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Resources and tips for undergrads and postbaccs pursuing PhD programs in psychology

Navigating the path to grad school and the nuances of academia is challenging and very esoteric in many ways. The goal of this post is to share some tips and resources that might help other aspiring psychology PhD students prepare for grad school applications. Because there are many blogs out there that explain the PhD program application process in depth (see here, here, and here), **I focus on ways students can make their applications more competitive *before* applying as well as on things that are often not immediately obvious/openly discussed when starting out**. This is by no means an exhaustive list but are my general go-tos I pull from when mentoring undergrads/postbaccs.

Immerse yourself into the world of academia

Join academic Twitter. Academic Twitter is a whole thing and I'm a big fan. Professors, postdocs, and grad students are always sharing new research, tons of useful resources, and job openings! Follow your research idols and the colleagues you may potentially work with to start engaging with them in a less intimidating space.

Podcasts. Get great advice, hear how academics present their science, and learn about cool topics and methods. Some of my favorites are Two Psychologists Four Beers, Acadames, and Quantitude.

Attend and present posters at research conferences. Email faculty a couple of weeks before a conference and ask if they can stop by your poster or grab coffee with you between sessions. Tell them you are interested in their work and are considering applying to their program. At the conference, socialize with other trainees and ask them about their own academic journeys (see below) over lunch or happy hour! See here and here for blogs on good poster templates.

Applying to programs while in undergrad versus getting more experience first

Get paid (don't pay) to get trained. Although I know many talented colleagues who went straight into grad school after undergrad, I'm definitely in the "get more experience" camp. However, I advise against pursuing a masters degree unless you (1) do not intend to get a PhD or (2) want to be a licensed therapist. I completed a masters program to make up for some low grades I had in undergrad, but the debt I took on was not worth the little I got out of it. After my MA however, I got an awesome job working as a paid full-time Lab Manager in a developmental psychology lab and it was the best preparation I could have possibly gotten for grad school.

To find these jobs, you can join this listserv, check Twitter, or ask your mentors if they know of anyone hiring. Pro tip: look on NIH Reporter to find out who recently got large grants because they are likely to be looking to hire research coordinators. I didn't know about any of these resources ahead of time, so I ended up taking the advice of one of my mentors and sent emails directly to professors whose work I was interested in. Keep those emails to one paragraph. Start by introducing yourself and briefly say why you are interested in their work. Then politely inquire if they have any openings for a full-time RA, Project Coordinator, or Lab Manager position and attach your CV. If you can find the contact information for their current Lab Manager on the website, I'd suggest cc'ing them as well because they might be the one screening applications.

When finding the right fit, be sure to look out for (or ask in the interview) opportunities for manuscript writing and submitting posters to conferences. These things take good mentors who have more time than the PI has, so aim for a lab with enough grad students and postdocs that you can collaborate with to guide you through the process.

Other postbacc research programs. Another great way to get experience is through summer intensive paid research internships or 1-2 year sponsored postbacc fellowships. Check in with your academic advisor of your department to ask about these. A few summer programs I'm aware of: REU, NYU QUEST, BP-ENDURE (university specific), UMN MSROP, and this list has some more. Many of these summer programs are for underrepresented students, so if you don't qualify for those, you can reach out to labs and ask if you can volunteer or inquire about possible part-time hourly RAships. For 1-2 year postbacc fellowships, check out the NIMH postbacc training program.

Build some foundational skills you'll thank yourself later for

Start learning the basics of reproducible open science. Learn R programming by exploring online resources on GitHub like this one from Joscelin Rocha-Hidalgo. For an intro to stats in R, try this e-book and toolkit from my awesome stats professor at UMN, Andy Zieffler. Educate yourself on the open science movement and make an osf account. See Riot Science for some videos describing open science practices in action.

Read and organize the literature. Reading papers consistently will help cultivate and communicate your own specific research interests. Search keywords in google scholar and read papers you find interesting and take note of the authors' names that keep coming up. Start with the ones at the top that have been cited the most, followed by the most recent ones. For authors that are publishing things you are especially interested in, set up google scholar alerts so you get emails when they publish something new. Download Mendeley or Zotero to keep track of what you read, and start making folders by topic that you can pull from later. For tips on reading these papers in a strategic way without becoming overwhelmed, see this blog.

Academic writing. If you're reading consistently, you'll notice patterns in the way academic articles are written. Note which papers are written especially well (i.e. concise, clear, organized), and use those as examples that you can model yours off of when it comes time to write your own papers. Dr. Barbara Sarnecka also has a great blog and a new book outlining the basics of academic writing. Also see here for an overview of other miscellaneous writing resources.

Learn from others' academic journeys

Ask current PhD students to share their stories. There are many paths to a PhD, and people come in with very different life experiences that influenced their current and future academic aspirations. Getting different perspectives is not only helpful in figuring out the many ways you can end up in a program yourself, but can make you feel less alone when experiencing the inevitable challenges that come with this process. Start by reaching out to PhD students you know (and don't know!) from programs you are interested in applying to and ask if you can talk to them about their experiences. Most students are happy to have these informal conversations with you over the phone, email, or in person.

Science stories post-PhD. Get a sense for what happens after the PhD by hearing how scientists at various career stages talk about their journeys and the challenges they faced. These stories help to normalize setbacks and brings some hope for the younger generation like us who can easily feel discouraged early on. For these stories, check out Growing up in Science, Stories of Women in Science, and Two Psychologists Four Beers (which always includes the guest speaker's story in the beginning or end). These stories can help to inspire your own career aspirations and provide insight into the ways you can to apply your PhD in the real world. Becoming a professor is only one option of many!

Examples, examples, examples. When you're ready to apply to programs (again, see here and here for a detailed overview and timeline), try to gather as many example statements from grad students you know. The best advice I got when writing my statements was that these are a way to "sell yourself" to the admissions committee. It's your job to convince them why everything you've done up to that point has prepared you to take this next step. Think about how all of your professional experiences build upon one another, and weave those together into a cohesive narrative. Don't be shy when talking about your accomplishments, and don't apologize for your weaknesses. If you have weaknesses (which I did in my application), provide context if needed and then immediately move on to demonstrate how you have overcome those. Push through the natural tendency to feel like an imposter and be your biggest advocate!

Self-care and belonging

Be true to yourself. As alluded to earlier, academia is an entire world with its own culture. However, that doesn't mean you should try and mold yourself to fit the status quo. It's become especially clear recently that the academic status quo needs to be challenged. Embrace the unique perspective that you bring with you and use your voice to speak out on things you feel strongly about. There may still be times when you question whether you belong in academia, or whether you are "smart" enough to get into grad school. You will likely encounter toxic mentors and overly competitive students/colleagues along the way that reinforce those imposter feelings—which don't go away once you're a grad student. Be kind to yourself in these moments and maintain healthy boundaries that align with your values. Remember that everyone is struggling in their own way and it manifests differently, so have compassion for yourself and for your colleagues when things get tough. Also, get a therapist.

Spark some joy and find your people. Establish a work-life balance early on and make space for things and loved ones that spark joy. The most successful (and most sane) academics I know have pretty strict working hours during the week and take most weekends off. Burnout is real and breaks are essential. Befriend your colleagues; have fun outside the lab together and foster collaborations with them. The peers I've met through my own academic journey have

become my lifelong friends, mentors, and collaborators who make me feel like I belong. Cherish and nurture those relationships—we are all in this together!

Additional resources on belonging and the first-gen experience:

Academic secret menu: Navigating the hidden curriculum

This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class

The Hidden Challenges for Successful First-Generation Ph.D.s

Great blog from a grad student, Yesenia

This entry was posted in Grad school and tagged grad school, psychology PhD programs on September 3, 2020 [https://meriahdejoseph.com/grad-school/resources-and-tips-for-undergrads-and-postbaccs-pursuing-phd-programs-in-psychology/] .