

Hello Lakers,

After vast amounts of homework, reading, and research that never seem to end, you have finally reached the point in your undergraduate career where it's time to start graduate school applications. The last couple of years you have geared your work to this moment, but now what? How do you apply? When I myself started this arduous process, I had more questions than answers on how to approach this. Now that I am finished with applying and received several offers, I have been looking back on everything; there are things I am very glad I did throughout my applications, and also bits of information that I wish I had known when I was going through it all. Nearly a Grand Valley alumni and starting my PhD in the fall, I thought it would be a good idea to share everything I learned along the way to help out fellow Lakers as you all apply to graduate schools. I am not claiming to be an expert on the matter, but I have been through it and think I have a good approach to the daunting application process. I also had a friend of mine, Catherine Strauss, help me write this. She is in my graduating class at Grand Valley, and is also starting her PhD this coming fall. She applied, interviewed, and got accepted into Clinical Psychology PhD programs. With her focus on clinical work and my focus on research and academia, we feel that these application guidelines cover the full spectrum of clinical vs research programs. One quick note, this review is geared more towards applying to doctoral programs, but master's applications are very similar.

Before you begin the application process, I would talk to some professors or people in the field to make sure that this is what you want to do and that you will be a competitive applicant. This process is competitive, so you want to make sure you are as prepared as you can be. If you are concerned about your competitiveness as an applicant or are unsure which degree you want to pursue, reach out to professors, other students, and even use google searches to make sure that you are ready.

Once you have that figured out, the first step, and probably the hardest, is choosing which schools to apply to. Hopefully before you start this, you know which field of psychology you want to go into, and, if you are going into a research-based program, what your clearly defined research interests are. If you want to stay in state, there are some great programs here in Michigan, like the ones at Western, Michigan State, Wayne State and University of Michigan. If location is not a priority for you, then that really opens your options. The psychology office has a book that lists every accredited psychology program in the country, and organizes this by field. Also, it lists whether it is a masters or doctorate program. I used this book to look up schools and it was exceptionally helpful. Another way to find schools (if you are pursuing a research-based degree) is by reading some literature in your preferred area of research. If you read a really great publication that grabs your interest, see if any of the authors are at a program you could apply to. When you initially start looking for schools, don't limit yourself in terms of programs you want to look more into. Catherine's original list had 62 programs on it! Once you have a general idea of where you want to be and the programs you want to apply to, your next priority is to visit all of the program websites and deciding if it sounds like a place you want to have on your final list.

There are a few important things to look for when narrowing down your final list. First is admission requirements. Programs will list required classes that prospective students need to have, and also an overall GPA requirement (this is usually a 3.0). Grand Valley's psychology department does a great job in deciding which classes psychology students need to take, so you will most likely have all the required prerequisites. Second, you should look to see if the program requires the psychology-subject GRE. Many schools do not require this, and for the ones that do, is it most likely only required if you are applying to their program as a non-psychology major.

Lastly, there are a few charts to examine that are exceptionally important. This is usually called “Student admissions and outcome data.” Here are a few things you should look at on this page

- Admitted students’ GPA and GRE scores: Applying to PhD programs is exceptionally competitive, and one of the main criteria looked at are an applicant’s GPA and GRE scores. This page will allow you to see how competitive you will be at a program. As stated earlier, a 3.0 is usually required. But Catherine and I saw that programs typically looked for GPA’s ranging from a 3.6-3.9. But even if your GPA and GRE scores are lower than the average admitted student, that does not mean you won’t get accepted; other parts of your application can compensate for this.
- Application data: This will show how many students applied to the particular program, how many offers of admission were made, and how many incoming students they had.
- Financial aid rewards/assistance: These charts will show you how much money the program gives their students, and what percentage of incoming students get this assistance. For example, many schools will give out teaching or research assistantships. If a student is rewarded with this, they do not have to pay for tuition, and on top of that, will also be rewarded a stipend.
- Internship placement: This is mostly for clinical students. This shows what percentage of their graduates were able to get internships after completing graduate school at their program.

Once you find a program you like, it is then important to find a faculty member there that is publishing research in an area you would like to continue at the graduate level. THIS IS ARGUABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THE APPLICATION PROCESS. This is because you not only apply to the school and specific program, but you also apply to work with a certain professor during your graduate school career (this faculty member will almost always be within the program to which you are applying). In my application process, I was more successful at the schools where my research interests were a great match with the professor whose lab I applied to. It would be to your advantage to email the professors you are interested in working with to make sure they are taking students, especially if they are the only person at that program with whom you would like to work. But, keep in mind that some programs operate under a more open mentor model, and may accept students as a department instead of in specific labs. Do your research to figure out how your prospective programs work. Most doctorate applications will have deadlines starting in early December. I would start the program/professor search as early as you can, this can take a while. Choosing how many schools you apply to is for your discretion. It is very competitive, so it cannot hurt to apply to as many as you can. Many people I talked to applied to around ten programs. Personally, I applied to 16 (11 doctorate and five masters). Having said that, if you apply to more than 18 or 20 programs, the quality of your applications can start to decrease. So, know your limits and make sure that you will be able to dedicate enough time to all of your applications.

Once you have completed your list, it is time to start applying. I will briefly list a few materials that you will need to provide while filling out your applications. Before I do this, I will quickly mention something, but it is not true for every program you apply to. Many programs will have you first apply to the graduate school, and following this you will apply to the psychology department at the university. So here is a list of materials you will generally need:

- Personal statement: This is a roughly two page letter describing your experiences in your undergraduate career, as well as your career goals for the future. Emphasize those experiences that relate most directly to your program of interest. Be sure to indicate which faculty member’s lab you are applying to and why you are interested in their lab. Also, it can’t hurt to specify more than one faculty member. This is because they might not be taking a new student; faculty

members do not always look for a new student every year, it depends on how many graduate students they currently have.

- Transcript: In most cases, you need to upload a copy of your transcript (this will be considered an unofficial copy). You will also need to send schools official transcripts, which is done through student services. Be sure to send this at least a week before the deadline, this is because it sometimes takes a little bit for them to send it off. If you have ever taken classes at other institutions (even if it is just one summer class), you will likely have to send these transcripts as well. Consult with your school before sending official copies of these transcripts, as other institutions may make you pay to send an official transcript out.
- Letters of recommendation: For doctoral programs, they will be asking you for three of these (at least two from professors and sometimes at most one from another source). They will most likely ask for these in two different ways. The first, and the most common, is done by email prompt. When you are filling out your application, it will ask for your letter writers' email address and that university will send them an email. The letter writer then replies with the letter attached. A second way a school will ask for a letter is by hard copy. When this is the case, let your letter writer know, and provide them with an envelope. When they return it to you, the envelope has to be sealed, with their signature across the seal. With every letter, you have an option to waive your rights to view the letter. While it may be tempting to look at what they wrote, it is always better to waive your rights with this option. Make sure you talk to your letter writers at least a month beforehand. You will likely not be the only one they are writing letters for, so be courteous and give them enough warning so that they will have the time (and the inclination) to write a well-thought out, really positive letter.
- GRE scores: Some applications will require you to upload an unofficial copy of your scores. What I did for this is I just saved a copy of my scores to a word document. On top of this, every program will ask for your official GRE scores. Most programs should have a "GRE code" listed somewhere on their page. When you have this code, you can then send scores directly to the university from the ETS website. If you know which schools you are applying to before you take the GRE, you can send 4 scores for free at the end of the exam. Generally scores in the 50 percentile or higher are adequate to be competitive in most mid-range schools, especially if the rest of your application is really strong.
- Resume/CV (Curriculum Vita): Include everything relevant to the field you are applying to such as research experience, clinical experience, awards and honors, volunteer experiences, extracurriculars, and education history (including major and overall GPA, major/minors, etc.)

Alright, after you complete all of this for every school you are done applying! Two things to keep in mind while trucking your way through this. One, do not wait until the last minute to do this. Realistically, you should be starting sometime in the summer before you apply. Two, it can get somewhat pricy. Each school will range from around \$40-80 to apply. Then on top of this, it is another \$25 to send GRE scores to each program. After you are done applying, you play the waiting game. For schools with December deadlines, you will typically hear back from them any time between January and mid-late February. In the meantime, remember that for the time being the pressure is off and it is out of your hands! So try to enjoy your holiday break and final semester at GV!

The next step is interviews. This can be very intimidating, but have fun with it! When you make it this far, this means that you are one of their top applicants in a very competitive pool. This is impressive and you should be very proud of yourself. That being said, in getting an interview you know that the admissions committee believes you will be a successful applicant based on your qualifications. By the

time you get to the interview then, they are really trying to gauge how well you fit with your prospective advisor and the program as a whole, so don't feel like you need to list off your credentials to every person you meet and just be yourself. If you just so happen to get multiple interviews, keep in mind that two or more interviews could occur on the same day. If this happens, talk to the second (or third) program that offered you an interview and ask if there is a makeup day you can come, or a phone interview you can set up.

There are a few things I did in preparation for the interview. First, make sure you are able to dress to impress! What I mean is this. Many people wear blue or black suits, so I bought a grey suit. I also bought a bright yellow tie. For women, it is also advisable to get a suit, but pant suits, skirt suits, or even professional structured dresses with blazers are appropriate. Avoid short hemlines, stretchy pants, or khaki pants. Try to dress as professionally as possible. Either way, making yourself stand out can make a very big difference. During one of my interview days, I actually got several compliments from faculty members about my tie. These little things truly can help out in surprising ways.

Something else I did, which I believe ended up being invaluable, was I got familiar with the faculty members I met with, especially the professor whose lab I was hoping to work with. When you receive an invitation for an interview, a schedule for the day will typically follow. On average, you will most likely interview with around five faculty members, and occasionally graduate students as well. When I received this schedule, I went to the professors' webpages and printed off copies of their top three publications and read them a few days before the interview. For your prospective advisor, I would read 5-10 articles to get a true sense of where their research is headed and what it's all about. You can also typically find lab webpages for each of your prospective mentors, which list the projects they are currently working on as well as the other students in the lab. Reading over this information can be very helpful as well. This will allow you to be familiar with their research, greatly impressing them the day of the interview. Another thing to research more is the program itself. You want to be able to articulate why you like their program specifically, as well as ask questions about it. When it comes time for the interview, there are two major phases. The first is usually the night before the interview, in which you hang out with a current graduate student of the program, and usually more than one. If the program gives you the option of staying with a current graduate student during your visit, take it! Those applicants that stayed in hotels nearby did not have nearly as positive an experience as those who stayed with other students, and it saves you money! This is also a great opportunity to ask questions about the program that you might not feel comfortable asking the faculty members. Examples of such questions are:

- What is a typical day for you as a graduate student here?
- Do you like working with your mentor? (the faculty member you applied to work for)
- How much involvement in research does your mentor allow?
- Does your mentor allow you to publish with him/her?
- Are you able to afford life in the area with the provided stipend? Have you had to take out any loans?
- What kind of financial support is provided?
- Do the faculty members in the department seem to get along?
- What are the relationships like with between the graduate students?
- What is the city like?
- What do the graduate students do for fun?
- What do students do in the summer?
- What made you choose this program over other offers you received?

This time with the graduate students is a lot less formal than your actual interviews will be, but still be sure to act professional. They will remind you that it is informal, but after you leave the next day, the faculty ask the graduate students about you. What they are really trying to find out is if you would be enjoyable to work with for the next four to six years. Another important thing to remember is that in most cases there will be some sort of social event at which alcohol will be present. You should not drink any alcohol, at least not yet. You want to make sure you are making the best impression you can, and you want to be clear-headed for interviews the next day. So save it for later!

The following day will be a long day of interviews with the faculty. Every program varies, but my interview days were from about 9:00am to 3:00pm. As I stated earlier, you will most likely meet with five different faculty. They will ask you a lot of the same questions, but each professor will also ask separate questions. In my experience, each session lasted about thirty minutes. The only exception was with the faculty member whose lab I applied to, and this was about an hour in length. These are some of the questions you should expect:

- Why do you have interest in our program?
- Why do you want to work in the indicated professor's lab?
- What are some potential future research ideas you hope to contribute?
- What research have you participated in? Tell me about the studies you have ran.
- What were the responsibilities assigned to you in your labs?
- What kind of skills do you have with programs such as SPSS?
- What are some clinical experiences you have?
- What are some of your strengths?
- I noticed some weaknesses in your resume and transcript, can you explain to me what happened here?
- What kind of career are you looking for after you receive your PhD?

These are definitely some tough questions, especially when they address your weaknesses. When this happens, **DON'T MAKE EXCUSES**. For example, if the interviewer asks, "I see a lot of B's on your transcript, why do you think that happened?" Do not answer with something such as, "The professors I had for those classes were not very good, so I do not think it was my fault." Instead answer by saying, "I was more focused on the research I was working on with my professor, so I spent more time in the lab than reading the text for the class." Also remember that you really should approach the interview itself as a conversation with a fellow psychologist. Don't get so caught up in nerves and trying to impress them that you don't let your personality come through. Make (appropriate) jokes, get to know what they like to do in their spare time, learn more about how they got to where they are, etc. Again, they are trying to decide if you as a person will fit in with their program, so make sure you are actually personable.

Another very important part of the interview is that they want **YOU** to ask them questions. This is important because you not only learn about the program you are potentially signing your life away to for the next several years, but it shows the interviewer that you have a deep, educated interest in their work and the characteristics of the program. When I was interviewing, they continually asked me if I had any more questions for them. I honestly think I asked them three times as many questions as they asked me. And don't hesitate to ask the same question to twenty different people! You will want to make sure that the answers are all consistent. If not, it may raise a red flag. Some questions you should ask are:

- What kind of assistantships/funding are given to students?
- (If it is a teaching AND research assistantship) How much of a student's work will be research compared to teaching?
- How involved are students in your research? What are some of the responsibilities?
- Do you allow students to publish with you? How often do students publish?
- (If you want to go into a teaching career) What kind of teaching opportunities are given to students?
- What kinds of resources are available to students to run studies? I.e. Labs, participant pools, data sets, etc.
- Does your department collaborate with any other departments on campus? What about other organizations/corporations in the area?
- How long do students receive financial assistance for?
- How long does your program typically take to complete?
- Is there any funding/financial assistance available to students during the summer?
- What kinds of classes do students take?
- What kind of internships do your students typically get? Is the match rate high for students' top choices?
- What kind of practicum experience is available? What sorts of populations do students typically work with?
- What externships are available? Do you have to apply for them?
- Knowing what you know now and being where you are, what is one piece of advice you would have given yourself when you were in my shoes (as an applicant going through the interview process) about the application process, grad school, or life after school? (I got some really interesting answers for this)

You might have noticed that I did not ask any of these questions in the first person. It is important to ask questions from the "incoming student" perspective. It is important to ask all of these questions and sound as interested as possible. It might also be the case that while you are learning about the program, you start to notice that you do not like it. This is okay! That is why you ask the questions. I found this happening to me, and it made my final decision a lot easier.

Keep in mind that there is certain etiquette involved in the admissions process. If you are one of the lucky ones who goes to an interview with an offer in hand and you find that you don't like the program you are interviewing at as much as the one you have an offer for, you need to let them know as soon as you leave that you wish to respectfully withdraw your application and plan to accept an offer elsewhere. This isn't a bad thing, and typically faculty members are just excited that you have found a program that's a good fit for you. If you happen to receive one offer while holding another, it is your responsibility to make a decision and reject one of them as soon as possible. Remember that while you hold an offer for a program you aren't going to attend, there is another student desperately hoping to fill that spot. Just make sure to be respectful during the whole process. You WILL run into these people again, and you want to make sure they don't have a bad opinion of you.

On that note, you want to make sure you treat the other applicants with respect as well. Don't be that person that talks about other applicants behind their back, don't ask another candidate lots of questions about their credentials, and try not to let it get to you that these people are competing for the same 6-8

spots you are. You are just as qualified as they are and have just as much right to be there, so don't feel like you need to compete with them on interview day.

Even though there are certain ways that you need to be courteous, keep in mind that the programs have to follow some rules too. During one of Catherine's interviews, they made her disclose all of the other programs she was interviewing at, with whom she wanted to work, and what her admission status was at each of those schools. During one of my interviews, the graduate student I was staying with also pressed to find out which other programs I held offers from. It turns out that it is actually against APA regulations to ask an applicant these kinds of questions, so you have no responsibility to answer them, especially if a faculty member is asking.

Seem a lot of work? It is not as bad as it sounds, and looking back at it, it is actually a lot of fun. This is what you have spent almost your whole life working towards. After you interview, it is then time to wait again. When you receive an offer, do not feel pressured to give them an answer right away. They HAVE TO give you until April 15 to make a decision. This allows applicants to hear back from all their schools before making a final decision. But as explained above, it is courteous to give an answer as soon as you can. So after learning about all these programs and if you receive multiple offers, how do you decide? This can be extremely difficult, and depends on the person. Personally, there were a few factors that I used to make my final decision:

1. The research I would be participating in.
2. The fit with the program, my would-be adviser, and the graduate students I met.
3. The financial assistance provided.
4. How much I liked the city. Keep in mind that this is a place that you will be living in for the next four to six years.
5. I went with my gut. When I visited multiple schools, only one of them gave me the feeling of "I can really see myself here." Catherine said she also felt the same way when she left the program she accepted an offer from. She described it as "When I left the program I chose, it felt like I had just gone on a really good first date."

I hope that this has been of help. I know that I would have liked this guidance while going through the process. It is something you should not have to endure on your own. The faculty at Grand Valley are exceptionally helpful as well, and I would not have gotten through this without them, so ask them for help if needed! I wish you the best of luck in your graduate school applications.

Best,

Michael Mead