

# Eye on Psi Chi: Summer 2011

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## Questions (and Answers) About Successful Psychology Graduate Admissions: Three Heads ARE Better Than One

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Mitchell M. Handelsman, PhD, University of Colorado Denver  
Scott W. VanderStoep, PhD, Hope College (MI)  
R. Eric Landrum, PhD, Boise State University (ID)

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The three-headed panel of Drs. VanderStoep, Handelsman, and Landrum combine their expertise on graduate school admission. These Psi Chi faculty advisors have successfully guided hundreds of students through post-graduation transitions and share their advice with students from the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay.

When looking at grad schools, who would you contact for more information?

Dr. Scott W. VanderStoep: For doctoral programs, crafting a well-written, proofread, fairly formal and BRIEF letter to the professor who would be your potential research advisor will put you on his/her radar and likely get you valuable information. The email should indicate that you have read the professor's work, that you're interested in studying similar topics in graduate school, AND ask if the person will be taking students into his/her lab next year. Perhaps the professor is leaving the university, maybe he/she will be on sabbatical, or, for some other reason, be unable to supervise you. Remember too that professors vary in their degree of warmth that they communicate via email. Don't over-interpret a curt or annoyed-sounding email as meaning that the professor doesn't want to hear from you. For master's programs, contacting the department chair or graduate admissions chair is the best approach.

Dr. Mitchell M. Handelsman: The first step these days is always the web. Programs put lots of information on their webpages specifically to save their staff from having to answer the same questions over and over. (Kind of like why we're publishing these pieces!)

Having said that, here are a couple guidelines: For general information about the program and questions about applying, contact the department office (not the faculty). Contact faculty

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□ Eye on Psi Chi is a magazine designed to keep members and alumni up-to-date with all the latest information about Psi Chi's programs, awards, and chapter activities. It features informative articles about careers, graduate school admission, chapter ideas, personal development, the various fields of psychology, and important issues related to our discipline.

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directly about their research, opportunities in their lab, and similar types of questions. Imagine a busy professor being asked a question that could have been found on the web in 20 seconds. What will they think about the applicant's initiative, drive, and ability to work independently?

Another good source of information is current graduate students. Sometimes their contact information is on the webpage, or you may need to ask departments for some names of students who are willing to talk with you. Faculty members are often very willing to have students in their labs contact you. The information you get from current students (and alumni, for that matter) can be useful at all points in the application process.

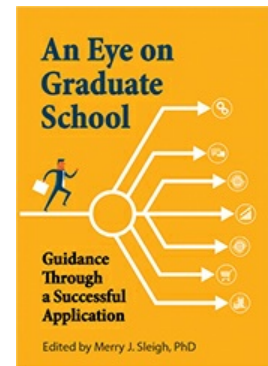
Dr. R. Eric Landrum: First, be sure to follow any directions that the graduate program website suggests, such as contacting the graduate secretary or chair of the admissions committee if you have more questions about the program or the application process. Second, it is good to make contact with the faculty at the program(s) you are interested in via email or chatting at a regional conference, for example. If you can have an on-site faculty member advocate for you during meetings of the graduate admissions committee, you have a strong ally who greatly improves your chances of successful entry into graduate school. You want to be on the radar screen, but not so much as to be a pest or a nuisance. Carefully consider the questions that you ask—don't ask a question that is answered easily by checking the department website—ask a question that shows your savvy for the program and for the challenges of a graduate education.

What can you do with a master's vs. a PhD degree?

Dr. Scott W. VanderStoep: For those interested in the helping professions, the degree of clinical privilege that master's graduates have varies by state and what a state's licensing board will allow. Some states allow one-on-one therapy as long as a doctoral level supervisor (PhD, PsyD, psychiatrist) is also on staff at the facility. In other states, a master's graduate would be allowed virtually no individual therapy sessions with clients. In nonclinical areas, a master's degree would prepare you for work in industrial or applied settings. A master's-level psychologist may also be able to teach at a community college or perhaps part-time at a 4-year college. A PhD will provide you with maximum employment flexibility, but not always a lot more money. For example, PhD-level persons working in nonelite liberal arts colleges or regional public universities will probably be making about as much as a master's-level person working in industry.

Dr. Mitchell M. Handelsman: Lots! You likely will not be able to work with the same variety of people or do the same variety of tasks (e.g.,

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assessment, consultation, program evaluation) as you would with a PhD, but lots of direct service work is done by master's level people. After all, they're cheaper to hire!

A master's degree can be a good option if (a) you tried but failed to get into a PhD program, or (b) you are not exactly sure what you want to do and want to explore options or get some experience before committing to a PhD program. If you're committed to nonclinical, academic-type jobs, a master's degree in something like general psychology may help as a stepping stone.

You would do well to collect some data other than advice from people like me, who went right from a bachelor's program into a PhD program. Talk to volunteer coordinators and others at mental health centers. Go see your Career Center on campus.

Another thought: You might consider a degree like a Master's of Social Work (MSW). Social workers do a lot of the same things that psychologists do, and an MSW degree (and some experience in the field) can look very good on an application to PsyD, and some PhD, programs.

You can find lots of career information in the Occupational Outlook Handbook, on the web, on pp. 72-75 of Landrum and Davis (2010), and in Kuther and Morgan (2010).

U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010). Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/oco>.

What kind of financial aid is available?

Dr. Scott W. VanderStoep: Most doctoral programs provide tuition assistance and employment opportunities for their graduate students. The tuition assistance is usually a full waiver, and the employment opportunities would be either working as a graduate student teaching assistant or a research assistant. Such financial assistance in master's programs is not as lucrative and not as common. If it exists, it will be more competitive; you may have to apply and compete with your classmates for these funds. The good news is that the master's will be for only 2 or 3 years as opposed to 5 or more years for doctoral programs. The question of funding is absolutely a question you need to ask. If 100% of students are not funded, find out how many get funded, how much tuition reduction is offered, how much the assistantships pay, and how long they last..

Dr. Mitchell M. Handelman: Much financial aid is offered through individual programs: Research assistantships (from professors about whom you've expressed interest, or from assigned assistantships). Teaching assistantships. Traineeships and grants with or without other strings attached.

Applications will often include financial aid portions that hook you into the university's pipeline. PhD programs often have a lot more built-in financial aid than MA or PsyD programs.

Do not let financial issues influence where you apply. If programs really want you, they will help. And, of course, you will be diligent in searching out sources of funding— such as foundations, community groups, and fraternal organizations—that you may not find until after you apply.

Dr. R. Eric Landrum: Of course this is going to vary by type of school, type of aid, and a host of factors, including your own eligibility— your results may vary. The financial aid office at your prospective school should be able to help you seek out possible sources, and you'll want to inquire with your department or program about the availability of assistantships and fellowships. An assistantship usually provides a stipend to the student in return for service to the department, such as serving as a research assistant or a teaching assistant. A fellowship provides a grant to the student to study in a certain area, but the money does not have to be repaid nor does service need to be provided to the institution. Just as with your undergraduate education, financial aid may be need-based or merit-based.

Should you make a separate personal statement for each college you apply to?

Dr. Scott W. VanderStoep: Yes, in almost all cases. For one thing, each school asks slightly different questions. The more you can personalize your letter, the better it will sound to the screening committee. The body of each statement will look similar, so you can use the cut-and-paste function. Read each personal statement carefully! Nothing is worse than telling the University of Montego Bay that you want to study developmental psychology with Professor A, and University of Kingston that you want to study educational psychology with Professor B, when, in fact, it's the other way around.

Dr. Mitchell M. Handelman: Do not start from scratch with each version of your statement, but do research each program and think about your own professional identity, goals, etc. How much your statements vary depends on the type of program to which you are applying. Research-oriented programs, in which individual faculty members have lots to say about who gets accepted, want specifics about your knowledge of particular research areas. Many big clinical programs that take the "best available athlete" are interested in your professional interests and experiences in more general ways, so there will be more overlap. Many of your paragraphs—about your college experiences or long-term goals—will work for most or all of your applications. This leads to one note of warning: If you do cut and paste some standard paragraphs, remember to proof your statements carefully before sending them. Few students will be

admitted to a program if they write a statement that says, "I really want to go to name of school because of your unique and excellent program."

Dr. R. Eric Landrum: Absolutely yes! One personal statement does not fit every situation, just as one size does not fit all. If you read the instructions carefully for each school you are applying to, you'll notice that there are slight (and sometimes substantial) differences between what is being asked. Be absolutely sure to follow instructions. More articles on the Psi Chi website ([www.psichi.org](http://www.psichi.org)) can provide helpful tips in preparing your personal statement—and you should consult with your faculty mentor for help and proofreading during your preparation. Let me put it this way—if you cannot follow the directions to apply to graduate school, what do you think your chances will be of being admitted to graduate school?

When looking at school options, what is the importance of internship matching rates?

Dr. Scott W. VanderStoep: I have never told an undergraduate to be concerned about this. It's probably important, but there will be other clues that you will receive as you do your homework on possible graduate programs in clinical psychology. I tell students it is more important to consider other factors. First, is the program APA accredited? That is non-negotiable in my opinion. Second, I tell them to worry about a different kind of match—does the research and clinical experience in the program match the student's interest? A low internship match rate is likely indicative of a program that is struggling, at least temporarily. But there will be other indicators of a struggling program—morale of the current students, research productivity of the faculty, competitiveness of the applicant pool (and accompanying GRE scores) that will trigger concern you have about a program's quality.

Dr. Mitchell M. Handeslman: When you make your list of factors (including geography, research opportunities, practicum placements, financial aid, etc.) to consider in your graduate school application process, you might want to categorize them as high, moderate, or low in their influence on your decision about where to apply and where to accept. You can also categorize each factor as relatively proximal or distal. Internship matching rate is a distal factor because you have a lot to do before an internship. Let's talk a bit about locus of control: A lot of the variance in whether you get matched is accounted for by your own efforts in excelling in your courses and seeking out the best educational opportunities and supervision. Many internship sites base their decisions on the applications they have before them—not the reputation of the program.

At the same time, internship match rate may be a reasonable proxy measure of the overall quality of clinical training. If a match rate is

not zero, it may mean that good students who seek out the best sites and supervisors will find a good internship. However, low match rates may indicate that the culture or atmosphere of the program regarding clinical training isn't what you might want.

Whether the factor of match rates reaches your high importance category depends to some degree (no pun intended) on where you stand on the clinical vs. academic route (I was very committed to doing clinical work in graduate school and wound up a full-time academic.) and the relative importance of other factors on your list. It's possible that matching rate will be more important in your decision about which offer (out of several!) you accept, rather than where to apply in the first place.

Dr. R. Eric Landrum: I'll be honest here and tell you that I don't know a lot about the APPIC process, other than that there is a process for those seeking internships to be matched with APA-approved internship sites. It seems that recently there has been more demand than supply. Just as you need to do everything you can to be competitive to get into graduate school, you'll also need to do your homework on internship sites and the APPIC matching process to give yourself any competitive advantage that might be available.

**Psi Chi Officers at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay**  
The Psi Chi Chapter of University of Wisconsin–Green Bay was founded in 2004 by its current adviser Dr. Regan A. R. Gurung. Since then the chapter's membership has increased to over 150 members and routinely inducts between 30-55 students a year. Each year the chapter adds to its repertoire by increasing membership and participating in more community service projects than in the previous year. All of the activities and projects help to give its Psi Chi members a well-rounded experience while attending the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

Mitch Handelsman, PhD, is currently professor of psychology and a CU President's Teaching Scholar at the University of Colorado Denver, where he has been on the faculty since 1982. In 2003–04, he was president of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association. He is a licensed psychologist and a fellow of APA. He currently writes the quarterly column Ethics Matters for Eye on Psi Chi. His blog, "The Ethical Professor," can be found at [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com).

R. Eric Landrum, PhD, is a former Psi Chi Rocky Mountain Regional Vice- President (2009–11). A professor at Boise State University (ID) and the chapter's faculty advisor, Dr. Landrum often give talks about issues such as graduate school admissions. He has over 225 professional presentations at conferences and published over 20 books or book chapters, and has published over 65 professional articles in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals.

Scott VanderStoep, PhD, previously served as Psi Chi Midwest Regional Vice-President from 2002–06 and President from 2008–09. His educational journey began in the same place where he currently works—Hope College (MI)—and where he is associate professor and department chair. In his 18 years of college teaching, he has taught introductory, developmental, social, cognitive, industrial/organizational, research lab, psychology of religion, and advanced data analysis.

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