Clinch your graduate school acceptance

Insiders offer tips on ways to stand out from the pool of graduate school applicants.

By Amy Cynkar gradPSYCH staff

It wasn’t just Jon Green’s acing of an undergraduate psychology course that caught Clark University’s attention. It was his desire to conduct research and work directly with faculty from his first day on campus, says Michael Addis, PhD, chair of the university’s psychology department.

“By the time he came to work with me on research in his junior year, he’d already been collecting his own data, presented it at a conference...and was able to relate it to existing research in the field,” Addis recalls.

Green’s experience and clear focus boosted his chances for acceptance into Clark’s clinical psychology graduate program, Addis says.

But you don’t need gobs of poster presentations and research projects under your belt to get accepted to graduate school. Here are some ways to boost your chances of getting in.

• Schedule wisely. While it might be tempting to sign up for Modern Dance for Beginners or Society and Leisure 101—undergraduate classes you know you can breeze through—the better route for sharpening your graduate school application is to take rigorous courses that will prepare you for your chosen field. For example, students who plan to pursue psychology doctorates can gain a strong foundation by taking biology, computer science and math courses, says Katherine Sledge Moore, a third-year cognitive psychology graduate student at the University of Michigan.

• Start research early. These days, graduate school admission reviewers expect stellar grades and strong Graduate Record Examination scores. Stand out from the applicant crowd by immersing yourself in research as soon as you think a psychology career might be in the cards for you, says Moore.

“Research experience is the best preparation for graduate school, and these days is virtually a requirement,” she says.

To find research opportunities, ask professors from your undergraduate psychology courses if they need research assistants or want to take on...
independent study students. And completing a senior thesis is a must, she adds, because it shows that you have the ability to conduct an entire research experiment from idea conception to final data analysis.

Green, now a first-year doctoral student at Clark, also recommends working on different research projects at various labs to help you narrow your interests.

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“The only way to figure out what you want to do is to make mistakes and study things that maybe don’t pique your interest,” he says.

Students—especially those without much research experience—may want to put off graduate school for a year or two and work as research assistants at a local university, says Moore. Working post-college may provide some perspective and help you fine-tune your career plans, she adds.

“In two years, you’ll have a substantive amount of work done, maybe even enough to submit for publication, before you apply,” she says.

• Get psyched for summer. Spend your free time—over summer break or afternoons off, for example—working in a research lab or volunteering at a hospital’s behavioral health center, says University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign psychology professor David E. Irwin, PhD. He says the best applicants often show that they’ve gained real-world experience by working, for example, at a summer camp for children with autism or for a suicide hot line, which demonstrates a commitment to the field, and shows that applicants have a good idea of what they’re getting into.

“It’s easy in the abstract for someone to say that they want to help other people, but sometimes they discover that it is more difficult than they realize and that it is not really for them,” he says. “It’s better for them to discover that before they enter graduate school, rather than after.”

• Identify your cheerleaders. Most graduate school applications require recommendation letters, often from faculty you’ve worked for or taken classes with. The best letters come from those who know you and your abilities well, says Irwin. Moore suggests giving your letter-writers a list of your research and academic activities as a reminder of your accomplishments.

• Build your network. To make new contacts in your field, attend professional conferences, says Irwin, who adds that many conferences encourage graduate and undergraduate students to submit their research for poster sessions. But even if you don’t yet have research to present, attending a conference or getting involved in a local psychological association helps you meet graduate school faculty, says Moore. Several months before she applied to graduate school, Moore e-mailed professors she thought she might eventually interview with and set up time during an upcoming conference to introduce herself. After meeting them, “professors recognized my name when they read applications, which probably gave me a bump in the admissions process,” she says.

• Find your perfect match. Finally, says Addis, undergraduates should be sure they understand the graduate school admissions process and the requirements of doctoral study in their chosen fields.

“Often, students think that graduate school is a lot like undergraduate study and that they’re going to take classes, write papers and take exams, and at the end of that, they’ll have a PhD,” he says. “It’s not really like that.”

He adds that students should view graduate school as more of a mentorship program, where they’ll be required to transition from being “consumers of knowledge” to “producers of knowledge” by conducting their own research, analyzing data and writing research papers.

To identify the right graduate program, Moore suggests asking trusted professors or graduate students for advice and reading through research papers in your intended field to find programs that might interest you. Putting in the extra time to get to know certain programs and their research openings can yield great results, she says.

“How much you want to go to graduate school often determines whether you end up getting in,” Moore concludes.