

The Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal (www.psychgrad.org)

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Applying to graduate school in psychology can be an intimidating process. Many obstacles must be overcome, such as applying to a program appropriate to the specific applicant, getting good GRE scores, submitting a clear and well-written statement of purpose, and obtaining letters of recommendation, to name just a few. Much information is available to assist applicants in these tasks, but finding this information can cause problems even for experienced Internet users. The goal of this project is to create an easily accessible Web clearing house of information on applying to graduate school in psychology. This Web site, called the Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal (or PsychGrad.org), contains targeted links to other Web pages with valuable information, book recommendations on the application process, polls to measure issues important to the graduate applicants, site-unique advice on graduate programs, a message board to exchange information and experiences, and other information relevant to the application process.

Applying to graduate school presents a novel situation to students. Paradoxically, they need to be both aggressive and discriminating researchers. Without a schema for determining what information is essential and how to acquire it, students are more prone to abort their research too soon, make costly decision errors, and make the graduate application process more worrisome than is necessary. The Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal offers such a schema for filtering through the masses of information on the application process. The Portal assists students in researching, decision making, managing time, and handling anxiety.

Existing Resources for the Graduate Applicant

There are, of course, many very helpful sources of information—several that academic advisors would consider essential for a student to consult. It is difficult to imagine a student not consulting the American Psychological Association's (APA, 2000) *Graduate Study in Psychology*. This reference work is a complete listing of graduate programs in the United States and Canada that contains each program's admission requirements, median scores on GPA and admission exams, and application and accep-

tion statistics. One of the most helpful sections of *Graduate Study in Psychology* is the categorization of the graduate programs by program area (developmental, clinical, cognitive, etc.). This resource provides an important starting point for a student in locating and narrowing down the range of schools to consider.

There are two other resources that provide a broad range of information for the prospective graduate applicant: APA's (1993) *Getting In* and Patricia Keith-Spiegel's (1990) *Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission*. These two books are very similar, and the authors present comprehensive overviews of the steps required in deciding to apply to graduate school that can be simplified to the following areas of knowledge: (1) choosing which programs to apply to, (2) the steps in the application process itself, and (3) what to do when you hear back from the schools. One important contribution of these books is that they suggest a timeline for all the application steps and the various components of the decision-making process. This is important for the prospective applicant, since time management can be difficult in a novel and uncertain situation.

Other sources of information are the myriad Web sites, mostly sponsored by individuals in psychology departments, that contain information about applying to graduate school. The goal of most of these sites is to provide some kind of basic information to the undergraduates who are at the host institution. The information on such sites is rarely comprehensive and often consists of links to other sites, rather than content.

The efforts on PsychGrad.org were presented at the 2000 Society for Computers in Psychology (SCiP) Conference in New Orleans. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to C. Burgess, Psychology Department, 1419 Life Science Bldg., University of California, Riverside, CA 92521-0426 (e-mail: curt@citrus.ucr.edu).

Applying to Graduate School Is a Complex Process

It is clear that students who are applying to a doctoral program face a broad range of tasks in order to successfully attain admission in a very competitive environment. A student who is applying to a doctoral program has a schema for applying to college, since he or she has been successful in doing that at least once. Yet, students who apply that undergraduate application schema to the graduate admission process are likely to be unsuccessful, because the requirements for the two types of programs differ considerably. Selecting a graduate program hinges as much, if not more, on the faculty in the program as on the school itself. What a potential faculty advisor expects to see in a graduate applicant's statement of purpose is very different from what one would expect in an undergraduate's personal statement. Similarly, the content in the letters of recommendation and who should be writing them will be different in this circumstance as well. The successful graduate applicant will have a different schema for handling the application process than does the successful undergraduate applicant.

A Schema for Applying to Graduate School

Although there is considerable information that can be available to a student, the student faces four problems in accessing this information. First, the student needs to conduct preliminary research to find out what steps should be taken. Should a vita be included? Writing samples? Should potential advisors be contacted directly? Once a student becomes clearer about the steps involved, the next obstacle is determining what information sources will enable them to successfully complete the steps. Should reference books be consulted? Do professional associations offer brochures on this process? Then the student must somehow limit the sources he or she consults to a manageable number. Finally, once the sources have been narrowed down, how can they be obtained? PsychGrad.org helps applicants at all four stages of this process.

The Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal (PsychGrad.org)

The goal of the Portal is to provide the information necessary for the prospective applicant to acquire a schema for applying to graduate school. The core of the informational resources at PsychGrad.org are links either to substantive books or to other Web sites with specific information. The following 13 areas were identified and are represented on the site: (1) general resources in applying to graduate school, (2) directory of psychology department Web sites, (3) directory of types of psychology programs and their Web sites, (4) letters of recommendation, (5) the personal statement, (6) writing the vita, (7) GREs and academic transcripts, (8) financial aid, (9) making contact with the program you have applied to, (10) the interview, (11) once you are accepted, (12) what if you do not get in? and (13) psychological associations.

As was mentioned earlier, there are several books about applying to graduate school in psychology. Thus,

one might pose the question, "Why set up a Web site for applying to graduate school, when these rather comprehensive books already exist?" The Portal provides a pointer for these books, which otherwise have no centralized presentation for the prospective applicant. It is useful to have these resources featured in one location. Moreover, all academic advisors may not be aware of them. PsychGrad.org is not intended to serve as a replacement for these resources. There is no on-line substitute for APA's (2001) *Graduate Study in Psychology*. The other two books are guides to applying to graduate school that offer information similar to that at PsychGrad.org, although there are many differences. PsychGrad.org has the advantage of being more current, involving the collaboration of more diverse experts, and allowing for interactions in real time. However, a wise strategy for the student is to consult all of these resources.

Content editors. One advantage of an on-line resource is that it can be immediately sensitive to updated or new information that becomes available. A key feature to the design of PsychGrad.org is that the Web pages are not simply lists of the links that can be found on a topic. The books and links have been evaluated by content editors so that the most informative and concise sources are represented and annotated on the site. The goal is not to have an exhaustive list of available resources but to have the best information available and to present it in an organized fashion. In addition to having students and faculty involved in the project, we directly solicit ideas from site visitors for recommendations (Submit a Link page). A future goal is to have users rate the usefulness of the resources so that these results can promote the evaluation of the links we maintain on the Portal. Our experts will use the feedback to assess the success and clarity of their Web page design and the quality of the content.

Developmental approach. The initial motivation behind PsychGrad.org was to provide an informationally dense and centrally organized resource for students applying to graduate programs in psychology that draws on existing resources. This resource is implemented in the Applying to Graduate Schools page. However, a successful application to graduate school does not occur in isolation. A successful graduate applicant has been a successful undergraduate. Thus, we have the beginnings of the Doing Well as an Undergraduate resource page, as well as its counterpart, Succeeding in Graduate School. The fourth information domain is Life after Graduate School. Collecting and evaluating content for these other three areas is the next priority.

Complete structure of PsychGrad.org. The complete organization of the Portal can be seen in Figure 1. The home page introduces the different components of PsychGrad.org. It further encourages prospective applicants to consult their academic advisor and the APA's (2001) *Graduate Study in Psychology*, along with Keith-Spiegel's (1990) and APA's (1993) books on the application process. The home page also allows visitors to send an e-mail recommendation by simply typing in a person's e-mail address.

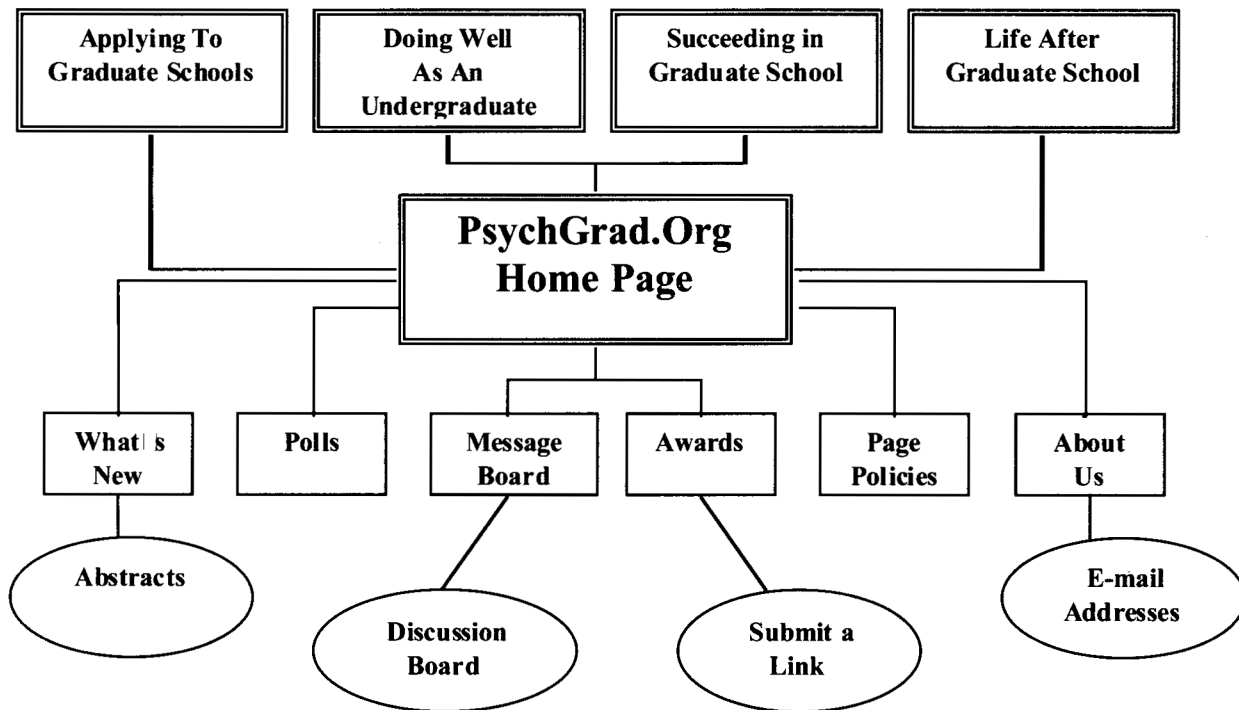


Figure 1. Organization of the Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal.

The four primary information domains discussed earlier are represented in Figure 1, but there are other important ancillary components of the site as well. The What's New page informs visitors of new information on the site and of new contributors to the site. For example, one faculty member is putting together material on Americans and Canadians applying to graduate programs in a nonresident country. The What's New page is also where we list the conferences at which presentations about PsychGrad.org have been or will be made, as well as public relations information.

Two other ancillary components offer supportive services for the visitor. We have implemented a message board. Students applying for graduate admissions face a heavy task with the process and also a high degree of uncertainty. The Message Board was created for students to share information and to provide support for each other. The board exists for students to post questions or concerns and for others to respond with feedback or ideas. In the past, there have been two Usenet newsgroups that accomplished this (soc.college.grad and soc.college.gradinfo). However, in recent years, easy access to newsgroup software has resulted in an unfavorable signal/noise ratio in these newsgroups, which typically contain mostly irrelevant or low-quality information. PsychGrad.org's message board is focused on psychology graduate programs and will be moderated, thus providing a unique and reliable resource for the student. Another important source of information for the student is accomplished with our Poll. A goal of the Portal is to acquire data about student behaviors and concerns relative to the application process. At a minimum, this data will be useful to

the student visitors by informing them of central tendencies of various issues involved in the application process. Table 1 lists some of the questions about which we are currently polling students. We hope that this information will be more generally useful in shaping our conceptualization of how students view the application process and the behaviors they utilize in accomplishing their goals.

Awards page. We hope that the Portal is a valuable resource to which psychology departments, academic advising centers, and other graduate application Web resources will link. The Portal staff is contacting those who are responsible for Web sites that could benefit by linking to PsychGrad.org. Those sites that have content that advances the search for useful information will be awarded the PsychGrad.org's Top Site Award. We welcome others' recommendations for sites that should receive the Top Site Award. The Awards page will also be the location where PsychGrad.org's awards are listed.

About us. The Portal is supported by the volunteer efforts of faculty at various institutions and a number of graduate and undergraduate students. PsychGrad.org itself, however, is not supported by a university and is independently located on a .org Web site. This allows those making the decisions about the Portal the widest latitude.

Table 1
Sample Questions From the PsychGrad.org Student Poll

1. What part of applying to a graduate program is the most difficult for you?
2. From whom have you received the most help in preparing your application?
3. How many Ph.D. programs are you applying to?

Summary

We have described an information portal specialized for those who are planning on applying to psychology graduate programs. Since applying to graduate school is a novel task for a student, the Portal provides an information schema for the process. The goal has been to put, in one Web-accessible location, links to the full range of information that a graduate applicant will need. Eventual plans include expanding the Portal to help students do well as undergraduates, graduate students, and new professionals.

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