SOME THOUGHTS ON APPLYING TO
GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PSYCHOLOGY

Resources:

http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/Mitch%27s%20Grad%20School%20Advice.pdf

http://mitch.web.unc.edu/professional-development/

http://www.apa.org/education/grad/applying.aspx

http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-humanities-schools/psychology-rankings

     CLINICAL: http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-health-schools/clinical-psychology-rankings

http://www.amazon.com/Insiders-Graduate-Programs-Counseling-Psychology/dp/1462518133/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1421519859&sr=1-1&keywords=clinical+grad

What Graduate Programs Evaluate You On:
- Grades + Undergraduate Education
- GRE scores (General; Subject test, as needed or required)
- Recommendation Letters (ideally from three faculty members who know you well and are in related fields; a fourth letter sometimes can be submitted)
- Research experiences (detailed in your CV, Personal statement, and Letters)
- Fit with program and advisor (the "match")
- Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- Many extraneous factors that you can't know about or control!

What You Can Do Now To Improve Your Application:
Grades
- Take your grades seriously: They matter! Not just Psychology, your overall GPA matters
  - If you have a "blemish" grade-wise:
    - Try to balance it out with other courses/training so that it doesn't look like a systematic problem
    - Think about how to frame it within your "narrative" (personal statement) of how you've grown
- Take courses that will strengthen your application
  - Challenge yourself with more advanced classes
  - Challenge yourself with more in-depth classes (e.g., small seminars)
- Get to know your professors

GREs
- Take the GRE _very_ seriously
  - It matters (a lot more than it should)
  - It's not the kind of test you're used to
- Make an advanced plan for when you take it
  - Consider a training course

- o Schedule studying in advance
- o Plan to take it early just in case you need a time #2 (see suggested timeline below)

Recommendation Letters
- ▪ Get to know professors well
  - o Should always be someone who knows you in an academic/research context
  - o Should be someone who knows you well (could comment on your academic accomplishments and interpersonal style)
  - o Best bet: work with someone closely/thoroughly in a research setting

Research Experience
- ▪ Depth is much better than breadth
  - o Look for opportunities to get *in depth* research experiences that will fit with your ultimate plan for graduate school
  - o It is OK to change your path or focus, but try to be thoughtful about selecting labs that are a good fit
- ▪ Too many labs/positions looks scattered
  - o Better to have less experiences with more depth
- ▪ Best to have designed your own project or contributed to an existing project in a meaningful way
- ▪ The more you have experience doing exactly what you'll do in grad school, the better!
  - o Research methods you're considering for PhD
  - o Questions/topics you're considering for PhD
- ▪ Find ways to gain "ownership" over a project
  - o Don't just be someone "working in the lab"
  - o Work in a lab that will allow you to learn a skill (not just enter data, turn on a computer, or organize files). Some skills to think about developing include: technical (programming, data entry), clinical (interviews, assessments, treatment), methodological (data analysis, technique administration [animal testing, psychophysiology, imaging, neuropsychology])
  - o Work to understand the conceptual questions
  - o See if there are opportunities for presenting this work at a conference/being a co-author on a publication
  - o Show initiative and treat yourself like a colleague
    - ▪ That being said, you also need to be willing to do the "grunt work". Everyone had to do "grunt work" at some point. Do not come off as too entitled to learn the ropes
  - o Publications are currency! Work to get at least 1-3 prior to applying for graduate school (does not have to be first author, but letters writers should comment on your specific role in the publication production). These can be obtained while in undergrad or during a post-baccalaureate research opportunity.
- ▪ Use your research experiences well
  - o Really get to know your PI
  - o Really learn the questions and methods
- ▪ Avoid the "I worked in this lab" or "my advisor told me to do it this way"
- ▪ Should deeply understand the conceptual issues
- ▪ Use all the resources at your disposal
  - o Learn from the grad students
  - o Learn from the people around you

Fit With Program
- Figure out what questions you're interested in
  - Remember the importance of specificity
  - Try to see to which questions you naturally gravitate
  - Work on narrowing down NOW
- Research potential programs like crazy!
  - Who's doing the cool work on this question?
  - What programs are good for my interests?
  - Who are good advisors in the field?
- Learn more about your field
  - Google stalk labs/programs like crazy
  - Read papers in the field (or even just abstracts)
  - Keep notes on labs & advisors
- If possible, make contact!
  - Go to a conference in your field
  - Send emails to potential advisors before applying

Develop Your CV
- Your CV will be essential for contacting people and for your application
  - Sections (as applicable): Education (with GPA), Awards and Honors, Research Experience (with descriptions of the research and your role, paragraph or bullet points), Publications (accepted, in prep), Presentations (any conference, poster day, sessions outside of class assignments), Volunteer (and Work [non-research related]) Experience, Clinical Experience, Teaching Experience, Professional Affiliations and Service, Relevant Coursework (optional list of a few courses that are directly relevant to your application), Skills (list specific computer programs, assessment batteries)
    - Sample Research Experience Sections
    - **Option A**:

      Research Assistant (March 2005 – May 2007)
      Brown Medical School, Center for Alcohol & Addiction Studies, Providence, RI
      Supervisor: Amanda L. Graham, Ph.D.
          Served as a Research Assistant on a 5-year R01 grant funded by the National Cancer Institute (5 R01 CA104836; PI: A. Graham) that examines the effectiveness of Internet and telephone support for smoking cessation. This is one of the first large-scale studies to examine a real-world cessation website (www.quitnet.com) alone and in conjunction with telephone counseling. In my role as Research Assistant, I was responsible for eligibility screening and subject enrollment (N=2,055); administering a structured protocol at baseline and at 3, 6, 12, and 18-month follow-up that includes measures of smoking history, current smoking patterns, demographic variables, and correlates of cessation (e.g., Cohen Stress Scale, Centers for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression, Partner Interaction Questionnaire, Fagerstrom Test for Nicotine Dependence); data cleaning; preliminary data analysis using SPSS; and manuscript preparation including literature reviews and bibliographies.

    - **Option B**:

Research Assistant   **March 2005 – May 2007**
Brown Medical School, Center for Alcohol & Addiction Studies, Providence, RI
Supervisor: Amanda L. Graham, Ph.D.

- Eligibility screening and subject enrollment (N=2,055)
- Administering a structured protocol at baseline and at 3, 6, 12, and 18-month follow-up that includes measures of smoking history, current smoking patterns, demographic variables, and correlates of cessation (e.g., Cohen Stress Scale, Centers for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression, Partner Interaction Questionnaire, Fagerstrom Test for Nicotine Dependence)
- Data cleaning
- Preliminary data analysis using SPSS
- Manuscript preparation including literature reviews and bibliographies

- o Use words that "talk-up" your role/experience. For example, don't just write "entered data", write "responsible for entering and managing database." Don't lie about your skills, but don't be modest
- o Be specific. Don't just write "administered assessments for a smoking study", but list out *which* assessments (and maybe even how many) you've administered

Develop your narrative
- Graduate programs are looking for people with a sustained interest and a specific passion.
  - o While engaging a lot of activities may be good for getting into to Undergraduate school, Graduate programs want to see a specific focus and developed relevant skills
  - o How did you get on your path? What was your "ah-ha" moment? What skills have you developed? Even if you have experiences that seem disparate, there is always a story that can fit these together
- Getting into graduate school is about the match (between you and your future mentor)!

Important Advice: Be Organized And Plan Ahead!
- For the application:
  - o Outline the programs you want to apply for in August
  - o Contact your potential letter writers in September with your current CV, list of programs, and notes about your interests and strengths. The letters are important. Make sure to ask people to write you letters who know you well and can speak to your specific strengths (e.g., critical thinking, writing, research, clinical skills, interpersonal style)
    - Most often you need 3 letters of recommendation. Sometimes a 4th can be submitted
  - o Contact potential graduate mentors in October, ask if they are accepting students (make sure to check their website first, if the website states they are accepting, just email introducing yourself and expressing your interest), describe your background in a few sentences, and provide your CV
  - o Work on your personal statement September-October
    - Have others read this and provide feedback!
    - This statement should generally outline your interests, tell your story, and specify why you are ready for a graduate program and why *that* program is a good fit! In this statement you need to be clear about the match and your experiences
    - Think about this statement like a 5 paragraph (though does not have to be exact) essay, first you will state your general interest and the mentors you are applying to work with, second-fourth you will describe your academic

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journey (fleshed out version of your CV), last you will summarize your passions/match/interests
- **Never reveal personal struggles, family struggles, or mental health problems in these statements**
- If you have a weak spot in your application, you can address it in the personal statement. Note the issue and reframe into a strength
  - o Complete your GREs (summer/fall before applying). Give yourself enough time to take them again, if needed. Scores are valid for 5 years. If there is a subject test (e.g., Psychology) take it if required/your general scores are not as high as you would hope

Remember: Getting In To Graduate School Is Competitive
- It is more and more common to have to take 1-3 years off in between undergraduate and graduate school. During this time in between you should be working in a lab or on a project that fits with your ultimate academic interests
  - o Common post-baccalaureate opportunities: labs at universities (in Psychology (or related) departments; in medical schools); NIH Postbac IRTA program
- Some people have to apply to graduate school multiple years in a row. That's OK; don't take it personally.
- Go to the best program possible (both in terms of fit and ranking)