

Making the Leap: Advising Students on Selecting a Graduate Program¹

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Following your recommendations, they've dotted all of the I's and crossed all of the T's. They have pored over the most recent copy of the APA's *Graduate Study in Psychology* (2002 Edition) and *The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission: Psychology, Counseling, and Related Professions* (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). If your students have worked hard and prepared well, chances are good that the process will result in more than one acceptance. How can you help your students make the important decision of which offer to accept?

Although we went through the graduate admissions process separated by over two decades (Gary in 1999 and Jane in 1972), we compared our stories and found some remarkable similarities in identifying the things we wished we had known when making our decisions. From those experiences we constructed a framework to help your students differentiate graduate school offers and find the best match for their needs and values.

We think it is helpful to draw a distinction between "overt" (data on program Web sites and print materials) and "covert" program characteristics that should contribute to your students' decision. Covert characteristics require a bit more work to uncover. Your students may need a more complex Internet search, library explorations, campus visit, or conversations with insiders to uncover this helpful information. Doing that last piece of investigation will enhance the likelihood of your students choosing just the right program.

Campus Profile

A visit to the campus Web site will determine some important overt factors such as the size of campus, description of library holdings, and level of support from the state or private donors. There also are other aspects of campus life about which to learn:

- How well funded is the campus? Is it fiscally secure?
- How committed is the campus to graduate education?
- What's the parking situation like? (Probably bad...)

Program Theoretical Orientation

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Program guides or Web sites probably will describe whether the program has a dominant theoretical orientation. If your students have developed some paradigmatic preferences, finding out about the values that drive a program will be critical to making a good match. Questions that may help determine covert data include:

- Is the program orientation rigorously (fanatically?) defined?
- How do “true believers” deal with opposing opinion?
- To what extent are multiple perspectives part of the educational plan?

Program Research Climate

Program Web sites or print materials will often list the most recent publications of the faculty associated with the program. However, your students can determine faculty productivity by checking individual faculty Web sites or by checking citation rates in the Social Science Index. In “publish or perish” institutions, faculty members can be hard pressed to crank out research, sometimes at the expense of high quality teaching and mentoring of students. In those circumstances, students must understand that they often will “piggy back” on a faculty member's research concentration rather than develop their own independent ideas. On the other hand, a high-pressure research setting may be just the right context if your student aspires to an academic profession in a comparable setting. Some other questions include:

- To what degree do faculty concentrate on developing their students as researchers?
- What is the nature and rate of publication of the students in the program?
- Where do graduate students present their work?
- How much independence do students have in selecting their own research projects?

Program Reputation

Although there are national listings of graduate program quality, it may be more useful if you help your students find an insider. For example, by connecting with colleagues in professional organizations, you may be able to direct your students to the just the right person who can provide some inside information about program quality. Some questions your students might want to ask an insider about reputation include:

- What are the best features of the training program?
- How is the morale of faculty and graduate students?
- Has the program had any student-generated litigation filed against it?
- Does the program climate promote an atmosphere of professional and personal integrity?
- Would you embark on this program if you had the opportunity? Why or why not?

Typical Student Progress

It can be surprising once students enroll in a graduate program that success among their peers will be variable. What data will help them compare programs on this important dimension? Here are several questions to which your students may want to gather answers.

- How critical is it to arrive on campus with some viable research ideas to facilitate your progress on a Master's project?
- How can you increase the possibility that your Master's work could be publishable?
- What percentage of students do not progress beyond the Master's? What happens to them when they are not successful?
- What is the average time in the program until dissertation defense?
- How many students fail the dissertation? What happens to them when they are not successful?

Program Design Features

Due to the relatively small size of most graduate programs, graduate students may not have the degrees of freedom regarding courses that they are used to as undergraduates. What information about program design can be a persuasive?

- What is the typical class size of the courses?
- Do the classes consist of only people formally admitted to the program? Are some of these courses also taken by undergraduates?
- Is there any rationale provided for course sequences, where relevant?
- How regularly are new courses introduced in or deleted from the curriculum?

Student Characteristics

Graduate program guidebooks usually describe average board scores of applicants, but that may not help you determine other important characteristics of program peer groups. What are the important dimensions?

- How big will the incoming class be?
- Does the program emphasize taking students with significant work experience or can students move directly into advanced work without such background?
- From which part of the country do students typically come?
- What is the gender and age balance?
- Did the faculty make a purposeful attempt to recruit diverse students in the cohort? (See Bernal, Sirolli, Weisser, Ruiz, Chamberlin, & Knight, 1999).

Learning Climate

All graduate programs offer intellectual stimulation but the quality of the climate in graduate schools varies (Halonon & Young, 2000). Your students need to know that some faculty design their programs to be maximally rigorous. Some pertinent questions to have your students ask include:

- What kind of learning atmosphere do the program faculty attempt to create?
- Do faculty practice an open-door policy and strive to be available to students?
- Does the program have warring faculty factions that divide student loyalties and make the environment feel perilous?

Professional Development Climate

Nearly every program will brag about their excellence in helping people craft their chosen careers. However, some programs treat professional development as a byproduct of their programs rather than the primary purpose for their existence. These questions may help your student gauge faculty commitment to students' professional development:

- Are students treated with respect or disdain?
- Are there mentoring programs that provide career advice on research and teaching?
- Does the program offer established professional opportunities or do students need to be entrepreneurial to find opportunities on their own?
- To what extent do the faculty facilitate entry of their students into arenas relevant to their professional interests?

Alumni Track Record

Programs may offer testimony from successful students on their Web sites or in print material, but these public relations promotions may not capture the typical experience of students in the programs. Some other questions may help your students identify helpful alumni data:

- What types of jobs have past graduates landed successfully?
- What is the percentage of graduate employment 6 months after graduation? Three years after graduation?
- Do graduates stay involved as active alumni in the program through networking or alumni contribution?

Financial Support

Funding can often be the top priority for applicants, but the amount of support made available is just a starting point. Programs are usually explicit about the amount of money for grants, scholarships, fellowships, and assistantships. Encourage your students to find out about the potential strings attached or other not-so-obvious costs:

- Does support obligate working hours and, if so, in what capacity?
- Are there limits on the number of years a student can be supported in the program?
- Are there other fees that will eat away at resources, such as parking fees, student activity fees, etc.
- What are typical textbook costs in the program?
- Are there prohibitions in your contract about earning outside money?

Administrative Support

Unlikely to be found on the program Web site or the catalog is potentially one of the most important figures in your student's graduate career--the department secretary. Encourage your students to make a point of introducing themselves to the program's secretary during campus visits and ask the following:

- What is it like to work here?
- How demanding are the faculty?
- Are departmental procedures difficult to learn?

Library Access

The library may hold thousands of volumes, but if it is not well maintained, your students may find constant disappointment in securing appropriate resources. Your students may want to ask:

- How comprehensive are the psychology holdings?
- How efficient is the interlibrary loan process?
- Can the library holdings be accessed from home?
- Is there a psychology library liaison who especially skilled in solving psychology-related retrieval problems?

Office Space

Psychology departments are notoriously cramped for space on most campuses and graduate students may find a woeful short supply of space allocated to them. (Your students may have to get used to the idea that graduate students represent the lowest entity in the academic food chain.) Encourage them to ask the following questions:

- Do graduate students have office provisions set aside for them? Is there space available for informal meeting with other graduate students?
- Do graduate students have access to private or shared computer resources?

Community Factors

Students should think about the nature of the geographical location of a program for several reasons. Encourage your students to look up the Web site of the chamber of commerce for additional information about lifestyle in the area. Other issues to consider include:

- In what parts of the community do graduate students typically live?
- Where does the university community shop, dine, and play?
- What recreational activities are popular?
- How safe is mass transit?

Conclusion

Graduate education represents a significant investment of time, energy, and resources. If we had to do it over again, we would do so without hesitation. However, knowing what we know now, the process for making the decision would have been far more comprehensive, deliberative, and interesting than it was the first time around. With a little extra advising attention, we hope that your students will be able to make the graduate school leap with greater confidence.

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