

# The Value from the Graduate School Perspective

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Why is research important for admission into graduate school programs? Involvement in research is important for at least four reasons. First, research can help a student determine his or her area of interest in psychology, thereby allowing for a more focused search of graduate programs. Second, working with a faculty member on research can help yield better letters of recommendation. Third, undergraduate research provides an excellent opportunity to enhance several secondary criteria for graduate school admission. Finally, engaging in research helps develop research-based skills that are important for success in graduate school.

## **Determining an Area of Interest**

An understanding of the literature is essential when conducting research. As students gain an appreciation for the types of studies already conducted and begin to formulate ideas for their own study, they also learn whether or not that particular area of research is interesting to them. If it is not interesting, they know to pursue a different area of psychology. If it is interesting, an excellent strategy for students to employ is to contact the researcher or researchers whose journal articles they have read that are particularly appealing to them. Before emailing the researcher(s), however, the student should explore the researcher's website, conduct a PsychINFO search on the researcher's name, and read three to five of the most recent publications of the researcher. Having a good understanding of the researcher's goal and recent findings will help the student write an email message that not only introduces himself or herself to the researcher but also shows the researcher how well their research interests match the student's and provides a glimpse of what the relationship might be like throughout the graduate program. Such an approach has several benefits. First, many applications contain an item asking whether or not the applicant contacted anyone at the school. By contacting a researcher in the department, the student can answer affirmatively to this item. Second, articulating whom a student wants to work with in graduate school and why the student has this desire will enhance the statement of purpose

of the student. Third, giving evidence of a purposeful evaluation of the graduate faculty demonstrates the drive, initiative, and determination that are valuable in completing a graduate program. Finally, a positive exchange between a student and potential faculty advisor before submitting an application can create an important advocate for the student after the application is submitted.

## **Improved Letters of Recommendation**

The three main criteria used to assess an applicant's admittance into a graduate program are college GPA, letters of recommendation, and personal statements (Landrum, 2005; Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2005). Graduate programs are highly competitive; therefore, letters of recommendation must be exemplary. The more a faculty member knows a student, the better the letter of recommendation can be (Terre, 2002; see Landrum, 2006). Although faculty can get to know a student through courses, the knowledge is limited. Working together on a research project, however, provides a context for a faculty member to assess the skills of a student to get to know a student on a more personal level. Faculty should take advantage of these opportunities to learn about a student's goals, drives, and ambitions within appropriate professional boundaries. Further, research provides a context for faculty to better assess how motivated a student is, his or her work ethic, scholarly ability, research skills, writing skills, speaking skills, creativity, and knowledge of the area of study. These factors are among the most valued applicant characteristics by graduate programs (Appleby, Keena, & Mauer, 1999). Combining information about classroom ability, research ability, and personal qualities can produce outstanding letters of recommendation. In addition, faculty are able to enhance their letters of recommendation by including specific examples from the research project. Performance-related examples are important inclusions for increasing the positive perceptions of an applicant (Knouse, 1983). Likewise, students can use information gained through their research experience to write compelling personal statements with clear goals and objectives.

For example, students can write about what they learned in psychology, their understanding of the research process and different methodologies, why they are interested in a particular area of psychology, the kind of research they would like to pursue in graduate school and beyond, etc. Again, the ability to use specific examples drawn from their research experiences will greatly enhance their personal statements (related resources are available online through the Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal ([www.psychgrad.org](http://www.psychgrad.org); see Burgess, Conley, Decker, & Devitto, 2001).

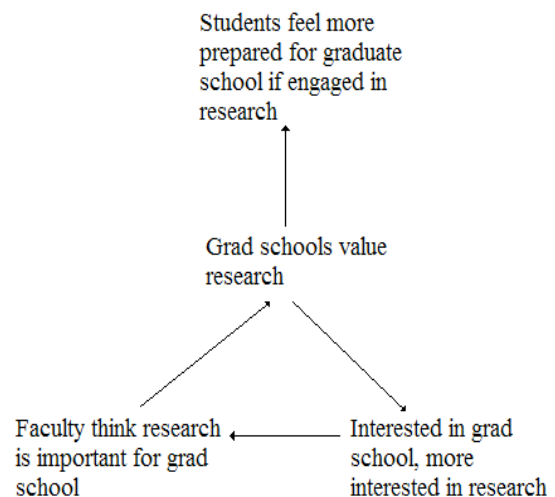
### Enhanced Secondary Criteria

Faculty on admissions committees want to know if applicants can successfully complete the graduate program. Essentially, Ph.D. graduate programs have two components: courses and dissertation research. College GPA and GRE scores provide some evidence of an applicant's ability to complete the coursework part of the program. Letters of recommendation often address both the academic and research aspects of the program. However, when a large number of applicants have high college GPAs and GRE scores as well as outstanding letters of recommendation, the admissions committees must consider secondary criteria (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). For instance, the committees want to assess how well an applicant can work independently and on part of a research team, carry out a research project, analyze data, and communicate the findings. These are some of the abilities that are necessary to complete the research aspect of the program. What better way to determine an applicant's future success at research than to examine his or her past research experience? Therefore, research that has been completed and presented at a conference, or possibly published, becomes an important factor in the admissions process. With this in mind, faculty should help students develop a research plan that includes multiple projects and results in scholarly products (e.g., conference presentation) before the student begins preparing a graduate school application (Koch, 2005).

### Summary

Figure 1 depicts some of the relationships that exist between undergraduate research and graduate school. First, faculty think research experiences provide important preparation for graduate school (Landrum & Nelson, 2002). Graduate schools also value undergraduate research and use it as a criterion for acceptance into graduate programs (Vittengl et

al., 2004). Further, students who engage in undergraduate research feel better prepared for graduate school (Huss et al., 2002). Although undergraduate students interested in attending a doctoral program are more interested in undergraduate research than students who are not interested in graduate school (Vittengl et al., 2004), they still underestimate the impact research can have a graduate school admission (Briehl, 2001). Therefore, it is important for faculty to stress the value of undergraduate research for graduate school preparation and admission and to provide research opportunities that students can complete before the graduate school application process begins.



**Figure 1. Relationships between undergraduate research and graduate school acceptance and performance**

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<sup>1</sup>Related resources are available online through the Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal ([www.psychgrad.org](http://www.psychgrad.org); see Burgess, Conley, Decker, & Devitto, 2001).