What do graduate programs look for in clinical applicants?

Last summer, just before the deluge of applications came flooding in, University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill director of clinical psychology Mitch Prinstein, PhD, answered questions about how to stand out in the highly selective application process.

Offering two main tracks to a clinical psychology doctorate, adult and child/family, UNC is a highly sought after program. Last year, of the 450 students who applied to the program, 25 were selected for on-campus interviews, and nine ultimately matriculated.

As the director of clinical psychology, at what stage do you see an application?

In our program, one tenure-track faculty member reviews every application, and from there, we create a short list of about 25 percent of the applications. Each faculty member reviews candidates from the short list.

What does your program evaluate in the first hurdle of the application process?

Primarily two things: Academic potential as measured by grade point average (GPA) and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores and match to our program values and research.

How important is an applicant’s psychology GRE score?

Not very important. It offers a sense of someone’s general breadth of knowledge in psychology. But, it’s not directly related to their potential to succeed as a clinical scientist. The psych GRE score usually will not get you in, and it will not keep you out.

What reasons might keep an applicant from making it past the second hurdle, of deciding whether there’s a fit with the program’s values and training experiences?

That’s really going to pertain to whether the applicant matches the general emphasis of the program’s training, and has research interests that match an available mentor.
What do you look for in an applicant's research background?
Some independent research experience, an ability to think like a scientist, someone who can generate hypotheses, who is familiar with research literature, who can understand the limits to prior research and maybe someone with some ability for scientific writing.

Can you give an example of "thinking like a scientist"?
Some applicants indicate a lot of enthusiasm for an area of research, but not knowledge of how to conduct good research. For example, they might indicate that they're very excited about working with children or adolescents, and that they think it's important to study internalizing symptoms. This is fairly broad. That type of essay will not stand out as much as an applicant who expresses such enthusiasm, but also is knowledgeable about some of the current theories and methodological approaches that are used to study specific developmental psychopathology symptoms. Applicants who can think like scientists usually express ideas that begin to sound like a hypothesis, their ideas convey an appreciation of the way in which constructs might be associated with each other.

What do you think is the value of working as a research assistant?
It's usually an opportunity to get a very detailed and thorough experience in how research is conducted, both the specific logistical issues and seeing a research project move from the conceptual stage to the methodological design to sometimes even manuscript preparation. These are the exact tasks that students will need to know how to perform competently when they're grad students.

What do you look for in a letter of recommendation?
A letter that can help to put that applicant's strengths into a context, and can give more specific examples of how this applicant differs from other intelligent, enthusiastic and conscientious students. A letter might indicate that a student is particularly adept at statistics, or has strong organizational abilities, or is able to think theoretically at a sophisticated level that's beyond their peers.

What do you look for during the on-campus interview?
Since that's occurring later on in the application process, you hope students have been able to focus their research interests as they've gone through the application process to get a little clearer picture of what they would like to do if they were in your lab in particular. It's good if, at that point, applicants are able to listen to what research is ongoing, and then talk in an informed way about how they think their research might be a match.

What are potential turnoffs during the interview process?
We're very committed to maintaining a very collegial, respectful and very comfortable environment here, so we're very much on the lookout for arrogance, egos and competitiveness. Those are the kinds of qualities we're very much steering away from.

Why is it a good idea for an applicant to identify a potential mentor?
For a couple of reasons. It's usually a way to more clearly illustrate the match and articulate exactly what their interests are. Also, it's good to have an advocate, someone who throughout the application process is thinking that you're the person they'd like to have work with them, someone who can really champion your application.

What else should applicants know about the process?
Once they have started to receive offers, I'd ask students to work as quickly as they can to decide which offer they might not want, and to please not hold more than two offers at a time. 

—C. Munsey

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