

Where Should I Apply to Graduate School?

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Category: [Graduate School](#)

A perennial student question is “Where should I apply to graduate school?” After reinforcing the desire to pursue graduate training, the mentor’s answer is often based on personal perspective instead of sound critical thinking based on available data. Additionally, it is not uncommon for students to apply to a specific graduate program because a professor in a particular program does research on a circumscribed topic in which they are currently interested. Although interest must be sufficient to endure the arduous process that is (at times) graduate school, students typically miss the purpose of graduate training. The purpose is to train students in the foundational skills necessary to succeed in a specific subfield of psychology. The topics or situations in which students apply these skills are in many ways simply interchangeable examples. For instance, learning how to design a sound, theoretically-driven research study is significantly more important than the fact that the study was on help-seeking behavior in ethnic-minority adolescents. In fact, individual interests and research topics in a subfield will change many times over the course of a career. Few psychologists continue the same line of research or the same area of practice for their entire professional lives. Understanding this educational truth leaves undergraduate students at a loss for how to proceed in identifying quality graduate programs. Unfortunately at times, it seems to be a divination process instead of a critical, methodical process. Although certain pieces of the process are based on personal desires (e.g., applying to schools in the coastal states) or basic traits (e.g., clinical psychology vs. counseling psychology; APA accreditation status), selecting quality graduate programs can be based on sound critical thinking—if you’re willing to do the leg work.

Arguably, the single most important trait of a good graduate program is the quality of research the professors and students produce or publish. In fact, because quality research demonstrates a multitude of valuable skills (e.g., critical thinking, perseverance, writing skills), it opens many doors to employment upon graduation, especially research oriented positions like academe. As a result, choosing to apply to programs that produce high-quality research is the first step toward career success. The student’s obvious question at this point is, “How do I know a program produces quality research?” The easy answer is pointing students to journals in the subfield. This direction often leads to a haphazard appraisal of a journal’s articles and being sidetracked (biased) by interesting topics. As a result, we developed a strategy to derive a list of graduate programs that consistently produce quality research in the subfield of interest. Although the programs discovered may not end up on your “short list,” these simple steps will lead you to a set of programs to investigate in more detail and potentially pursue for graduate school admission. Here are the steps in the process:

1. Identify the major journals in the subfield of interest. In addition to your undergraduate mentor helping with the identification process, use of the Journal Citations Report (JCR) database at your library may help. The JCR lists an Impact Factor (IF) for most journals in psychology. If you select this route, review the list of journals included in JCR and select five of the top journals in your particular subfield. (The higher the IF, the better the journal is.)
2. Do a literature search for each of these journals for the most recent 5 years and download the articles. We encourage 5 years as this will be an indication of consistency and limit most anomalies (e.g., a special issue of one journal in which all authors are from a single graduate program).
3. Develop an Excel spreadsheet or SPSS database, inputting the following variables:
 - a. First Author’s Name
 - b. University Affiliation Listed For First Author
 - c. Program Affiliation Listed For First Author. The program affiliation is often listed in the contact information (e.g., department of psychology, director of experimental psychology program). The program information is important because larger universities may have multiple programs with faculty that are not connected with one another (e.g., faculty in a postdoctoral program at the university’s hospital and faculty in the experimental psychology master’s program). If the author’s program is not listed, an internet search can help fill in the blanks. Also, keep in mind that faculty may teach in multiple programs.
 - d. Journal Where the Article Appears. Programs represented in more than one of the “top” journals potentially indicates broader impact and higher prestige for the program.

4. Once the data are assembled, perform some basic analyses by sorting and resorting the data file (or running descriptive analyses in SPSS). Focus your analyses on identifying the 25 most frequently listed university affiliations (additional analyses on aspects like “program affiliation” and “student or faculty member listed as first author” may be done later to flesh out the results if necessary). If the process does not produce “enough” affiliations from your perspective, perform 3a. and 3b. for the second and third authors as well.

5. Perform a web search for each of the affiliations in order to find out if the affiliation has a graduate program you might be interested in attending. This will also help separate those affiliations that do not have graduate programs (e.g., research institutes, postdoctoral programs, applied settings).

6. Note in your spreadsheet or database the degrees (i.e., masters, specialist, doctoral) and types of programs (e.g., clinical, counseling, experimental, cognitive) offered by each affiliation.

7. Once all of the information is compiled, begin your investigation of the resulting list of graduate programs in your interest area(s).

In order to “test” the strategy, we used the process with the increasingly popular subfield of forensic psychology. Table 1 provides the general (i.e., abbreviated) end results from our “test.” Interestingly, the graduate programs found using this method overlap considerably with a study presented by the first author at the annual conference of the American Psychology-Law Society (Helms, 2008). Importantly, that study employed a different methodology in which people who are actively involved in the subfield ranked forensic psychology graduate programs. In short, the converging evidence supports not only the paramount importance of research skills but also the strategy of developing a list of potential quality programs to pursue in order to acquire these skills. In conclusion, we hope that you find the process not only useful in discovering quality graduate programs in your area of interest but also anxiety reducing due to increasing the manageability of the exciting endeavor of pursuing information on graduate training in a strategic and critical manner.

Table 1: Author Affiliations in the Top Forensic Psychology Journals: 2004–08

Affiliation ^a	Number of Articles ^b	Number of Different First Authors	Degrees Offered	Types of Programs ^c
John Jay College of Criminal Justice	13	13	MA, PhD	–Forensic (Clinical) –Forensic (Experimental)
Simon Fraser University	17	10	PhD	–Clinical –Cognitive and Biological –Developmental –Law & Forensic –Social –Theory & Methods
University of California-Irvine	10	9	PhD	Department of Cognitive Sciences: –Cognition and Information Processing –Cognitive Neuroscience –Mathematical Behavioral Science –Language –Perception and Action Department of Psychology and Social Behavior: –Developmental –Health –Psychopathology Social and Personality
University of South Florida	11	8	PhD	–Clinical –Cognitive –Industrial-Organizational –Neuroscience –Social
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	13	6	PhD	–Biopsychology –Clinical –Cognitive –Developmental –Law/Psychology –Social/ Personality
University of Southern California	6	6	PhD	–Brain & Cognitive Science –Clinical Science –Developmental –Quantitative Methods –Social
University of Virginia	7	5	PhD	–Clinical –Cognitive –Community –Developmental –Quantitative –Sensory & Systems Neuroscience –Social
University of Texas-El Paso	5	5	MA, PhD	MA: –Clinical –Experimental PhD: –Health –Language Acquisition & Bilingualism –Legal –Social, Cognitive, & Neurosciences
University of Alabama	5	5	PhD	Clinical: –Child –Geropsychology –Health –Psychology & Law Experimental: –Cognitive –Developmental –Social
University of California-Los Angeles	5	5	PhD	–Behavioral Neuroscience –Clinical –Cognitive –Developmental –Health –Learning and Behavior –Quantitative –Social
University of Kentucky	5	5	PhD	Clinical Experimental: –Animal Learning, Behavior, and Cognition –Behavioral Neuroscience and Psychopharmacology –Cognitive –Developmental –Social

Note. Portions of these findings were presented at the annual Georgia Undergraduate Research in Psychology Conference (Schoorf & Helms, 2009).

For the deconvolution test, we used the top three journals in the field of forensic psychology as identified in Helms (2009).

The journals, in rank order, are Law and Human Behavior; Psychology, Public Policy, and Law; and Behavioral Sciences and the Law.

a. For simplicity, we list only those affiliations with five or more different first authors. Affiliations are listed from most to least number of different first authors.

b. This is the number of publications in which the first author indicated this affiliation.

c. All psychology programs for a particular university affiliation are listed.

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