

# GRADUATE EDUCATION: A GUIDE FOR UMW PSYCHOLOGY MAJORS

THOMAS G. MOELLER, CHRISTOPHER KILMARTIN, AND  
DAVID W. KOLAR

August, 2005

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Graduate School Decisions	1
Becoming a Professional Psychologist	1
What is Graduate School?	1
Should <u>you</u> go to graduate school in Psychology?	1
Advanced Training in Other Fields	2
2. Graduate Study in Psychology	3
Types of Graduate Degrees in Psychology	3
Fields in Graduate Training in Psychology	3
Accreditation and Licensure	4
Master's vs. Doctoral Programs	5
Types of Degree Granting Institutions and Funding	5
3. Preparing for Graduate School as an Undergraduate	6
Have a Strong Academic Background	6
Go Beyond "normal" Coursework	6
Communicate with Faculty Members	6
Prepare well for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE)	7
3. Applying to Graduate School	9
Decide on a Field of Interest and Type of Degree	9
Decide which Programs to Apply to	9
Obtaining Recommendations from Professors	10
Completing the Application Process	11
Some other Practical Tips for Dealing with the Application Process	11
Visiting Schools	11
Dealing with Acceptance and Rejection	12
Further Sources of Information	12
Appendix A: Biographical Information Form	14

This original version of this guide was part of a larger work entitled, "Career Options for MWC Psychology Majors" by Thomas G. Moeller. The writing of the first edition was supported by a Faculty Development Grant from Mary Washington College during the summer of 1986. J. Christopher Bill, Rachel A. Brown, Renee H. Everingham, Vicki Flaherty, Steve R. Hampton, John Hummel, Joyce Johnson, and Debra Cowart Steckler assisted in the original project. The 2nd edition was revised by Christopher Kilmartin with help from Mary Becilia and Kim Floyd. This edition was revised by David W. Kolar.

The University of Mary Washington discriminates neither in hiring nor employment practices for faculty and staff members, nor in recruiting, admitting, and enrolling practices for students on the basis of race, color, religion, physical disability, national origin, political affiliation, marital status, sex, or age (except where sex or age are bona fide occupational qualifications).

Complaints of discrimination shall be directed initially for resolution or referral to the Executive Vice-President and AA/EEO Officer, Room 15, George Washington Hall.

## Chapter 1

# Graduate School Decisions

In making a career decision, you may face the question of whether or not to go to graduate school. Many students have little knowledge about what graduate work entails or whether they should even apply. The purpose of this chapter is to provide you with some information regarding these issues.

## Becoming a Professional Psychologist

To become a professional psychologist generally requires a minimum of a master's degree, which usually takes at least two years of full-time work to complete. Sometimes, however, the doctoral degree (which takes four or more years to complete) is required. For the most part, professional psychologists perform one (or a combination) of four types of activities:

- 
- 1) **counseling or providing therapy for people who are having personal problems, emotional difficulties, and/or learning difficulties.**
  - 2) **conducting research at universities, for government agencies, or in private industry.**
  - 3) **teaching at colleges and universities.**
  - 4) **applying specialized psychological knowledge to problems in business and industry.**
- 

A more detailed description of the various types of psychologists can be found in chapter 2.

## What is Graduate School?

Graduate school differs from undergraduate education in a number of ways. First, the work is more involved and extensive. You will be given much more to read, and much of this reading will be primary sources from professional journals. In addition, professors will expect you to know methodological techniques and statistical procedures, how to do literature searches, and how to write and argue well. In other words, you will be expected to master the basic skills you have been taught as an undergraduate.

You will be required to work much more independently as a graduate student. Professors will give you a task and expect you to be able to carry it out with a minimum of help and supervision. Many of your courses will be seminars or independent studies in which you will bear a much greater responsibility for your own learning. Others will be more similar in form to most of your undergraduate courses. Many graduate programs also require you to perform some service for your department. This work might involve helping to teach an undergraduate course, collaborating with a professor in doing research, performing some clinical service under professional supervision, or, as an advanced graduate student, supervising junior graduate students. You will have to juggle this aspect of your education along with the others mentioned above. All of this will demand dedication, organization, responsibility, and a good sense of humor as well!

## Should You Go to Graduate School in Psychology?

Students are often faced with the decision of whether to pursue a career which demands an advanced degree, or whether to choose one which does not. In deciding whether to pursue graduate education, you should consider a number of factors.

Perhaps the most important question is whether you are really interested in psychology in general and in a specific subfield in particular. Graduate school, especially a doctoral program, demands a large investment in both time and money. Chances are that if you're really excited by psychology, you'll be successful. On the other hand, if you're just going to graduate school because you don't know what else to do, then your future success and enjoyment are more questionable. So before you decide to go to graduate school, assess your interests and motives and make sure you are going for the right reasons.

A second factor to consider is your undergraduate academic record. If it is strong, then your chances of getting into and succeeding in graduate school are better. On the other hand, a lower GPA might make it difficult or impossible for you to get into graduate school, and it might also call into question your ability to do graduate level work if you do get accepted.

A third question to ask yourself is whether you really enjoy academic pursuits. Much of your work in graduate school is going to involve reading, researching, writing, thinking, and analyzing. If you really enjoyed doing these things as an undergraduate, then chances are that you will enjoy graduate education. On the other hand, if you really didn't get excited by the academic side of college, then you probably ought to think again about pursuing graduate education.

Finally, consider whether you have the psychological qualities that are needed to deal with the demands of graduate school. For example, do you have the organizational and time-management skills necessary to get everything done on schedule? Are you independent and responsible enough to work with a minimum of supervision? Do you have the emotional maturity to deal with the stress, frustration, and doubts which inevitably accompany graduate education? Will you be able to endure several years of making little money? (Graduate students are notoriously poor.) If you can answer yes to these questions, then graduate school might be for you.

### **Advanced Training in Other Fields**

Some psychology majors are interested in pursuing advanced degrees, but not necessarily in psychology. As it turns out, the psychology major is excellent preparation for numerous other professions and the UMW Psychology department has many alumni who have gone on to earn advanced degrees in other fields. Law, medicine and medically-related careers such as dentistry, optometry, nursing, and physical and occupational therapy, are good examples. Some UMW psychology students who certify to teach may enter graduate school in education or special education. A student who is interested in writing fiction, poetry, or children's books may major in psychology and then enter graduate school in English. Students interested in social welfare may go to graduate school in social work after completing their psychology major. In all of these cases, psychology serves as an excellent undergraduate background for further work in higher education.

Much of the remainder of this booklet focuses specifically on graduate education in psychology. Students interested in pursuing graduate work in other fields should consult experts in those fields in addition to reading the information here.

## Chapter 2

# Graduate Study in Psychology

Students interested in going to graduate school to work in psychology related fields have many options. The purpose of this chapter is to give a brief overview of the different types of degrees, specialty areas, and graduate programs that are available to those interested in psychology as a career.

## Types of Graduate Degrees

There are several different kinds of graduate degrees one can earn in order to work in psychology or psychology related fields:

The “first rung” of advanced degrees is the master’s degree (M.A. or M.S.). In most cases, a master’s degree involves 30 or more hours of coursework plus a thesis and/or some type of project or internship. Students typically complete a master’s in two or more years of full-time study. While many of these master’s programs are in research-based or clinical-based Psychology, another option for those specifically interested in doing therapy is to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) by getting a Master’s in Social Work with an emphasis on individual counseling. In Virginia, those who are interested in doing therapy can also become a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) by going to graduate school.

The “specialist” degree (e.g., Ed.S.) is generally found in school psychology programs and requires 60 hours or more of coursework. Students typically take two years to complete the coursework, plus a third year for the thesis and/or internship.

The highest degree in psychology is the doctoral degree, which usually involves from 75 to 90 hours of coursework, plus a good deal of either supervised research and/or clinical training. Students in clinical or counseling psychology programs are also required to complete a one-year, full-time supervised internship. In most cases, doctoral students must first pass all the requirements for the master’s degree. In order to become doctoral candidates, students must typically pass a set of intensive comprehensive examinations in their field of specialization. Most students take at least four years (five for clinical/counseling) to complete all the requirements for their doctoral degree.

There are basically two types of doctoral degrees -- the Ph.D. (doctor of philosophy in psychology) and the Psy.D. (doctor of psychology). The Ph.D. is a research degree; students are required to write a research dissertation. Some Ph.D.’s are in clinical or counseling psychology, in which case the student trains as a practitioner as well as a researcher. The Psy.D. degree is more of an applied-practitioner degree and typically lacks the research emphasis and dissertation requirements of the Ph.D.

## Fields of Graduate Training in Psychology

### *Experimental/Research Psychology*

Research training encompasses all the various subfields of psychology. Some examples of subfields that you can earn a graduate degree in are Developmental, Social/Personality, Cognitive/Learning, Sensation and Perception, Physiological, or Health Psychology. Experimental/Research psychologists often teach and do research in colleges and universities or work for the government or private industry conducting research. The Ph.D. degree is usually a prerequisite for work in these types of positions, although a master’s degree is sufficient for some research positions.

### *Clinical and Counseling Psychology*

Clinical and counseling psychologists are trained to perform psychological assessment and psychotherapy. Training in a Ph.D. program emphasizes both research and practitioner work. In Psy.D. programs, clinical work is emphasized more and research less. There are job openings for persons with a master’s degree in

clinics and psychiatric hospitals, public schools and colleges, community mental-health clinics, as well as alcoholism and drug-abuse clinics -- although some jobs in these areas require a doctoral degree plus a supervised internship of one full year. Clinical and counseling psychologists typically earn more than experimental psychologists, and competition to get into Ph.D. clinical and counseling programs is extremely tough, especially for accredited programs (see below). One can become licensed to do therapy after obtaining an LPC degree, and LCSW degree, or a doctoral degree.

While many students visualize clinical practice as one practitioner in a private office, most practicing clinicians and counselors today work in group practices. This reflects increasing need for shared secretarial assistance, complexities of practice in an era of HMOs, and increasing use of medications as part of many treatment programs. After completing graduate school, most of today's new graduates who want to do therapy enter a group practice where they begin their practice, receiving supervision which leads to local licensure.

A frequently asked question is, "what is the difference between clinical and counseling psychology?" Historically, the major difference is that clinical psychologists typically received more training in the treatment of severe psychological disorders, whereas counseling psychologists received more training in how to help people deal with more "everyday" types of problems (such as career choices, marital problems, family difficulties, etc.)

However, the boundaries between clinical and counseling psychology have become blurred in recent years, to the point where the two degrees are virtually interchangeable. The differences today are mainly in the histories and training philosophies of the two disciplines. Some counseling programs are found in departments of psychology, but others are found in schools of education, whereas nearly all clinical programs are found in psychology departments. It should be noted that at the doctoral level, those interested in working with children (especially young children) in therapeutic settings should seek out a clinical program with a child "track" or specialization. Counseling psychologists at the doctoral level deal almost exclusively with adults, although they sometimes do family therapy or therapy with adolescents. But you can be an LPC and work with children.

### ***School Psychology***

School psychologists are trained to work with children in elementary and secondary schools. Much of the school psychologist's work involves assessing children's intellectual abilities and emotional difficulties and providing recommendations to teachers. In addition, school psychologists sometimes do counseling and develop programs to help prevent and treat emotional problems in children. But school psychologists are more likely to do assessment than therapy. In most states, a school psychologist needs a teaching certificate and a master's or specialist's degree plus an internship in a school setting.

### ***Industrial/Organizational (I/O) Psychology***

Industrial/Organizational psychologists are trained to work in business and industry. They help in testing and selecting personnel, developing programs to improve employee morale and productivity, and applying psychological knowledge and principles to the problems of businesses. Many I/O psychologists have master's degrees; others hold Ph.D.'s.

### **Accreditation and Licensure**

The American Psychological Association (APA) accredits doctoral programs in clinical and counseling psychology. Other organizations accredit school psychology, LPC, and LCSW degrees. Obtaining a license or certification is almost always easier for graduates of accredited programs. Licensure is always necessary for any kind of independent work such as private practice, and licensed psychologists almost always earn more than unlicensed ones. For these reasons, if you are applying to any of these types of programs, you should be aware of whether the particular programs in which you are interested are accredited. Most accredited schools advertise this in their promotional materials. If a school you are

interested in does not mention accreditation in their materials, make sure to ask.

## **Masters vs. Doctoral Programs**

Many students are interested in knowing the advantages of having a doctoral degree vs. a master's degree. While the doctoral degree is more prestigious and provides more options in the long run, for many students a master's degree is sufficient for their career objectives. One clear advantage of a master's degree is that it usually only takes about 2 years to complete. With this degree, one can conduct research, teach at the college/university level (although likely only part-time), and become licensed to perform therapy (individual or group). Many counseling jobs are available for those with master's degrees in counseling or social work in state and local agencies. If you are only interested in direct care (providing therapy) and have little interest in research or teaching, then a master's in counseling or social work might be for you.

While the master's degree takes less time to earn, a doctoral degree can have many advantages over the master's degree. Those with a doctoral degree not only conduct research, but they are usually the ones in charge of the research program, making decisions about what research questions to ask and how to ask them. Individuals with master's degrees who are doing research (for the government, a private company, or academia) are often working for someone with a doctoral degree. Full-time teaching in higher education is another option for those with doctoral degrees. Many colleges/universities will only hire those with a doctoral degree (usually a Ph.D) into tenure-track positions.

Talk with your advisor and/or other faculty members when you are deciding on what type of degree to pursue.

## **Types of Degree Granting Institutions and Funding**

There are a few different types of institutions that grant graduate degrees in psychology. Universities often grant master's degrees and Ph.D. degrees but they don't usually grant Psy.D degrees. While there is a trend for some Universities to grant a Psy.D, it is not very common. A Psy.D. degree is most often granted by a professional school that is not affiliated with a University.

These distinctions are particularly important to note because they can have an effect on how much one pays for a graduate education. For many Ph.D. programs that are affiliated with a university, it is possible to pay very little (if anything) to earn your Ph.D. These programs often waive tuition and provide jobs as either teaching assistants or research assistants for their Ph.D. students. While you won't become independently wealthy in these programs, you also will not incur very much debt. Some master's programs that are affiliated with universities also provide financial support for their students, but this is not as common as it is for Ph.D. students. However, most Psy.D. programs little, if any, financial support for their students. Therefore, students who choose these programs are likely to incur a large amount of debt to earn their degree.

## Chapter 3

# Preparing for Graduate School as an Undergraduate

Because a graduate degree is ultimately necessary for many career options in psychology, undergraduates should begin thinking early in their career at UMW about things they can do to enhance their chances of getting into the graduate program of their choice. The purpose of this chapter is review several things students can do to make it more likely they will get into graduate school.

### Have a Strong Academic Background

To enhance your chances of being accepted into and succeeding at the graduate school of your choice, the first thing is to do well in your courses. This doesn't necessarily mean that you need a 4.0 GPA, but it does mean that you need to achieve above-average grades, especially in upper-division psychology courses. This is particularly true for students who are interested in Ph.D. programs, where competition for entry is particularly strong. For Psy.D. programs and master's programs, your GPA doesn't need to be as high as for a Ph.D. program. But the stronger your grades, the better your chances are for gaining admittance and receiving some kind of financial aide.

In addition to earning good grades, you should take some courses which will help you on graduate entrance examinations (e.g. GRE's) and which will make you more attractive to graduate admissions committees. Graduate schools are often impressed with students who have demonstrated an ability to do independent psychological research. PSYC 491 (Individual Research) is especially recommended for this reason. Many students have also found history of psychology, developmental, social, abnormal and physiological psychology to be valuable for the GRE (which is discussed later).

Outside of psychology, courses in mathematics, natural sciences, and computer science are often helpful. Students who have succeeded in being admitted to graduate school suggest math courses through calculus, additional biology and chemistry courses, and perhaps logic and linguistics.

### Go Beyond "normal" Coursework

Many graduate programs are interested in accepting people who have some experience or more applied knowledge regarding what they will be doing in graduate school and their careers. For example, most graduate programs require students to do research. By conducting independent research with a faculty member as an undergraduate (as noted above) you will show graduate admissions committees that you are capable of (and interested in) doing research. Beyond independent research, students can work, do internships, or volunteer at organizations that are related to their career goals and the goals of the graduate programs they apply to. These outside experiences are usually viewed in a very positive light by graduate programs.

Research summarized in the [Psi Chi Newsletter](#) addressed the question of what undergraduate students can do to enhance their chances of being accepted into graduate school in psychology. According to the responses provided by 59 graduate departments of psychology, **the most important factor is doing research as an undergraduate**. This was followed in order by: paying a personal visit to the department, developing computer skills, doing volunteer and/or paid human service work, and double-majoring in another social science. The survey also found that graduate schools emphasize good grades and good GRE scores.

### Communicate With Faculty Members

Beginning early in your undergraduate career, it is important that you keep your advisor informed of your career intentions, especially if you are considering going to graduate school. By doing so, you will enable your advisor to give you better guidance regarding course selection, and to help you decide if graduate

work is really for you. If you decide to go to graduate school, your advisor can help you determine which specialty fields interest you and which graduate schools you should consider. Finally, your advisor will also be able to help you in the process of applying to graduate school.

You should not, however, limit discussions to your advisor. Indeed, it is beneficial to discuss your plans with other professors and professionals. It is particularly important to talk with professors with whom you have had a good deal of contact, especially in upper-level courses, and/or those who are in the field in which you're interested. By talking to a number of psychologists, you may get ideas which you wouldn't get by talking to only one faculty member. Moreover, if a number of professors all suggest the same thing, you might be more confident in the worth of that suggestion. All in all, it's good to get ideas from a variety of sources. In the last analysis, of course, the decisions will be yours.

Good communication with several faculty members throughout your undergraduate career is also important for another reason: letters of recommendation. You will usually need at least three letters of recommendation when you apply to graduate school, and it is likely that most of these letters will come from UMW faculty members. If you have had good contact with professors, then they will likely know your strengths and your long-term goals and should be able to write you a better letter than if they don't know you well.

### **Prepare well for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE)**

The GRE is a standardized test which consists of two parts: A General Test which measures verbal, quantitative, and writing skills, and a Subject Test, which measures basic knowledge and understanding of the student's field of concentration. Many graduate schools require applicants to submit their GRE scores along with their application and then use these scores to make admittance and financial aide decisions.

**Do not underestimate the importance of your GRE scores.** The fact is that, whether you like it or not, your chances of being accepted into graduate school and of getting financial assistance may depend greatly on your GRE scores. Even students who have very strong GPAs (3.5 and above) can have a difficult time getting into the graduate school of their choice if their GRE scores are low. Some schools use GRE scores to make a "first cut" of their applications, and students with poorer scores do not even have the rest of their application reviewed. Thus, your GRE preparation is an investment in your future. It has been our experience that UMW students who fail to prepare for the GREs (even those with GPAs of 3.5 and above) seldom do as well as those who do prepare. Your few hours of study a day for a few months has the potential payoff of acceptance into graduate school.

Information about the GRE is available on campus from the Office of Career Services (OCS). You can also learn more about this test on their website at [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org) as well as many other websites that focus on how to study for the GRE. If you plan to attend graduate school in the year immediately after your graduation, you will need to take the GRE no later than October or November of your senior year so that your scores can be processed and sent to the schools to which you are applying.

Consult the Graduate Study in Psychology and Related Fields book (available from the department secretary) as well as application information from schools you are interested in to determine whether the school requires the GRE, and if so, whether it requires the Subject Test as well as the General Test. Almost all schools require the General Test, and most schools weight it more heavily than the Subject Test. Therefore, your primary emphasis should be on doing well on the General Test, and secondarily on the Subject Test. It is obviously important to prepare well for the GRE. For this reason, many students find it most advantageous to prepare during the summer, when there are no coursework demands.

There are a number of strategies you might adopt in getting ready for the GRE. First, there are a number of "GRE preparation courses" taught by various companies. OCS has a binder which lists available prep courses. Second, there are also a number of commercially-produced GRE study guides (hard copy and CD-Rom), which are available at local and campus bookstores. These are very helpful if you can consistently set aside time to study. If you need more structure, a course may be the way to go, but

obviously this will be more costly. Also, the psychology department usually holds a GRE training session each semester to help you with both the general and the subject tests. Third, take the sample GRE. This will give you an idea of how much and in what areas you need to prepare. And finally, it's also helpful to study with others who are going to take the test as well. By studying together, you not only reinforce each other, but you can also talk out the answers to each other, thus helping yourselves to develop a strategy for answering questions.

There are three major ways in which you can study for the Psychology Subject Test. First, many students have said that one of the best preparations is to take Psyc 421 (History of Psychology) in the semester prior to the test. Second, find yourself a high-quality introductory psychology book and study it, especially the sections in which you have not had upper-division courses. Some of these books are accompanied by workbooks, which are good for structuring study and evaluating progress. Third, there are also study guides published specifically for the GRE Psychology Test.

Some students have reported that the Psychology Subject Test emphasizes knowledge of "who did what". Thus, you should be quite familiar with prominent psychologists and their work. Again, studying with another person (especially if that person has had a different set of psychology courses than you have) may be very helpful.

## Chapter 4

# Applying to Graduate School

The process of applying to graduate school is often very different from applying to an undergraduate institution and can be rather daunting. The purpose of this chapter is to provide students with a rough guideline for this process as well as to answer some common questions that students have.

## Decide on a Field of Interest and Type of Degree

Before you can apply to graduate school, you must decide on a field of interest within psychology. The first step in this process is usually to determine if you are more interested in the clinical/counseling areas of psychology or in experimental/research psychology. As noted in Chapter 2, these areas don't have to be exclusive, but many students will likely make this distinction before narrowing down their interests. If you are interested in clinical/counseling, then you might need to narrow your interests down by determining if you are interested in working with individuals or groups, in inpatient facilities serving those with severe psychological disorders, at community mental health clinics, in alcohol or in drug rehabilitation centers, etc. If you are more interested in experimental/research psychology then you will usually need to narrow your interests down by focusing on social, developmental, physiological, sensation and perception, cognitive, or any of the other sub-areas of psychology. When performing this "narrowing" process, you may wish to talk further with your advisor, other professionals, or other faculty members.

In addition to narrowing your interests, you need to decide if you want to apply to master's programs, Ph.D. programs, Psy.D. programs, or some combination of these. If you are applying to doctoral programs, it is usually a good idea to also apply to some master's programs in case you are not accepted into any of the doctoral programs. Refer back to Chapter 2 for a brief discussion of the advantages of each of these kinds of programs.

## Decide Which Programs to Apply to

The next step is to decide on a tentative list of graduate schools to which you might apply. The book Graduate Study in Psychology (available from the departmental secretary) lists all of the psychology graduate programs in the U.S. and is an excellent source for information about each program. In addition to this book, there are numerous websites that list and describe different graduate programs in Psychology (for example, [allpsychologyschools.com](http://allpsychologyschools.com)). A simple web-search of "psychology graduate schools" should provide you with many websites to choose from. Finally, consulting with your advisor or other faculty members can be helpful in identifying graduate schools to apply to.

One of the things you will discover in your search is that graduate programs differ greatly in terms of prestige and quality, from the top-quality Ph.D. programs at big-name universities to more modest master's programs at little-known colleges and universities. One of the decisions you'll have to make is where, in this range, to apply.

You can get some idea of where to apply by looking at your own college record and by discussing this issue with your advisor and other professors. The Graduate Study book contains a composite description of students who are admitted into each school's program. By comparing those descriptions with your own record, you can get a better idea of which schools are most likely to accept you. In addition, faculty members can also give you some advice in this area.

There are at least three basic approaches to applying to schools. The first is to apply to only one or two schools that are superior. This strategy may work if your credentials are outstanding, but even that might not be good enough. Remember that you will be competing against excellent students from everywhere for the few slots that are available in these programs. We have had outstanding students at UMW (who definitely belong in graduate school) try this approach only to end up not getting into any graduate program at all that year. Second is the "shotgun" approach, in which you apply to 30 or more schools.

While this approach obviously increases your probability of being accepted somewhere, it is not recommended. The application process is time consuming, expensive, and puts a large burden on you and the people writing letters of recommendation for you. However, if you decide to use this approach, be sure to give yourself plenty of time and try not to be too generic in your applications. The third approach is a balance of the first two. **You choose a few really good schools, a few “backup” schools, and a few in the middle.** For most students, this is the best approach. But your approach should depend on your particular situation. One rule of thumb is do not apply to any school which you would definitely not attend. You can obtain applications material from the institutions’ website or with a phone call or postcard. There’s no need to write an extensive letter in this phase of the process.

There is one other strategy, which is sometimes termed the “back door approach.” Students who do not succeed in getting into a graduate school sometimes take a few courses under a non-degree-seeking status at a particular school, try to work with some professors on their research, and then apply to the school the following year. This allows faculty to get to know them, and they can demonstrate their ability to do graduate work.

## **Obtaining Recommendations from Professors**

As noted earlier, most graduate schools require letters of recommendation from three or more professionals. Most students obtain these recommendations from professors. While you are narrowing down your field of interest and determining what schools you are going to apply to, you should also be deciding which professors to ask for letters of recommendation. You want your references to be able to answer the kinds of questions graduate schools ask, and that means someone who knows you well enough to answer those questions. In addition, you want someone who will give you a strong recommendation, and that means someone for whom you’ve done well.

Sometimes, students don’t have a very good idea of who will give them a good recommendation. A good suggestion is to have a frank talk with prospective references. Ask them how strong a recommendation they could give, and proceed accordingly. This procedure could produce some damage to your ego, but it will ensure you of getting the best possible recommendations.

When asking professors to write a recommendation for you, give them enough time so they can do a good job. A month in advance of the due-date is usually enough time, but they may need more time if exams, semester breaks, or the year-end holiday is coming up.

It is helpful for professors if you are very organized and fill in as much information on the reference forms from each school as possible. For example, be sure to put your name on the application form provided by the school and to supply the address to which it should be sent. If you are applying to a number of schools, supply faculty members with a cover note indicating the names and addresses of the schools, the exact degree (level and subfield) for which you are applying at each school, and the due date for each school. Some schools do not supply forms; they merely ask for a letter. In this case, be sure your recommender knows this.

Although you may have been taught to supply your references with stamped, self-addressed envelopes, many psychology professors prefer to send recommendation forms and letters in UMW envelopes, so check your professor’s preference beforehand. You should offer to address these envelopes, especially if you are asking the professor to do recommendations for many schools.

It is also helpful to provide professors with additional personal information which will help them write a good recommendation for you. **Appendix A contains a form indicating the types of information which many professors find helpful.** However, individual professors may differ in the kinds of information they want from you, so ask them about what would be most helpful to them in the recommendation process.

If you are not planning on going to graduate school right away, but are seriously contemplating it for some

later time, ask professors to write a letter for you now and either place it in their files or in your UMW Credentials File. If you do this, you (and your achievements) will be fresh in your professors' minds, and they will be able to write a strong letter. If you wait for three or four years, chances are that the professors' memories of you will have dimmed, and their recommendations might not be as detailed and strong. If you should want a letter of recommendation at a later time, be sure to give the professor the surname under which they knew you, as well as the courses you took from them and the years you attended UMW. Also provide them with a brief description of what you have done since graduation so that they can update their old letters. Again, the form provided in Appendix A is a useful guide.

## **Completing the Application Process**

By the fall of your senior year, you should have:

- decided on your field of study
- decided which schools to apply to
- taken or are studying for the GRE's
- received application materials from the various schools you are thinking of applying to
- requested and received the consent of a number of professors to write recommendations for you

Even if your application isn't due until the end of January or February, try to complete it and get it in early. You should start thinking about and working on the material during the fall semester so that you can complete the process over the semester break. Most schools will want a "Statement of Purpose" from you describing your interests and why you want to go to graduate school. This statement of purpose is very important and you should spend a considerable amount of time refining it. Starting work on your applications early gives you time to think about, revise, and tailor your application materials to each different school.

## **Some other Practical Tips for Dealing with the Application Process**

1. In deciding which schools to apply to, it often helps to do some research on individual faculty members in the various schools. You can do this easily with computer literature searches, and it allows you to determine which faculty research interests match most closely to your own. When writing your statement of purpose, mention some professors with whom you are interested in working. Better yet, contact some of these professors BEFORE you apply to the program and let them know you are interested in their research and will be applying to their graduate program. Faculty are interested in admitting students who want to work with them in particular. Contacting them ahead of time should increase your chances of acceptance.
2. Emphasize your strengths and the qualities which make you unique. For example, if you have learned some specialized computer language, are fluent in Spanish, or have done independent research or an internship/work in a specific area, make that known.
3. Keep your "statement of purpose" to the length requested in the application and individualize each statement appropriately for each different school. Also, write a first draft and have others read it, then revise. Professors can also be helpful in this process.
4. Make copies of your finished product and make sure to get in your application in plenty of time. It is also reasonable to call the school to make sure your application has been received and is complete, although many schools will send you a notice when they have received some or all of your material.
5. Many schools are moving to on-line applications. But if you are filling out a hard-copy, make a copy of each form before beginning to fill it out. That way, if you make a mistake, you have another blank form.

## **Visiting Schools**

The Psi Chi Newsletter study mentioned earlier reported that visiting a graduate school is one of the best ways to enhance your chances of being accepted into that school. In fact, some programs require a personal interview before accepting a candidate. Others give you the option of a personal interview, but some do not even allow personal interviews. You might consider visiting at least some of the schools to which you have applied. A call to the department secretary should allow you to find out the school's policy on visits and make the necessary arrangements.

You may also wish to visit a school after you've been accepted, especially if you have more than one offer. There is simply no substitute for a personal visit in order to find out what a program is really like.

When visiting a school, it is important to talk to a number of graduate students in your planned area of study. If you don't talk to any students, you run the risk of getting only the faculty's point of view. And if you talk to only one graduate student, you might get a distorted view. The best strategy is to talk to as many different people, both faculty and students, as you can.

## **Dealing With Acceptance and Rejection**

Schools should inform you of their decision sometime before April 1. Good news often comes by a telephone call; bad news almost always comes by mail. You should also be aware that decisions about financial aid (e.g., loans, fellowships and assistantships which you often must apply for separately from the admissions process) are often separate from decisions about admittance to a program. Thus, some schools may inform you that you have been admitted to their program but that no decision has yet been made on your application for financial aid. Others might give you information about both these decisions at the same time.

It is almost certain that you will be rejected by some schools. Although a rejection is difficult to accept emotionally, try not to let it disturb you too much. You might comfort yourself by knowing that most of your professors also received some rejections in their time, and so they can empathize with what you are experiencing. If you're not accepted outright, you may be placed on a list of alternates and be offered a place if one of the accepted students declines the school's offer.

If all goes well, you will get accepted by one or more graduate schools, and then you will need to make some decisions. If you get accepted by more than one, you will need to decide which school's offer to accept.

Most graduate schools abide by the agreement that students will have until April 15 to inform the school whether they will accept that school's offer. What this means is that you don't need to make a decision as soon as you hear from a school. If you receive acceptances, there are some things you should do:

1. Inform your references about where you were accepted and where you were rejected.
2. Communicate closely with your advisor or the professor most involved with your application. When an offer comes in, discuss with them the nature of the offer and the advantages and disadvantages of acceptance based on the criteria you developed earlier.
3. Each time you receive more than one offer, make at least a tentative decision between the two. If you definitely decided to accept one over the other, let the "losing" school know as soon as possible, but if you're genuinely undecided, use as much time as you need, up to the deadline.
4. If you have questions or concerns about the offers, call back the professor who corresponded with you initially and lay the issues on the table. Be honest and sincere, but don't feel forced into making a premature decision.
5. If you've been successful in your quest, congratulate yourself and celebrate. You will shortly

enter the new and unique world of graduate school.

## **Further Sources of Information**

If you would like more information or ideas, you can consult some of the books available from the Psychology department (see the department secretary) or the Office of Career Services.

### ***In the Psychology Department:***

Graduate Study in Psychology  
Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology  
Career Paths in Psychology  
Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sports Psychology

### ***In the Office of Career Services (OCS):***

Graduate Study in Psychology, 2004  
Succeeding in Graduate School: The Career Guide for Psychology Students  
Getting in: Step by Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Grad School in Psychology  
Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology  
Opportunities in Counseling and Development Careers  
Careers in Focus: Therapists  
Opportunities in Mental Health Careers, 1996  
Career Paths in Psychology

# Appendix A

## Biographical Information Form

The following information should be supplied to faculty members whom you have asked to write a letter of recommendation for you for graduate school. In addition to this information, be sure to supply the professor with a list of schools to whom the letter should be sent; addresses to which it should be sent; the deadlines for each school; and the specific degree for which you are applying at each school.

1. Name and current address. (Maiden name if professor knew you by that name.)
2. Basis of contact with professor (e.g., courses taken, dates, grades, etc.).
3. Academic Achievement: Overall GPA and GPA in major; grades in psychology courses; academic strengths and weaknesses; intellectual goals; how your academic background has prepared you for these goals. Include anything “extra” or unique about your background. GRE scores (if known) would be helpful.
4. Non-academic Background: Information regarding your extracurricular activities, work experience (including volunteer work and internships), sports achievements, community work, political or social involvement, foreign travel, etc. Anything which might seem relevant to providing a more complete picture of your intellectual abilities, your motivation, and your personality.
5. Describe your career goals five and ten years from now.
6. List some reasons why you think you would be able to handle the intellectual and emotional demands of graduate school.
7. What are your plans if you don't get accepted to an appropriate graduate school?