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## Insider tips for applying to graduate programs

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## TRANSITIONS

# Insider Tips for Applying to Graduate Programs

*By Susan Davies*

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As I approach my 20th year as a school psychology faculty member (12 as a program coordinator), I have reviewed thousands of applications and interviewed hundreds of prospective students. It is truly a joy to meet people at interviews who will go on to excel as school psychologists. I also have met my fair share of applicants who were clearly unprepared. Following is some insider information on how prospective students can strengthen their applications and interviews.

## The Application

Begin the process early so all parts of your application (including letters of recommendation) are received by the deadline. Follow up to make sure the graduate school has marked your application as complete but avoid being too needy during the application process. If you have questions, first check the graduate school or program website to see if they are answered there. Remember that any correspondence with the graduate school or department may make its way to the admission committee. It is a red flag if a prospective student sends a rude email to an administrative assistant, as they may become a school psychologist who sends snippy or entitled emails to school staff, administrators, or parents. Present yourself professionally at all points in the application process, including making sure your email and voicemail are professional (no more [crazzeeegirl420@hotmail.com](mailto:crazzeeegirl420@hotmail.com)).

Now that many programs are waiving the GRE or making it optional, undergraduate grades and overall academic performance may be weighted more heavily. While review committees do not scrutinize every class, they often look for indicators of where a student struggled. For example, I am not particularly concerned with your first-year chemistry grade, but I do care about your advanced psychology or education coursework.

Letters of recommendation are very important and should be from professional sources such as professors or supervisors who are familiar with your professional work experience. It's great that your aunt or a family friend thinks you would be a good school psychologist, but they are not appropriate sources for letters of recommendation. We are looking for your potential to succeed in a graduate program and in the profession, as well as information about your interpersonal skills and work ethic. Avoid submitting letters that may share negative information. Red flags or concerns shared in a letter of recommendation are significant. Request your letters of recommendations several weeks prior to the application deadline to ensure that your writers have ample time to compose and submit a letter.

Your personal statement is read closely and carries considerable weight in your application. Not only does your statement demonstrate your knowledge of, and interest in, the profession and the program, but it is a chance to demonstrate your strong writing skills. Attention to detail is crucial in our profession, so careless errors in the personal statement are fatal flaws. If you have typos or forget to replace the name of another program you are applying to, your application may end up in the "no" pile.

Let your personality shine through in the personal statement, but be cautious about oversharing, particularly in a way that could be construed as unprofessional. We want to know about your skills

and experiences that have prepared you for graduate studies and a career in school psychology. It helps if you can demonstrate knowledge of our program and field in the personal statement, particularly if you share research interests with our faculty.

## The Interview

Interview days are my favorite workdays of the year. However, we have encountered a few interviewees who were painfully unprepared for the day. Are you applying to a program in a different time zone? Make sure you show up at the correct time. Unfamiliar with the campus? Figure out parking and the building location in advance. Participating in an interview via Zoom? Double check your camera and microphone settings and consider what is in the background.

For in-person interviews, you are likely being evaluated from the minute you walk in the door. Do you engage with current students when given the opportunity or are you huddled in a corner on your phone? Are you dressed professionally and able to hold a conversation without fidgeting? We give some grace knowing you are nervous, but we also want to make sure you are someone who would make a good impression on school staff and parents. And, please, no crying during your interview. That has happened to us more than once and indicates you might not be able to handle the pressure of our job.

Be prepared to answer a range of questions. Familiarize yourself with the NASP website and the 2020 Professional Standards, as well as the specific program and institution. If we ask why you are interested in school psychology, tell us how you are excited to promote comprehensive and integrated services for children, families, and schools. Or how you want to support students with mental health needs by providing skill instruction and support plans. Tell us something that shows us you understand the range of services you will be trained to provide. If we ask why you want to come to our university, we want to know that you have done your homework and can identify why our program stands out or why it aligns with your professional goals. For example, if you were applying to our program at the University of Dayton, you might mention your interest in social justice, community, leadership, service, and inclusivity because those are core values of our program and institution, all of which are conveyed on our website.

We are looking at both the content and delivery of your responses. Give depth and breadth to your answers but avoid rambling. If a question throws you off, take a breath and a moment to consider your response before answering. Keep an eye on your interviewer for signs that your response warrants expansion or that it is time to wrap it up. I have interviewed applicants who gave such short responses that we flew through the questions in 10 minutes, others who rambled on and on with tangential or even nonsensical responses, and others where the conversation was so rich that I lost track of time. The applicants in the last group almost always get an admission offer.

We want to get to know you as a person. In fact, one of my usual questions is “Tell me something about yourself that has nothing to do with graduate school or school psychology.” However, the oversharing that I cautioned you about in your personal statement is important in the interview as well. We know that it is not unusual for someone to become interested in school psychology because of an experience with an educational or mental health issue themselves or with a loved one. However, if an applicant focuses solely a personal life issue (for example, their own child's experience with autism), we may be concerned that the applicant would have difficulty viewing another family's situation from an objective lens.

A final red flag includes responses that indicate that an applicant demonstrates an external locus of control and tends to blame others when things go wrong. It is important that school psychologists

take responsibility for their decisions and take initiative in their work. When we ask “Tell me about a time when you faced conflict, negative feedback, or a confrontational interaction. How did you react?” we are discerning your locus of control. Finally, when we ask if you have any questions for us, have something ready to ask. Discussing an issue or topic of interest to you helps end your interview on a positive note.

## Follow-Up

A follow-up email or note after the interview thanking the committee is appreciated. If the university is your first choice, go ahead and let them know. Then, as soon as you have made your decision, let the program coordinator know if you will be accepting or declining the offer. This can help them manage their admission offers and waitlist. No program should require that you make an admission decision prior to the April 15 deadline; however, early decisions are helpful. Declining an offer at a program you do not plan to attend allows them to extend the offer to a waitlisted student, which helps ensure that all open spots are filled in a timely manner. Once you have accepted the offer, consider yourself committed to that program. Once waitlisted applicants are declined, a vacated spot may mean one less school psychologist in the field.

School psychology is an exciting and evolving profession. Given the shortage of school psychologists and the need for increased school-based mental health services, job prospects are outstanding. Program admission is competitive, so take the time to prepare for the process and clearly communicate your commitment to serving students in schools. I hope these tips help you prepare for the first step of your successful career!

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