

## **The Successful Job Applicant at Alabama State University**

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Alabama State University (ASU) is a public Historically Black University (HBCU) located in Montgomery, Alabama, the heart of the civil rights movement. ASU was established in 1867 with an initial enrollment of fewer than 20 students for the purpose of preparing African Americans to teach at the elementary and secondary levels. Today, ASU enrolls over 6,000 students, 89% of whom are African American, and offers 32 undergraduate programs, 11 Masters programs, 2 Education Specialist programs and 3 Doctoral programs. The Carnegie Classification is Masters Colleges and Universities I.

ASU's Psychology Department is currently housed in the College of Education, but plans are underway to relocate the Department to the College of Arts and Sciences in the near future. ASU offers a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology and has experienced significant growth in the number of students during the past five years, increasing from 70 to over 300 majors. The Psychology Department currently includes five full-time faculty members and 11 adjunct faculty members.

Psychology faculty must be able to teach a variety of psychology courses, provide a nurturing academic environment for minority students and to secure external funding to support research that involves undergraduate research assistants. The undergraduate curriculum is revised every two years and currently includes 21 psychology courses. Faculty members each teach four classes per semester with an option of teaching two classes during the summer. The large number of psychology course offerings, the growing number of students, and the limited number of faculty make it necessary for faculty members to be able to teach at least three or four different courses each year. Applicants for faculty positions with experience teaching a variety of courses as a graduate student or adjunct, who have experience teaching students from diverse backgrounds, and who have well-developed

research skills so as to be able to integrate research across the curriculum, are regarded favorably.

Many African American students who attend an HBCU are seeking a college experience that includes one-on-one interaction with faculty, small class sizes, and a nurturing and comfortable environment that permits intellectual and social growth in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding. Some students come to ASU from predominately White high schools to escape the burden of being the representative of their race in each class, other students come to ASU from predominately Black high schools to postpone their immersion into a world of racial injustices and look to ASU to provide a temporary safe haven, and some students come to ASU because they come from a long line of proud ASU alumni. However, many students come to ASU because of it's commitment to offering an opportunity to pursue a college degree to students inadequately prepared for college by offering rigorous remediation courses.

As a result of these varied reasons for students attending ASU, there is a wide range of students' academic preparedness that results in special challenges for instructors. Meeting these challenges is especially crucial for psychology instructors, since almost all psychology majors aspire to go to graduate school. Faculty members must be able to develop instructional strategies that provide high-quality instruction to students at every level of academic preparedness. This means setting high standards that will prepare high-performing students for the rigors of PhD programs while simultaneously meeting the needs of other students who may want to apply to masters programs in psychology, who have career aspirations outside psychology or who may be undecided about their career path.

Providing quality research experiences for all students, but especially for those students who will be competitive applicants for PhD programs, is a critical element of the undergraduate program. Traditionally, graduate programs primarily consider grade point average, GRE scores, and to some degree, research experience, in making decisions about which applicants will be accepted and offered financial support. Evidence of strong research

skills is paramount for many of our outstanding students because it has made the difference in tipping the scales in favor of applicants who were considered marginal due to low GRE scores. Many of our students who have grade point averages of 3.7/4.0 or above, write and speak well, and are highly motivated to pursue a doctoral degree, do not perform well on the GRE. The Educational Testing Service (2004) reported that African Americans scored  $-0.80 \sigma$  below the population mean on the verbal section and  $-0.87 \sigma$  below the population mean on the quantitative section in the 2003-2004 exam administrations. In addition, women of every racial group scored lower than their male counterparts. Since 89% of ASU's students are African American and 68% are female, the odds are not in their favor. Thus, as long as universities continue to rely on GRE scores as a primary predictor of academic performance, it is imperative that every effort be made to strengthen students' applications by providing evidence of research competency to offset potentially low GRE scores.

The Psychology Department has limited resources for research, so it is advantageous for applicants for faculty positions to commit to seeking external funding sources. Being a researcher at a minority institution may facilitate the acquisition of federal funds because federal funding agencies strongly encourage and sometimes solicit researchers at minority institutions to apply for competitive funding. Some agencies provide additional technical support for faculty at minority institutions, and a few agencies occasionally will restrict applications for funding for a specified program to minority institutions. Often, funding that is restricted to minority institutions focuses on institutional capacity building for a specified area of research, so the funding is often very generous. Also, large research universities will seek collaboration with researchers at minority institutions in an effort to increase their probability of being funded. This collaboration is beneficial to faculty because it can provide equipment, release time, student research assistants, and a mentoring relationship with an established researcher.

Students' undergraduate preparation is greatly enhanced by assisting faculty with funded research programs, because in addition to learning about the research process, they can

attend conferences, present papers, and publish. These experiences create students who are competent and confident in their ability to excel in graduate school.

ASU's Psychology Department has much to offer new faculty members who are dedicated to undergraduate education, who take genuine pleasure in helping students fulfill their academic potential and who want to establish a program of research. Potential applicants for faculty positions should prepare themselves by serving as graduate teaching assistants for a variety of courses or obtaining an adjunct faculty position while in graduate school. Preferable experience includes teaching students from diverse backgrounds, especially minority students. In addition, potential applicants should take every opportunity to become competent researchers by learning as much as possible about research methodology and data analysis. While in graduate school, prospective applicants should seek out faculty members who are successful grant writers, and ask to serve as their research assistants as well as to be involved in the grant writing process. Preparation for teaching a variety of classes, working with students from diverse backgrounds, and conducting research is the key to becoming a successful job applicant at ASU.

#### Reference

Educational Testing Service. (2004). Sex, race, ethnicity, and performance on the GRE General Test. Princeton, NJ: Author.