Standing out as a ‘bench science’ applicant

Steven Yantis, Ph.D., is director of graduate studies for the department of psychological and brain sciences at Johns Hopkins University. A small bench science program with 12 full-time faculty members, Johns Hopkins offers doctorates in biopsychology and cognitive and developmental psychology.

After the program’s mid-December application deadline, Yantis and his colleagues review 100 to 120 applications; of those, they invite 15 to 20 applicants for interviews and recruitment visits. Between two and nine students end up joining the program each year.

Yantis discussed with gradPSYCH the qualities he and his colleagues look for.

At what stage of the application process do you start to see individual applications?
We create tables of the applicants and their interests, so the faculty can begin to sift through them. I start looking at them once they are all in and starting to be categorized. Eventually, every application is read by somebody.

What “objective indicators” are evaluated on an application?
GRE (Graduate Record Examination) scores and GPA (grade point average) are the numerical indicators. But, knowing that if a person has research experience, knowing a person they worked with can be an objective indicator or a subjective indicator. And with GRE scores, I weigh them somewhat more heavily than GPA.

How important is the psychology GRE score?
I tend not to weigh that as heavily as the others. It’s been a very long time since I’ve taken a psychology subject test—30 years ago and I didn’t do so well on it—so I figure it must not be so critical. I think of it as testing your knowledge for remembering names and facts more than your intellectual ability, so I tend to weigh it a little less heavily.

What do you look at with GPA?
I look at the courses a person has chosen to take. That gives me a sense of where their interests are, whether they’re interested in quantitative dimensions, or whether they’ve avoided science courses, because that can tell something about what they see as their strengths. And if their GPA is not great, you like to see that it has a positive rather than a negative trajectory.
Who decides which applications get a closer look?
Since we operate as a committee of the whole, everyone gets to decide who gets a closer look.

What are you looking for in an applicant’s research background?
Ideally, you’d like to see evidence that the applicant has engaged in research at a level that indicates that they know what they want to do at the next level of their education. [We look to see if] they’ve been able to acquire technical skills; and that after having done that, they continue to want to pursue that as a career. [That’s important since] sometimes people think they know what they want, but without having the experience, once they get to graduate school they may realize it wasn’t what they had in mind.

Are you looking for specific courses?
I’d like to see some evidence of quantitative background, statistics, math, computer programming and so forth, but that’s not going to be relevant for every lab, because some labs are biologically oriented.

What is helpful about working as a paid research assistant following an undergraduate degree?
Spending a couple of years as a paid research assistant can help you decide where you want to end up going, and make you that much more attractive as a candidate.

What makes a recommendation letter stand out?
Probably the rarest kind of comment you can get is, “this person exhibits a level of independent creativity, in terms of coming up with really novel ideas for new experiments.” That’s the hardest thing to teach, and that’s the hardest thing to achieve when you’re starting out in a career. [But] if you don’t see that, that’s not really a problem, because very few people have that.

What’s not helpful in a recommendation letter?
Letters that say “this applicant was a student in my class and they got an ‘A’ are probably worse than nothing, because if that’s the best you can say, it means you can’t say much. So, I’d urge students who are applying to grad school to make sure their letter-writers are able to write a unique, and fairly detailed, letter that speaks specifically to them.

What do you look for during the on-campus interview?
You like to meet someone and get the sense of their abilities to work in teams and think on their feet—someone who can talk about what they’ve done and express enthusiasm about their own interests.

Anything else you want applicant to know about the process?
Begin planning as early as you can. If that happens late in the game, you should really think hard about taking an extra year or two, getting more experience [working as a research assistant] and making sure you have better options. Getting that extra level of experience and making yourself a more competitive candidate can be time well spent.

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