

A Letter to the Graduate School Applicant

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I love clinical psychology. I find that when people ask me what I do, I often get a grin on my face when I tell them. It is difficult for me to imagine anything I would rather do with my life than try to better understand what I think of as the most powerful thing on Earth (the mind), and given that understanding, attempt to alleviate the suffering that sometimes stems from the mind.

I have also struggled in graduate school. I have learned to alter my expectations of how long it takes to write a paper, learned what constitutes a “thorough” literature review, learned to be more precise in the way I explain things I am enthusiastic about, learned to revise, revise, and revise on projects I previously would have thought of as complete, etc. Long hours, long-distance relationships, and little money are all constants among graduate students in psychology.

During the first semester of my freshman year in college, I made the lowest grade I would make in my entire life in an Introduction to Psychology class. I was disappointed. I enjoyed psychology, but figured it was not for me if I couldn’t even muster the same grade I’d managed in precalculus (a class I took more out of obligation than anything else). So, I went on my merry way, never taking another psychology class as an undergraduate. I pursued major courses of study I enjoyed and excelled in from the outset. I did well in my major, and by the time I graduated, I received honors and awards in one of those majors: English, with an emphasis in poetry writing. In my early 20s, I wanted nothing more than a Master of Fine Arts or a Ph.D. in creative writing. Not only did I aspire to do more writing, I seemed well set up to do just that. I was studying under several well-regarded writers, all of whom encouraged my work. That is why I was surprised when, as my senior year began, they began discouraging me from applying to those graduate programs that were (to me) the logical next step in my education—the step they themselves had taken when they were my age.

“I didn’t know what I was doing, Andrew,” said one of my mentors. As we continued to speak, what I discovered was that my mentors

were not trying to dissuade me from pursuing a life of writing; they were encouraging me to seek a life that I would find most fulfilling. They saw the first step of seeking that most fulfilling life as removing some of the preconceptions I had about what I *should* or *could* do next. They weren’t trying to talk me out of going to graduate school for writing, they were reminding me that there is a lot more to “learning” and “education” than formal schooling, and considerably more to life than doing what others have done, or what I thought I should do to advance my: career, education, . . . *fill in the blank*.

By encouraging me to take a break from formal education, they opened a door for me to take a step back from things and reconsider my interests from a variety of perspectives. Most importantly, they helped me see that continuing my formal education should not be an arbitrary next step but a choice based on a passion for and commitment to my interests. When I have met difficult times in graduate school, I have been grateful time and again for being acquainted with that passion and commitment. Why am I making coffee at midnight so I can keep studying for a final? Because I *love* this stuff. Why am I going home to study instead of heading to the pool hall? Because I *love* this stuff. Enthusiasm for and commitment to your interests is what helps sustain you when the inevitable unexpected and undesirable hassles of graduate school arise.

Going to graduate school is partly about advancing your formal education and partly about advancing career opportunities. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, graduate school in clinical psychology represents an opportunity to move in a direction that will be fulfilling in other ways. There are a number of values with which a Ph.D. may be in accord: the alleviation of human suffering, natural curiosity about the mind, nature more generally . . . Be honest with yourself about what pursuits and possibilities you find inspiring both inside and outside the classroom. Use this as your guide to pursuing interests that can be sustained through the labors of doctoral work.

The “laboriousness” of graduate work may warrant some description. Pursuing a Ph.D. in clinical psychology is very different from undergraduate work. While classes are typically emphasized in the first year or two, beyond this point, relatively few aspects of the graduate school process come with linear and straightforward directions or set deadlines. It is reasonable (likely) that you may spend a year or more on *pre-dissertation* projects. Much of the time spent on these projects may be related more to skill acquisition (literature reviews, statistics, hypothesis-generation, writing) than learning specifically about the area of study you are most interested in. Clearly, abilities to be motivated internally and to seek, accept, and respond to criticism repeatedly and over long periods of time are essential. While processes like this can be tedious, they are often the only way to become a truly independent clinician, thinker, and investigator; this is what a Ph.D. prepares you for.

Speaking of being an independent investigator, you have to work for one in graduate school; this person is called your *mentor*. No brief article, or even a brief book, could completely describe the nuances of the mentor-student experience; but *do not* underestimate the importance of this relationship. A few graduate students have told me they believe the mentor relationship is *the* most important relationship they have (professional or personal) in graduate school. As with all things, there are no rules here. However, some of the following thoughts may be helpful: Seek out information from other students about what working with a particular professor is like. Know what you are looking for. Know the kind of people with whom you resonate and work well. More supportive than challenging? More challenging than supportive? Someone who is willing to give you free reign to explore anything from parapsychology to rat maze learning? Someone who has a specific project up and running they want you to step in on, take a part of, and plan your dissertation around? Do you want to be one of a couple of graduate students in your lab, or one of a couple of graduate students working with a few postdocs, working with a

few faculty members, working with your mentor, who has a variety of ongoing collaborations on multiple continents? None of these possibilities is the perfect option for everyone. Nevertheless, your choice of a mentor will have a significant impact on your experience as a graduate student. Some professors may be better overall mentors than others, but more important is whether or not this faculty member is the best *match* for you.

If you are uncertain whether or not training in a Ph.D. program is the best fit for your interests, another way to build confidence about your opportunities postbaccalaureate is consideration of alternatives to the Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Perhaps you are not sure if you want to go into a research or clinically oriented program. If this is the case, take the time to make sure you have experience on both sides of the scientist/practitioner coin. One can learn more about clinical work by volunteering on a crisis line, working in a hospital, finding an opportunity to recruit or assess patients involved in a larger treatment program. Research experience can be gained in most academic and medical centers. What is research? How do you start to do it? How do you write a paper or present at a conference? For those interested in a program that involves research, familiarity with statistics and research methods before entering the program is highly recommended. Since different programs often lean to one side or the other of the scientist/practitioner balance, learn a bit about which of these activities appeals to you most before choosing the schools to which you ultimately apply.

Perhaps you're not clear about the differences between seemingly similar graduate programs such as Master of Social Work, Doctor of Psychology, Doctor of Philosophy (in clinical, developmental, social, or more neurologically based emphases of psychological study), Doctor of Medicine, Nursing, Law . . . Each of these degrees, and the career paths associated with them, should be considered excellent possibilities for someone interested in psychology. Finding a job or volunteering in settings related to these careers can be an excellent opportunity to ex-

plore the career, as well as meet persons that may later be able to facilitate your advancement in the field (e.g., by writing letters of recommendation, etc.).

Meeting people is important, because one of the most important things you can do as you think about your steps after college is consider the well-informed opinions of others. Seek the opinions of others who are active in your field of interest. Why did they choose this career? What do they like about it? What do they dislike about it? What do they wish they had known before choosing? What are the implications of this education/career choice for financial, geographic, social, and relationship concerns? Rather than seeking a "single right answer," gather information that will inform a more complete assessment of your options. What would make you happiest? What best suits your vision of a meaningful education and career? I believe a satisfying graduate career, one in which a student can continue to find enthusiasm for the work while preparing the 30th draft of some paper, is built on a special kind of commitment. Talking to others will help you develop a more realistic picture about what is involved in a given area of study or career. Honest self-reflection about values and lifestyle will help you orient toward which of these options is the best fit for you.


Without a doubt, I have known individuals to move straight into graduate school from college, and excell. I have friends and colleagues who in their early 20s had a clear understanding of who they were, what type of career they wanted. If that's you, great! Go for it. There's no need to worry about what's right for you if you already know.

On the other hand, if you're not so sure, know this: it's fine to be not so sure. It's fine to give yourself a while to "find your bliss" (Campbell, 1988, p. 147), as philosopher Joseph Campbell recommended. I'm not suggesting you have to wait for absolute certainty before moving ahead. If this were the case, we would probably all have a hard time leaving the house in the morning! There are always uncertainties. Seek a balance between reasonable uncertainty and something solid within

you that says: "Look here. Try this." My suspicion is that without some awareness of the "energy" that nudges us in given certain directions, heading into a Ph.D. program could ultimately prove disappointing and frustrating. If, on the other hand, you feel well informed about the challenges: (possible) relocation, accompanied relationship and social changes, lower income for a number of years; and benefits: (ideally) throwing yourself into something you truly care about, being surrounded by similarly enthused peers and mentors, learning how to be an independent investigator of phenomena you are fascinated by, then this is the ticket.

In the end, attending graduate school may not be the right choice for everyone. Only you can decide whether such a course of action will prove satisfying. Some soul searching, maybe a little time, and frank discussions with people you know in a variety of education and career tracks will go a long way toward helping you decide. Be honest with yourself about what you want from your education, and more broadly, what you value inside and outside the classroom and office. Balance information and advice from others with an awareness of what stirs and moves you. *Don't* let uncertainty scare you away from your interests. *Do* allow your curiosity and passion to inform your educational and career decisions.

Reference

Campbell, J. (with Moyers, B.). (1988). *The power of myth*. New York: Anchor Books. 

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