RA, take note of any aspects of research that are particularly difficult for you. Once you have determined your problem areas, you should *confidently* seek out support. Self-assessment, paired with the ability to ask for help, will be very important as you continue to progress in the field. Additionally, while some of the complexities of research are initially overwhelming, don't let this scare you away! You will find that most research processes follow a written or unwritten (i.e., generally understood) set of guidelines. Once you learn these guidelines, the research process becomes less intimidating.

The same recommendations regarding work ethic and development of personal interests mentioned in the volunteer section apply to RA positions as well. In addition to those recommendations, RAs should work to build their resume, assess their general interest in psychological research, and refine their interests.

Building a resume. In psychology, and some other fields, a resume is referred to as a Curriculum Vitae, or CV for short. Your CV will not only include your experiences and academic accomplishments, but it should reflect your determination and commitment to personal development. When drafting a CV, you will mention all of the primary duties of your RA positions as well as any presentations or publications that you may authored or assisted with while working as an RA. As mentioned above, your CV will be much more impressive if you can report having experience with more advanced tasks/training in a research lab. If the opportunity exists, it is highly recommended that students take part in the development, reporting, and presentation or publication of a research project. Presentations mostly include posters or papers presented at national or regional psychology conferences; the formats for these presentations vary by conference (see the "National/Regional Psychology Conferences" section below). Although you may have the fortunate opportunity to assist with the presentation or publication of another person's research project, you should ultimately strive to conduct your own independent research project. For a personal research project, you could analyze archival data (i.e., a pre-existing dataset), insert measures into an ongoing research project, or design a study that is solely dedicated to answering their specific research questions. Admission committees of research-oriented graduate programs are especially

impressed with students who have demonstrated the ability to undergo the full scientific process, from idea conception to the presentation of findings. In any case, being involved with a presentation or publication is almost always a result of a student's persistence in pursuing such options. Students are strongly encouraged to ask if such opportunities are available, seek out assistance, and present themselves as highly motivated to conduct their own research.

Assessing your general interest in psychological research. Psychological research, and research in general, isn't for everyone. Research in psychology is different when compared to the so called "hard sciences" (e.g., biology, chemistry, physics, etc.) because the majority of the constructs are more abstract and pose a range of measurement challenges. Researchers in psychology who desire tangible evidence often conduct more basic research examining neural, physiological, or behavioral influences. Although psychological research has its complications and frustrations, it is an incredibly exciting branch of science that has much room, and need, for new perspectives, ideas, and contributions. As an RA, students should determine if they would like to remain in the world of psychological research or pursue psychology from a different perspective (e.g., policy-maker or clinician).

Clarifying personal research interests. If you have a passion for psychological research and choose to pursue it further, the next step is to determine which area of research is most appealing to you. This involves the identification of a general research question, or set of questions, that you would like to attempt to answer in your personal research. Narrowing one's interests can be difficult for some students as their interests may be multifaceted and broadly conceived. However, specific areas of interest can often be found by searching for common themes existing across all potential interests. Importantly, as an RA, you should not feel obligated to find an interest that perfectly aligns with the goals of the lab that has employed you. In fact, you may realize after testing your interests in a lab that the research on a topic was not as interesting or rewarding as you had hoped. In this case, you should test out other interests and continue working to develop your interests.

National/Regional Psychology Conferences

In addition to the time you may spend engaged in volunteer or paid research assistant positions, another important opportunity that you could take advantage of during your time "off" is to attend conferences in psychology. The general purpose of psychology conferences is to keep researchers, students, clinicians, and the public current with the field through continuing education, discussion/debate of current topics, and dissemination of recent advances in research. Conferences are recommended for all students planning to apply to graduate school as they provide information that is useful for both researchers and clinicians. Further, conferences can positively influence students' motivation and excitement for becoming an active member of the field. Although conferences focusing on special topics or populations are certainly available (you should ask researchers who specialize in your field of interest which ones they recommend), some excellent conferences that broadly focus on many areas of psychology include the APA (American Psychological Association; http://www.apa.org/) and APS (Association for Psychological Science; http://www.psychologicalscience.org/).

Conferences offer several types of presentations. Poster sessions are generally housed in an auditorium or large room and are organized by topic; many people (30+) present posters during a single session. A poster is simply a condensed summary of a research study that communicates the general purpose, results, and significance of the study. Symposia are slide-driven presentations that are given by a smaller group of researchers (typically 5-8) who are conducting research on a shared topic; these presentations are more selective and reserved for the presentation of higher-quality studies. Clinical round tables consist of a panel of experts who discuss/debate current issues relevant to a specific topic in psychology. There are other types of presentation formats (which you can view on the conference websites), but these are the ones that are generally the most informative for students.

Students are not necessarily required to be a presenter to attend some conferences; however, others are more restrictive and may only allow certain groups (e.g., members only, presenters and guests only) to

attend. During all conference activities, your attire should be professional. Costs of attendance often include membership (sometimes not required), registration, flight, hotel (can be divided with colleagues/peers), ground transportation, poster printing, meals, and of course, souvenirs.

As with all learning opportunities, your experience at a conference can be much more valuable if you take advantage of everything it has to offer. Some of the opportunities offered by conferences are obvious, but others are more subtle. A few benefits are reviewed below.

Current Information. Obviously, conferences provide current information about the field. The research presentations mostly represent studies that were conducted more recently and are intended for publication (or were just published). Often, the data presented at conferences precede publications, and as such, attendees sometimes receive a "sneak peak" at what will be published in upcoming journals. Equally informative, discussions of current topics give attendees more insight into the current concerns and directions for clinical work, training programs, career development, legislature related to psychology, and the general information structure of the field (i.e., efficient methods for sharing information). This knowledge will be useful as students determine which area of psychology is appropriate for their interests and preferences. Further, with knowledge of the current trends in psychology, students will be better prepared to conduct innovative research, or implement more empirically-based treatments with a clinical population while in graduate school. Note that many professional associations keep prior conference agendas on their website long after the conference has completed. If you missed a conference, you can still learn a great deal about the field, recent research, and active researchers by reviewing the old conference agendas.

Reputable Presenters. Conference presenters include researchers, clinicians, and/or political figures who have great influence and have significantly contributed to the field. When sitting in on their presentations, students can begin to appreciate the effort and dedication that these individuals have exerted during their time as an active member of the psychological community. Their opinions are often the result of continued (decades-long in some cases) discussions, debates, and personal efforts to improve the science and/or practice of psychology. As a result, attendees receive information that is highly intellectual and thoroughly contemplated. During the experts' presentations, pay close attention to their programmatic way of thinking about the information that they present. More often than not, success in psychological research is accomplished with studies that smoothly integrate preexisting theories with novel ideas, or new perspectives.

Grad School Representatives. At conferences, potential graduate school applicants can observe, meet, and evaluate faculty and students from prospective universities. Upon registering for a conference, you will receive a conference program that includes the schedule of presentations and presenters. Look through the program and identify any faculty and students who can provide you with useful information about each university's psychology program. Try to attend their presentations so that you can get a feel for their current projects or general lines of interest.

For research-oriented students, who could possibly have one mentor during graduate school, presentations can be especially useful and give them a feel for their potential mentor's personality, enthusiasm for research, and interactive style; all of which could possibly foreshadow their life as a graduate student under their supervision. If you choose to interact with a potential mentor, be mindful of how you present yourself and what you choose to say. I would recommend interacting with a prospective mentor if, and only if, you have something important to say, or ask, that is relevant to their presentation or line of research. Remember, this will be your first impression so you want to come across as knowledgeable, confident (not arrogant), and appropriate, both in content and in the timing of your interaction. Regarding the timing of your interaction, it is important to keep in mind that the person may have many people wanting to speak with them. Also, during your conversation, don't feel obligated to announce that you are planning to apply to work with him or her. In fact, you should avoid approaching a potential mentor with the sole intention of stating your plans to apply; instead, your intention should be to gather useful information about the person, their research, or their area of expertise. Announce your plans to apply only when, and if, the timing is appropriate (e.g., the conversation becomes directed towards your interests/status in

the field). In conversations with graduate students, it is more appropriate to ask questions about their respective graduate programs and discuss their overall levels of satisfaction. But, again, the primary focus should be to gain information about the grad student's research and the ongoing projects in their lab.

The Language of Science. Whether you are presenting your own research or discussing research with a presenter, you should attempt to develop your scientific language. This language is difficult to acquire and speak fluently so any opportunity to practice should be welcomed. Developing your scientific discussion skills will increase your credibility both in future research discussions and in graduate school interviews. Importantly, there are several things to avoid when speaking the language of science. First, avoid sounding arrogant and overusing technical jargon. Strive to balance necessary scientific lingo with more common terminology so that you appear knowledgeable but also easily comprehensible. Second, don't overstate your knowledge. Instead, admit your lack of knowledge about a topic, remain confident, and at the same time communicate your enthusiasm for learning new information. Lastly, be positive and non-confrontational. Bad impressions can easily be made with snide remarks, harsh criticism, and negative outlooks. Acknowledge the need for improvements in the field, but do so with respect for those who have dedicated their lives to the progression of psychology.

Final Remarks

Hopefully the information contained in this guide will be useful as you determine your career path in the field of psychology. Please acknowledge that the content presented is intended to be more suggestive than directive as every individual's path could, and should be unique. Examining your interests, seeking out multiple perspectives, and thoughtfully considering your preferences and abilities during this transitional phase will serve you well in choosing the most appropriate program to suit your interests and career aspirations. Good luck!

A persistent link to this document can be found at:
http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/BeforeYouApply.pdf

Additional Resources:
For general information on graduate school programs and the application process, see Dr. Mitch Prinstein's document titled "Mitch's Uncensored Grad School Advice," which can be found at:
http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/Mitch%27s%20Grad%20School%20Advice.pdf

For detailed advice on applying to clinical psychology grad programs, see Sophie Choukas-Bradley's guide titled "A Student's Perspective on Applying to Graduate School in (Clinical) Psychology: A Step-by-Step Guide," at:
http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/TipsForApplyingToGradSchool.pdf

For advice on how to prepare for an interview to a clinical psychology program, see Dr. Mitch Prinstein's document titled "I Just Got an Interview for a Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program, What Do I Do?," which can be found at:
http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/I%20Just%20Got%20an%20Interview%20for%20a%20Clinical%20Psychology%20Doctoral%20Program.pdf

Autobiographical Account

Preface: Please read this account with the understanding that my personal journey is not typical of individuals interested in pursuing grad school in psychology. Additionally, my intention is not to suggest that you should obtain the same number of experiences or that you should spend such a lengthy period of time evaluating your interests. Instead, I only hope that my life can provide some example and encouragement for those of you who have your own uncertainties about moving forward in psychology.

After changing my major to psychology during my sophomore year of undergrad, I found myself a bit lost and confused. Similar to many students who become interested in psychology, I was intrigued by the human mind and had the ever-so-common urge to "help people". However, I had many questions and little guidance. I wondered "What are my career options?" and "How do I best prepare myself and my application for grad school?" Eager to answer these questions, I enrolled in an "Introduction to Clinical Psychology" course. This course pointed me in the right direction as the instructor explained that I should seek volunteer experience in research and/or applied settings to better determine which career option would be the best match for my interests. From this point on, I became a very active, somewhat greedy, consumer of experiences in psychology. Before discussing these experiences, it is important to note that I started my journey with an open-mind and a very broad interest base. As a result, my experiences varied greatly and were encompassing of multiple age ranges, diagnoses, and settings.

During my final years as an undergrad at UNC, I worked in several positions to determine if I was more inclined to working in research or applied settings. For more applied experience, I served as an advocate and on-call volunteer for the local rape crisis center. I also volunteered at a local state-supported psychiatric hospital, where I worked primarily in the child and adolescent schools. To assess my interest in research, I initially joined a lab examining comparative treatments for schizophrenia and, as an RA for this lab, I transported the study participants to and from the treatment sessions. Having established an affinity for working with children and adolescents at the psychiatric hospital, I explored research assistant opportunities at UNC targeting these populations. During my senior year, I volunteered in a research lab examining parent-child relationships in early childhood and the effects of these relationships on later development. Almost simultaneously, I joined the lab of Dr. Mitch Prinstein, who was investigating the influence of adolescent best friendships on depression. Dr. Prinstein's lab especially sparked my interest, and I became enthralled by the complexities of adolescents and their peer relationships. Despite my interest in these topics, I still had other interests to test before making any conclusions about which graduate school programs I should consider.

Following graduation from UNC, I moved to New Hampshire where I worked as a live-in assistant for a family needing support for their 8-year-old son with low functioning autism. For this position, I received training in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) from the child's school, and I was primarily responsible for providing structured activities at home before and after school. While in New Hampshire, I also worked for another family who wanted to incorporate more physical activity into their son's daily routine so that he could maintain a healthy lifestyle. To accomplish this goal, I worked collaboratively with the boy's mother, a psychologist, an occupational therapist, and a personal trainer to develop a fitness program that incorporated the fundamentals of ABA. Not to become detached from research, I also volunteered in a research lab at Boston College, where I assisted with measure selection and database management for a study examining early childhood development. All in all, I spent six months in New Hampshire working in these positions.

Though I enjoyed my time in New Hampshire and my experiences with autism, I began to realize that I may prefer examining topics and disorders that affect a larger population of children and adolescents. With this in mind, I returned to Dr. Prinstein's lab to work as a paid project coordinator for his study examining the associations between adolescent peer relations and depression. I immediately realized that my role in this position was very different from that of my volunteer positions. Suddenly, I was the person primarily responsible for the success of the research project and people were coming to me for answers (yikes!). Over time, I became increasingly more comfortable with the responsibilities of the position as I developed efficient, yet simple, systems for organizing the project. I noticed that under the pressure of being

"in-charge" (so to speak), I became more thorough in finding answers and generating solutions to problems. Perhaps consequently, I began to feel more competent and confident in my abilities to successfully manage the project.

While completing my duties in Dr. Prinstein's lab, I interacted with grad students and discovered that they attended these things called "conferences." My ambition sent me to my mentor with more questions: "What are conferences?" and "Can I go?" In his answer, he introduced the idea of conducting an independent research project and presenting the results of this project at a conference. Having not completed an honors thesis in undergrad, I felt compelled to conduct independent research for my graduate school applications (to be competitive with those students who *had* completed an honors thesis). Though I had taken classes describing the processes of research and methods of analyzing data, the information gained from these courses didn't really sink-in until I developed my own hypotheses and worked with actual data. Don't get me wrong; I certainly had my insecurities going into my first project and knew that I probably wouldn't remember all of the statistics material from undergrad ("What's a correlation, again?"). Additionally, I didn't want to come across as incompetent to my mentor. But, to learn and better prepare myself for graduate school, I swallowed my pride, admitted my lack of statistical skills, and presented myself as eager to learn this necessary aspect of research. Initially, I watched Dr. Prinstein as he tested my hypotheses in front of me (using SPSS). I took notes on how he was analyzing the data, and then I practiced the same analyses on my own. To further increase my skills, I purchased a book (worded for statistical "dummies," like myself) on how to conduct analyses in SPSS; this book, paired with my observations of Dr. Prinstein, led to a rather quick acquisition of basic statistical knowledge.

Using my newly developed area of competence, I completed my first research poster and presented it at a national conference. My first conference experience was fantastic! The symposia and poster sessions that I attended gave me many more ideas for my own research. I took notes, spoke with presenters about their research, and felt inspired to continue in the field of psychological research. I was, of course, nervous about presenting my poster, but this experience was not nearly as stressful as I had anticipated. Having repeatedly practiced a brief verbal summary of my study's findings beforehand, I delivered the same two-minute synopsis to a dozen or so interested viewers. I received positive feedback and some suggestions for future research, which were both highly encouraging and confidence-boosting.

I served as Dr. Prinstein's project coordinator for one full year; then, my untamed curiosity led me in another direction. I began to wonder how peer relationships might operate differently for individuals with externalizing problems (versus internalizing problems). Having some previous high school experience working with an individual with ADHD, I was somewhat familiar with the basic symptoms and social implications of the disorder. Maybe this disorder is something I would be *even more* interested in? Being fairly paranoid about not making the right decision for grad school, I decided that I should test out this interest. In support of my personal and professional development, Dr. Prinstein put me in touch with one of the nation's leading ADHD researchers. I applied, and was accepted, to work at the researcher's summer treatment camp for children with ADHD (in Buffalo, New York). As a lead counselor at the camp, I supervised a team of undergraduate counselors who were responsible for administering a behavioral program to a group of 17 children with moderate to severe ADHD. Training was intense, and the learning curve was steep. The first few weeks of camp were mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting, but over the course of treatment, we (our counselor team) began to feel more comfortable administering the behavioral program, and the kids began to show noticeable signs of improvement. At the end of the camp, the children's behavior had improved substantially and parents were extremely grateful for our efforts. Witnessing the direct impact of empirically-supported treatment on the lives of these children and parents revealed the importance of psychological research and propelled me forward.

Around the same time that I had applied to work at the summer camp, I had also applied to work in a research lab at UVA that was examining the social interactions and peer relationships of children with ADHD. Two days after the conclusion of the summer camp, I began working as a project coordinator for this lab. While working at UVA over the next year, I was allowed to take-on more advanced tasks such as conducting diagnostic interviews, assessing general intelligence, developing a behavioral observation system, and co-leading a parent treatment group. I also coordinated with local schools to arrange for undergraduates to conduct observations in the classrooms and administer surveys to students and teachers. On top of performing my RA duties, I continued to pursue independent research projects and attend conferences. In

doing so, I learned more and more about various grad school programs, potential research mentors, and directions of research.

Coming full circle, I returned to Dr. Prinstein's lab after my position at UVA had ended. Here I worked for one final year before attending graduate school. Since my previous departure, Dr. Prinstein's projects had undergone modifications, and my updated role involved recruiting patients from the local inpatient unit, outpatient clinics, and state psychiatric hospitals. In addition, I assisted with start-up for a new project that involved school-based data collection. During this year, I *finally* took the leap of faith and decided to apply to grad school. At this point, I felt confident in my abilities to conduct research and thought that I had adequately established my research interests. Though my interests remained multifaceted and somewhat broad, they could be characterized by a particular theme. I used this theme to inform my decisions for grad school.

It is worthy to mention that I returned to Dr. Prinstein's lab during my final post-bacc year not only because his research was very relevant to my interests, but also because I wanted to take another year off and apply to grad school at the same time as my girlfriend (whom I had been with for 8 years at this point). She was finishing her senior year of undergrad at UNC, and it was important to me that we make grad school decisions together, considering her career goals and mine to be equally important. I bring up my relationship to acknowledge that many students may be in serious relationships and need to make decisions regarding post-bacc positions and grad school that are mutually beneficial. I also mention my relationship to highlight the personal sacrifices that I made while moving around the country pursuing my interests (my girlfriend remained in North Carolina during my travels to continue her undergraduate education). Ultimately, we had to design our own unique life plan for pursuing our career goals, and so will you.

All in all, despite the personal and financial sacrifices of moving to different places for my various post-bacc positions, I found my experiences to be invaluable as I made decisions regarding grad school. More than anything, I'm grateful that I had the chance to thoroughly assess myself in these various contexts and become more confident in my life plan. In the text above, I purposefully neglected to mention that I had fully prepared 12 grad school applications during my first post-bacc year (with letters of recommendation, personal statements, etc.). Luckily, I realized that I still had many unanswered questions about the field and my own interests. In light of my realization, I resisted the temptation to submit these applications and painfully tossed them in the trash. This decision was likely one of the most important that I've made for my career. Notably, over the course of my post-bacc years, my interests had changed so much that not one of the initial 12 schools I had previously considered was on my final list. From my experiences, I've learned the value of being able to step back and globally assess the likelihood that my life's trajectory will lead to personal happiness.

As I start my third year in graduate school, I am thoroughly enjoying my time as a graduate student in clinical psychology. In one way or another, each of my past experiences has informed my final career goals and plans for graduate school. For this, I am extremely grateful and do not regret any of the time that I spent exploring my interests. Though I am still learning and continue to generate new questions about the field and myself, previous experience has taught me that I should be confident in my ability to learn new skills and answer my questions in the years to come.