

The Gradnomicon

Or: So You're Interested in Grad School

Michael D. Barnett, Ph.D.

Introduction

Hello! I'm Dr. Barnett, faculty advisor in the Department of Psychology. After advising millions (well, a *lot*) of students, I've decided to write down my "general spiel." Please read *all* of *The Gradnomicon* – *even the parts that you think don't apply to you*. There's a short quiz at the end.

Disclaimers

1. According to legend, *The Gradnomicon* may possess the soul of anyone who dares to read it.
2. *The Gradnomicon* is intended to be helpful, but it's not official or authoritative. All of this stuff ~~has been prophesized~~ is just my opinion. Think of this as just you and me having a chat – except I'm the only one talking. That's how chats with me often go.

Do You Even Need to Go to Graduate School?

Many (but not all) jobs in psychology required advanced degrees, licenses, or both. What's the difference between a degree and a license? A university "gives" you a degree; a state "gives" you a license (although neither is free – far from it!). A degree is necessary but not sufficient for a license. As a general rule of thumb, if you're interested in obtaining a professional license (e.g., to become a licensed psychologist, licensed professional counselor, licensed marriage and family therapist) and/or into going into academia (teaching at college level or higher and/or conducting research), then you'll need a graduate degree of some kind. If not, then you don't need to continue reading *The Gradnomicon*.

"But wait!" you say. "Earlier, *The Gradnomicon* instructed me to read all of what is inscribed herein, yet it just said I could stop reading. This is a contradiction!" Well, my friend, I'm afraid that is simply the madness setting in. You've already fallen under this tome's spell.

Which Type of Graduate Degree Should I Get?

There are three types of graduate degree:

1. Masters (M.S., M.Ed. – the M. is the masters bit, and the other letters indicate what kind of department awarded it to you)
2. Psy.D.
3. Ph.D.

Which one is right for you depends on what you want to do with your life. A graduate degree is a means to an end (even if that end is just avoiding gainful employment for a few more years!), so it's often helpful to begin with your overall goal.

1. If you're interested in working in academia, then you need a Ph.D.
2. If you're interested in working in a hospital setting, forensic psychology, psychological or neuropsychological assessment, then you need a doctoral degree: either a Ph.D. or a Psy.D.
3. If you're interested in doing psychotherapy, then any of the three may be right for you.

So what's the difference in the degrees? Well, people with a Psy.D. or Ph.D. can call themselves "doctor" without any medical training (and, alas, without the commensurate salary). Besides that:

Masters

- Typically around 2 years
- Most are practitioner focused
- Typically have little financial support
- Typically admit many students
- Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT), etc.

Psy.D.

- Typically around 4-5 years
- Typically practitioner focused
- Typically have little financial support
- Typically admit many students
- Licensed Psychologist

Ph.D.

- Typically around 5-7 years (yet somehow manages to seem even longer)

- Practitioner and research focused (exception: some other programs – experimental, cognitive, personality, social, developmental – are usually strictly research-focused)
- Typically ~~good~~ better financial support
- Typically admit few students
- Licensed Psychologist

Fields and Programs

Which Field of Study?

Man, there sure are a lot of fields of study! Counseling, clinical, experimental, health, marriage and family, forensic, neuropsychology, rehabilitation, and so on... If only there was a Sorting Hat to know. But read about each area and talk to advisors and mentors about each.

Which Programs Do I Apply To?

For Ph.D. and Psy.D. programs, I generally advise students to apply to APA-accredited programs: <http://www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/programs/>

For masters programs, it's a bit more complicated because the APA doesn't accredit them. Methods:

- Look at APA-accredited doctoral programs and see if the department also offers a standalone masters degree.
- CACREP accredits counseling programs, including masters programs: <http://www.cacrep.org/>

How Do I Find Information About Programs?

- Program websites.
- *APA's Graduate Study in Psychology, Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical or Counseling Psychology* – an amazingly thorough book!
- Connect with faculty and students in a non-stalkerish manner.
- Studying the entrails of sacrificial offerings.
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How Many Programs Do I Apply To?

This is complicated. Remember that in most cases, if you don't get into a program, then it's going to be another year before you can apply again, so in that sense you'd like to apply to as many as you can. However, each application costs money and takes effort, so you'd like to apply to as few as possible. So, it's a balancing act.

In general, 4-5 well-chosen masters programs is usually sufficient. For doctoral programs, 10-15 well-chosen programs is recommended, with 12 *realistic* options maybe being the best number. Research suggests applying to more than 15 isn't helpful as, frankly, if you apply to that many and don't get in, then you could apply to many more and still probably not get in.

By the way, if you're applying for graduate school, hopefully some part of your brain is screaming at the lack of a citation of that "research" in the previous paragraph.

But what do I mean by "realistic"? Well, it's OK to apply to that dream school that almost no one gets into. Just don't count it as one of your 12. For Ph.D. applicants, it's often advisable to also apply to 2-3 masters programs as a "backup."

If you're applying to Ph.D. programs, it's advisable to apply to programs all over the country. It's very common to have to move for a doctoral program. It's also common to have to move again for your internship year. And then for a job. And then for your next job. Basically, prepare to live a semi-nomadic existence for the better part of the next decade.

What Do I Need to Get Into Graduate School?

Welcome to the core of *The Gradnomicon*. This is where you will learn the secret rituals and incantations needed to get into graduate school. It's likely the reason you've imperiled your soul by reading this far. The first thing to note is that many graduate programs are competitive, and the rest are extremely competitive! The following are important:

- CV
- Personal Statement
- GPA
- GRE
- Letters of Recommendation
- Courses
- Minor
- Volunteer/Work Experience
- Research Experience
- Miscellaneous
- Passion, Personality, and Stuff Like That

CV

Before you applied to graduate school, you had a resume – sorry, *resumé*. But now you have a CV: *curriculum vitae*, Latin for “courses of life” – basically, a pretentious resume.

Your CV will list all of your *relevant* experiences. Wait, you may be thinking, that word “relevant” was in italics, and terms in italics are ~~likely to appear on the exam~~ important. Generally, you don't want to list experiences that aren't relevant to psychology. So, you may have been the greatest dog groomer or Uber driver in the world, but putting that down might cause you to lose control of your message (see “Control Your Message” below).

Personal Statement

Most programs will request a personal statement, although some will insist on calling it other things like Letter of Intent or Personal Narrative or Bert. A personal statement should be about 2 double-spaced pages unless the program specifies otherwise. If every document you ever write has a ratio of time spent writing to number of pages, then this should be one of the highest, perhaps only behind the most passionate love letters and confessions to the most heinous crimes. You're trying to distill your very essence into those two pages (sounds messy). Make sure it addresses whatever points they request. But, in general, here's a format to consider:

- Paragraph 1: What got you interested in psychology. Quick piece of advice: even though it's called a "*personal* statement," I almost always advise against sharing any of your personal mental health issues.
- Paragraph 2: What you're interested in and what got you interested in that.
- Paragraph 3: What you'd like to do with your degree and said interest. Maybe where you see yourself in 10, 20, 30 years (protip: don't put "in jail").
- Paragraph 4: Why you're a good fit for the program and, for a Ph.D. program, the individual faculty member you're applying to work with.

A few more things about your personal statement:

- Although it's OK to highlight a few relevant accomplishments, don't just rehash your CV. They'll have that.
- Be memorable... but not for the wrong reasons. Start off with an interesting sentence or a quote or something.
- Never say "I am interested in psychology because I want to help people." It's a cliché.
- Consider explaining away negative aspects of your application (e.g., if your GPA is low).
- Have knowledgeable mentors you trust – ideally, folks who are willing to write you a letter of recommendation would also be willing to help here – look it over.

GPA

As a rule of thumb:

- Masters and Psy.D. programs: 3.0 and above
- Ph.D. programs: 3.5 and above

Raise your GPA in the following ways:

1. Work hard in current courses.
2. Take future classes strategically.
3. The UNT gods are merciful gods. You can retake courses to get a higher grade.

GRE

Most graduate programs require your GRE scores. What's the GRE? I'll put it in analogy form here:

SAT : Getting into college :: GRE : Getting into grad school

Almost all programs require the general GRE exam, not the GRE psychology subject test. Make sure you study thoroughly. In most cases, just buying a GRE study guide from [*insert name of book retailer here – sponsorship opportunity available for an obscene amount of money!*]. Generally, you take the GRE the summer before your senior year.

Letters of Recommendation (LOR)

Almost all programs require three LORs. At least two should come from faculty members – ideally, UNT psychology faculty. One can come from someone outside academia. This is typically from a supervisor at a relevant job or volunteer site. It's generally not advisable to use a supervisor from a non-psychology kind of job. Except in very rare circumstances (such as a freak lab accident resulting in radioactive vampire bunnies swarming the U.S.), don't have a family member or friend write you a LOR.

Courses

The Gradnomicon doth decree that all psychology majors should take at least 3 of these:

1. Personality
2. Developmental
3. Abnormal
4. Social

And, lo, students interested in doctoral programs should take 1-3 of these:

1. Learning and Memory
2. Cognition and Perception
3. Psychophysiology

Furthermore, you should take courses appropriate to the program you're applying for. If you're applying to clinical psychology programs, it looks a bit odd if you've never taken Abnormal Psychology.

Minor

I've never heard anyone say, "We'd take this student for this program (or hire this person for this job) if only they had a minor in X!" However, getting a minor is not only a great way to learn about what you're interested in doing; it's also a great way to *show* that you're interested in that thing.

Volunteer/Work Experience

Getting volunteer or relevant work experience can be helpful. Ideally, you want work experience with the population that interests you. So, if you want to specialize in working with individuals with severe mental illness, then volunteering at Denton County MHMR or the equivalent might be good experience. I particularly advise this when it comes to children – it always looks odd when someone says they're interested in researching/working with children but has no experience of actually having done so.

Research Experience

Research experience is primarily important for students interested in applying to Ph.D. programs.

Miscellaneous

Presentation matters. Have someone proofread all of your application materials. When you apply, use a professional email account. If you put "mean_dog_27@gmail.com" as your email address on your CV, this does not look as polished as, say, using your UNT email address. (You know, that email address you only check when you're hoping that campus is closed due to inclement weather!)

Passion, Personality, and Stuff Like That

All of these are extremely important, but I can't really help you with them!

The Process of Actually Applying

The process is generally the same for all graduate programs. Although some masters programs are exceptions to this, in general programs only admit new students in fall, and applications are due the fall before you apply. This has a few important implications:

- Unless you want time off in between your undergraduate and graduate degrees, you need to apply during the fall of your senior year.
- Anything you want to show up on your CV in your applications needs to be done by the end of the fall semester of your senior year.
 - o If you get a poster accepted at a conference, have a thesis underway, etc., you can list these on your CV with (expected) after them or whatnot.
- It typically doesn't do much good to graduate in winter because you can't start graduate school until the following fall anyway. It's usually advisable to slow down your courses and use the time to get research experience or volunteer.

Control Your Message

Anyone applying to graduate school, but especially folks applying to Ph.D. programs, needs to make sure that their application tells a consistent story. Programs and faculty want to know who they're getting.

Here it might help to look at the application process from the other point of view, that of the program. Each year, a Ph.D. program in psychology is going to have about 8-12 openings. They're going to receive hundreds of applications (I know it's depressing, but it's important for you to know this). How are they going to narrow it down to the final 3% of folks they actually take? Typically, they're first going to exclude applications that don't meet certain basic criteria (e.g., GPA, GRE, coursework). Beyond that, they're going to give individual applications to the relevant faculty member and/or committee.

Look at this way: applying to a Ph.D. program isn't like applying to college. When you applied to UNT, you just applied to the university. When you're applying for a Ph.D. program, you're applying to a university and a program, but you're really applying to work with one person. You're applying to be one faculty member's apprentice – his or her *Padawan*, if you will. (This system is actually called the “apprenticeship model.”) So, you need to tailor your application to that one person. If you want to get a Ph.D. in clinical psychology focused on neuropsychology, then you're going to apply to Dr. Smith, who does neuropsychology research. You want your application to *scream* neuropsychology (the magic of *The Gradnomicon* is so powerful that, in some instances, applications have been known to actually scream). You need a good GPA and good GRE scores to survive that initial cull, but beyond that having appropriate courses, research experience, letters of recommendation (ideally from individuals in that area), volunteer work. Everything (as much as possible) should be related to neuropsychology. Why? Dr. Smith lives, eats, breathes, and sleeps neuropsychology. When Dr. Smith wakes up in the morning, he's thinking about neuropsychology when he's brushing his teeth. He wants someone who's as into neuropsychology as he is. You need to prove that that's how into neuropsychology you are. In other words, specialize to the extent that you can.

One quick caveat, though: research experience is very valuable. Demand always outstrips supply. So, as an undergraduate, you should attempt to get research experience that's as close to what you want to do as possible, but never let the perfect be the enemy of the good: in short, take whatever you can get.

What Success Looks Like

Here, the arcane text of *The Gradnomicon* shifts into prophesy.

Let's say you've sent off your 12 applications to Ph.D. programs and included a few masters programs as a backup plan. Even the most spectacularly good student is unlikely to be accepted by all 12 programs. You'll probably be rejected by most programs. Usually, rejection comes by mail. Your mailbox can be a pretty depressing place for awhile. Good news typically comes by phone or email. Oh, and "good news" isn't hearing that you've been accepted. It means getting an interview!

Interviews for grad school (mostly, it's Ph.D. programs that do this but some masters programs do as well) are a big event. Typically, the night before the interview is an "informal social event" with the current graduate students in the program. They will say that you're not being evaluated, but you probably already know that you are.

The interview itself is typically an all-day or even a multi-day event where you interview with several faculty members and current students. Dress professionally. You can always tell when it's interview day in Terrill Hall because suddenly there are dozens of eager/nervous people in suits roaming around lost.

During the interview, you want to answer questions about yourself and ask questions about what the program is like. If you're interviewing for a Ph.D. program, be prepared to discuss your research interests. Typically, they won't grill you about every detail of your interests, but they may ask some questions to probe whether you know the basics of the topic. So, if you've said you want to do attachment research, you should be able to name drop Bowlby and outline the basics of attachment theory. One of your main goals is to come across as passionate about the interest you share with the faculty member you've applied to work with, hardworking, and fun/well-rounded.

Quiz

1. Did *The Gradonomicon* take possession of your soul?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I'm not quite sure yet – maybe
 - d. I didn't have a soul to begin with

2. A _____ gives you a degree; a _____ gives you a license.
 - a. State; university
 - b. University; state
 - c. Thermometer; DMV
 - d. DMV; thermometer

3. How is a raven like a writing desk? (One sentence answer)

4. Which is a good job to put on your CV when applying to graduate school?
 - a. Server at a restaurant
 - b. Babysitter
 - c. Mental health technician
 - d. Oligarch

5. If you're applying for a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology, it looks a little strange if you've never taken:
 - a. The temperature of a laboratory animal
 - b. Abnormal psychology
 - c. Developmental psychology
 - d. Something from a store