

Student Forum

Surpassing Milestones: Important Information to Know Before Going to Graduate School

Peter C. Trask and Christine Swartz, *University of Michigan*

Sitting for the national licensure exam and reading a recent Student Forum section (Pai, Hommel, Hilliard, Messman-Moore, & Iwamasa, 1998) in *the Behavior Therapist* caused us to reflect on the variety of milestones that we have encountered and overcome during our graduate careers. What struck us immediately was how little we knew about becoming a psychologist when, as undergraduates, we declared ourselves psychology majors. In conversations with students considering going to graduate school in psychology, we noticed the same trend, a general lack of knowledge about the process of becoming a psychologist. As some of our colleagues begin careers teaching undergraduates, many of whom will major in psychology, in colleges around the country, we wish to underscore the importance of including in advisor-advisee meetings open discussions of what lies ahead. We believe that by having such conversations, students will be better prepared for the graduate school experience, a time of tremendous growth and unrivaled opportunity.

The current paper presents both a factual account and personal reflection of what actually lies between an undergraduate major and a licensed clinical psychologist. While those who pursue careers in other areas of psychology may not have had all of the following experiences, they may have had similar ones and can undoubtedly recount numerous others not covered in the following pages. Different issues arise at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels and, where possible, we have provided ways to deal with or anticipate these in order to successfully surpass them.

Undergraduate

Looking back, the life of an undergraduate is filled with intellectual exploration, increased autonomy, campus parties, and personal growth. Interest sparked by introductory psychology courses is followed by more specific upper-level courses. Unfortunately, exploring psychology's breadth frequently leads to confusion about which of the many areas to follow. Little thought was given to thinking about academic versus clinical careers,

theoretical orientations, or networking. In hindsight, for those thinking about graduate school, it is important to define, at least as much as possible, a life plan early in the process. A decision to pursue graduate education in psychology results in the need to successfully meet several requirements. First, the individual must take the GRE and pass with a sufficiently high score, variously reported as 1,100 or 1,200 combined math and verbal. Second, a good GPA is important. Third, but perhaps more important, is the match between the candidate and potential advisor. It is our experience that undergraduates are frequently unaware of the importance of the advisor-advisee match and place undue emphasis on grades and GREs. Strong applicants often have shown independent initiative and intellectual curiosity in seeking out research and volunteer positions as an undergraduate.

The match between candidate and potential graduate school advisor is based on experience, the most salient being the candidate's involvement in research projects in areas similar to those of the potential advisor. Recently, the publication of these projects has become more important. For those who complete undergraduate training without publications, one option is to take a year off and work in an area (usually as a research assistant) that will provide exposure to research and increase the potential for publications. Another option is to find opportunities to increase one's knowledge of the clinical field (e.g., through psychiatric technician positions). These experiences provide greater familiarity with the role of a clinical psychologist and help the individual to identify likes and dislikes of the profession.

Thus, the first step in pursuing graduate education is to have solid GRE scores, a good GPA, and research/professional experience. Following this, the most important step is to identify a potential advisor with whom you have similar professional interests and convey them during the application/interview process. Good interpersonal skills, expressed enthusiasm, along with signs of hard work, can often balance relative weaknesses in either GRE or GPA.

The choice of graduate schools is often based on several factors: the faculty's areas of interest, the degree of emphasis on clinical or research pursuits, generalist versus specialty track programming, and the level of financial support available. To the best of their ability, it is beneficial to the student to identify the position of prospective programs in areas that are important to them. Frequently this knowledge can be obtained during the application process. For example, if financial support is necessary, then individuals will want to seek out programs that have teaching assistant positions or that can supply greater stipend support in order to limit the amount of student loans needed to complete graduate school. Knowing the focus of the program is also important. In some programs, the faculty is composed of clinicians who maintain private practices and devote large portions of the curriculum to assessment and therapy. In these programs, emphasis is placed on the completion of practicums, clinical placements, and supervisory experiences. In others, greater emphasis is placed on conducting research. Faculty in these programs often maintain large grant-based research projects in which incoming students can participate. In many programs, there is a blending of research and clinical work, the traditional scientist-practitioner model. The differences in the overall focus of programs are mirrored by the specific, internal requirements. Specifically, master's theses, qualifying exams, course structure, dissertation defense, and financial support are just some of the areas that can vary between graduate programs.

As noted, the first year is primarily concerned with providing instruction in the courses most needed for becoming successful clinicians and/or researchers. While programs vary in intensity, difficulty, and order of classes, the basics include psychopathology, ethics, psychotherapy, and statistics. This can be a difficult year of transition for the student, with occasional thoughts of "they are going to find out that I don't belong here." To adjust and successfully complete this year, we recommend frequent and open discussions with advisors, professors, senior graduate students, peers, and even counselors. Learn to anticipate difficulties and get assistance as needed. Completion of the first year marks an important milestone in one's graduate career.

The second year brings additional challenges and potential milestones. In addition to academic courses, clinical requirements often increase, and students begin to pursue external practica. There is nothing quite like that first therapy session, when one enters the room unaccompanied

exception for the patient. On more than one occasion, we have heard students express or remark having thought, "What do I do now?" Implementing basic skills and techniques learned in class represents the first clinical challenge. Developing the ability to confront and deal with ambiguity, remain genuine, engage in constructive thinking, and think on one's feet are all important at this stage. Throughout much of the first and second years, the graduate student is at a very young developmental level, focusing on the assimilation of new skills. Slowly, as students encounter contradictions from theories and therapeutic challenges, they begin to move into accommodating and altering their understanding to fit their experiences. From a learning perspective, peer supervision, supervisory feedback from audio- and videotaped sessions, and, when possible, watching supervisors during therapy can provide a lot of information. As students progress through this period, we suggest the following: expect to make mistakes, ask questions, and don't create unrealistic goals.

In several programs, the midway point is marked by the master's thesis, which is often the first large, independent research project. Again, the individual learns to blend theory and practice. The goal becomes taking an idea or concept and making it tangible, quantifiable, capable of being studied. With this step, students assume a new level of responsibility: managing data and participants, dealing with committee meetings, and encountering the ethics of research. All of these constitute important skills for the future.

Another major milestone in many programs is preparation for preliminary or qualifying exams. Because of the considerable variation between programs, our comments are based on a program with exams over a multiple-day period. This is a period when time management skills become very important. Given that exams cover salient material from the core courses, there are journals to review, course material to recall, and large amounts of information to commit to memory. For the days of exams, this can be a particularly stressful time, as students seek to demonstrate the breadth of knowledge they've incorporated. It is not uncommon, when first-year students ask those who have completed qualifying exams what it was like and what they wrote about, for senior students to remark in a kind of haze, "I don't know." It appears as though the qualifying exam for some provides a sort of general amnesic experience, an experience that for some is reiterated by the dissertation process.

Following qualifying exams, students have hit another milestone, the halfway point. Although there are still steps to

take ahead, the goal of obtaining the Ph.D. appears closer. Continuing in the program, the next two milestones are the dissertation and internship. In most programs, identification and proposal of a dissertation topic, formation of a committee, and collection of initial data is required before internship. During internship, students take what they have learned in graduate school and apply it to the outside world. The range of internship possibilities is influenced by several things: the level of success in graduate school (including publications), areas of interest, the choice and strengths of graduate programs, and the eminence of one's advisor. Because much has been written on the internship application process, we will not go into it in any great depth. To increase the likelihood of getting the internship site of your choice, formulate ideas about what you want to do during the internship, think about future career goals, look at where people in the program have done internships, and examine early on what different internship sites offer. In addition, discussions of the internship process with upper-level students can provide helpful insights.

For many, the internship application process can be a particularly stressful time. Hopefully the recent introduction of the matching system (one that has been relatively successful in the medical setting) will reduce any stress. Despite the stress, however, acceptance into an internship can lead to one of the most satisfying experiences in graduate school. Although the student may enter internship with specific goals or interests, it is important that they also challenge themselves and make use of available opportunities. The willingness to be flexible can often result in very interesting experiences.

For the most part, internship represents a much greater clinical load than experienced to this point. Independence is gradually increased. In addition, the intern may face and negotiate new surroundings, internal structures, institutional politics, and potentially different orientations. At some point during the internship, there is often a period when the intern realizes that they don't know as much as they think they do, a potentially humbling experience, but one that can only serve to help the intern grow. As part of the experience, the intern starts to define what is important for them in their career and what balance they are going to try to strike. Here, supervisors provide not only clinical direction, but also model different ways of balancing personal and professional goals.

As a final note, if the dissertation is not completed before going on internship, it will add an additional challenge to the internship year as the individual will have

to coordinate activities with the graduate institution. While challenging, this is not impossible and can be made easier by research assistants and frequent contact with one's advisor and dissertation committee. Needless to say, the rule is, the sooner the better. It is for this reason that some programs have the internship occur in the 4th year, having students return to complete the dissertation during their last year. Regardless of the program's structure, we recommend completing the dissertation as soon as possible.

Postgraduate

So let's say that you have made it this far. Internship is winding down, dissertation is defended, and you are looking at identifying the next step. Within recent years, the choices have been job (academic or clinical practice) versus postdoctoral fellowship. While there are pros and cons to pursuing both routes, it basically boils down to what you want to do "when you grow up." Assuming there are academic positions available and one wants to teach, this is the obvious direction. Alternatively, if the desire is to pursue a position within a specialized area of clinical psychology, a postdoctoral fellowship is appropriate. Although the challenges and experiences will be somewhat different depending on which route one chooses, if one is interested in clinical work, learning the licensure requirements in the state in which he or she would like to practice, passing the licensure exam and amassing supervision hours will be necessary for becoming fully licensed.

In general, postgraduate work is the time when one learns everything they didn't teach in graduate school. This makes sense as life is not 5 years, but a continuing process of growth. During this time, the balance of work and life becomes more defined, as does the direction of one's career. Goals include continued publication, application for grants, understanding the politics of institutions and individuals, and learning the steps (sometimes a trial by fire, and frequently the result of learning from mistakes) of navigating successfully in whatever position one has chosen. Regarding the licensure exam, it too can be another potential stressful process. The key to succeeding is to remember that one only needs enough to pass (generally nationally accepted as a score of 70). In general, though, postgraduate training is truly the time to "do what you want to do." Some people will define themselves as "settlers," deciding to maintain a status quo; still others will choose to be "pioneers," boldly going out and pushing the limits/boundaries and

Continued on page 123

Continued from page 117

exploring new areas. Regardless, the choice is for the individual to make.

In essence, this is what we did not know when we started graduate school. Thankfully, the milestones don't end after graduate school. On the contrary, continuing education credits, grants, licensure in different states, and many more milestones await. But, by this time, we are far

from naive and more than capable through our training at meeting the challenges. In the preceding pages, we have provided a brief glimpse of the various milestones that we and several of our colleagues encountered both before, during, and after graduate school. We hope that we have provided insight where there was none and ways to deal with what is to come. There are plenty of opportunities out there. The overriding rule to success-

fully passing the milestones during your career is . . . ask, if ever in doubt, ask.

Reference

- Pai, S., Hommel, K., Hilliard, K., Messman-Moore, T., & Iwamasa, G. (1998). Beginning clinical practicum: What I know now that I wish I knew then. *the Behavior Therapist*, 21, 170-176. 