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## Does Research Experience Make a Significant Difference in Graduate Admissions?

Graduate School  
Promotion of Research

by [Lynn H. Collins](#) - La Salle University

*I know that many of you are undergraduate students who are interested in going on to graduate school in psychology. Others are in master's degree programs and hope to get into a doctoral program. As a student, your perceptions of graduate admissions criteria may differ from those used by graduate admissions committees (Cashin & Landrum, 1991). Although you may accurately recognize the importance of your overall GPA, you probably underestimate the importance of your verbal and quantitative GRE scores, your autobiographical statement, and your letters of recommendation. You are also likely to overestimate the importance of extracurricular activities, practica, and the prestige of your undergraduate institution (Cashin & Landrum, 1991). The purpose of this article is to describe the real role that research experience plays in graduate admissions decisions. You are already ahead of the game. Most students don't bother to investigate how graduate schools select students until they are rejected by the schools to which they apply (Landrum, Jeglum, & Cashin, 1994). If you read this article and seek the kinds of experiences it recommends, you may be able to improve your chances of acceptance.*

Often we faculty tell you that we had it tougher than you do. We walked 10 miles in the snow and lived in utter poverty, all for the honor of studying for long hours . . . which is all true . . . but time has not made graduate school admissions criteria less stringent. The criteria have actually gotten tougher. In talking with other graduate program admissions committee members, it seems that although the GRE scores required have stayed about the same, these days most successful applicants have already presented their own research at a conference. Many of today's applicants have authored or coauthored papers. These things were not typical of applicants when I applied to graduate programs. Although I have served on admissions committees myself, I thought it was important to examine the literature on graduate admissions. I found that with one or two exceptions, the data is consistent with my experience.

Some of the things one might think are important are actually not so important. Your score on the advanced Psychology GRE is less important than your Verbal and Quantitative scores (Bonfazi, Crespy, & Rieker, 1997; Landrum & Cashin, 1991; Munoz-Dunbar & Stanton, 1999; Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz, 1989). Admissions committees often believe that if you have strong basic academic skills, then they can teach you psychological theories. Practica, internships, or field placement experiences and nonpsychology activities are not given as much weight in PhD program admissions. Although it may be that these hands-on experiences are important for those wishing to enter PsyD programs in clinical psychology, researchers who have studied admissions to PhD programs in experimental, clinical, counseling, and school psychology have found that practica, internships, or field placement experiences are not as important as GPA, GRE scores, letters of recommendation, and research experience (Hines, 1986; Landrum & Cashin, 1991; Landrum, Jeglum, Cashin, 1994; Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz, 1989).

Researchers conducting the most recent study of graduate admission directors of APA programs in clinical psychology found that research experience or commitment to research was the most important factor in selecting graduate students, followed by letters of recommendation, statement of purpose, quantitative GRE score, and other factors (Munoz-Dunbar & Stanton, 1999). In another study of APA-approved clinical psychology programs, research experience was only exceeded

in importance by verbal and quantitative GRE scores. These were followed in importance by letters of recommendation and grades (Hines, 1986).

Purdy, Reinehr, and Schwartz (1989) looked at the priorities of admission committees in a variety of types of graduate psychology programs. They also found that admission committees emphasized GREs (verbal, quantitative, and total), letters of recommendation, research experience, and GPA more than clinical experience, psychology GRE, analytic GRE, previous graduate course work, and courses taken. Landrum, Jeglum, and Cashin (1994) found that GPA, GRE, and letters of recommendation are important, as are autobiographical statements, conference presentations, and publications.

On the other hand, when I've served on PsyD admissions committees, I've noticed that clinical work experiences were valued more highly than research. This observation was confirmed by Bonifazi, Crespy, and Rieker (1997). If you apply to PsyD programs, it will be important that you ask the professors and clinical supervisors who are familiar with your clinical skills to write letters for you. Even on PsyD admissions committees, however, research experience may still be valued. After all, most professors, even those who teach in PsyD programs, hold PhDs themselves and are often interested in research.

When Hines (1986) and Bonfazi, Crespy, and Rieker (1997) asked faculty teaching in doctoral programs whether any particular course or activity would have made a student with a master's degree more attractive for admission, the most common response was research involvement. In Bonfazi, Crespy, and Rieker's (1997) study, 33% of the respondents from APA-approved PhD programs in clinical psychology, 44% of respondents from PhD programs in counseling, and 27% of respondents from school psychology programs said that research experience would make an applicant from a master's program more attractive. When asked the same question in Hine's (1986) study, 33% of the respondents from APA-approved programs in clinical psychology said that research involvement including joint authorship of a paper or publication, would make an applicant more attractive. Considering its relative importance in the ranking of applicants, research can make up for a less-than-optimal GPA, but only up to a point.

I am a good example of the influence of research experience on admissions. I was in the rigorous premedical program at Duke University, so I regularly enrolled in physics, chemistry, and biology courses, a math course, and a couple of psychology courses. I came down with mononucleosis one semester and didn't withdraw from school because I didn't want to be seen as a quitter. Not the best call. I also had a very busy social life. So, my GPA was not a 4.0. But when I earned an A in a graduate-level statistics course, the professor took me aside and offered me the chance to get involved in research on schizophrenia. I accepted the offer and was eventually admitted to an APA-accredited program in clinical psychology to work with an expert on schizophrenia research. Coincidence? I think not.

Research involvement, including presenting your research at conferences, also affects your chances in other ways. Research experience can help you to develop an area of interest. Many students who like psychology say that there are so many interesting areas that they aren't sure which type of graduate program would be best for them. My first research experience entailed working in a visual perception lab through a work-study program. I had a wonderful supervisor, but learned that I wasn't particularly interested in psychophysics. My next experience was with taste perception. That didn't really excite me either. I found, however, that I did enjoy working with behaviorally disordered children and found the research on schizophrenia interesting. By the end of my undergraduate experience, I knew that I wanted to become a clinical psychologist. I have since added anxiety disorders, alcohol dependence, and the psychology of women to my list of interests. Keep in mind that interests can always change and expand. Another advantage to getting involved with research is that as you work with a professor, she or he gets to know you better and can then write you a more meaningful letter. Your research supervisor may also introduce you to his or her colleagues at conferences, give you the scoop on careers in psychology, and invite you to join professional organizations where you can network, or at least meet interesting people. No guarantees, but strings have been pulled, and connections are a major factor in the hiring process for first jobs (Bair & Boor, 1988).

Although enrolling in a master's degree program does not typically give you an edge on the competition, if you don't get into a doctoral program on the first try, it may be helpful to enroll in a master's program that has a research emphasis (Bonifazi, Crespy, & Rieker, 1997; Hines, 1986). An empirical master's thesis and any papers or publications you could produce during the program would be viewed very favorably by admissions committees. Course work in research methods and statistics is also viewed favorably (Bonifazi, Crespy, & Rieker, 1997; Hines, 1986; Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz, 1989). If you complete an empirical master's thesis, it and several core courses (e.g., statistics, research methods, learning, development, personality) may transfer into the doctoral program you eventually attend (Bonifazi, Crespy, & Rieker, 1997; Hines, 1986).

Attending a master's program is not the only way to become involved in research, however. You can do research under supervision as part of an undergraduate program, through a special arrangement with a professor, or even as part of a paid job. There are likely to be opportunities to get involved in research at your school, as there are here at La Salle University. Ask your professor whether she or he needs help with a research project or if you could collect and analyze data for your course project instead of writing a regular term paper. Those are just two of the ways students and faculty can build research experiences into course work in a way that allows students to do research as part of their regular academic load. Traditional independent studies and summer research internships are other ways to add research experience. It is clear that research experience does make a significant difference in graduate admissions. Any of these experiences can enhance your graduate school application and allow your potential to shine through!

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** **Lynn H. Collins** received her BS from Duke University, her PhD from Ohio State University, and completed a postdoctoral fellowship on the Anxiety Disorders Unit of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Dr. Collins is associate professor of psychology and clinical director of the doctor of psychology program (PsyD) in clinical psychology at La Salle University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A clinical psychologist, her areas of clinical specialization include anxiety disorders and alcohol dependence.

Dr. Collins is currently on the Board of Directors of the Eastern Psychological Association, serves as secretary of the Philadelphia Society of Clinical Psychology, and is a Fellow of the American Psychological Society. She serves as national consultant and regional steering committee member for Psi Chi. Dr. Collins has been active in the Association for Women in Psychology (AWP) and is also cochair of the Gender Research Interest Group of the International Council of Psychologists.



Dr. Collins publishes and presents in the areas of clinical psychology, psychology of gender, and international psychology. She is interested in the interface between clinical and social psychology. In other words, she studies how social situations create behavioral problems. She believes many behavioral problems that are seen as reflecting pathology or flaws in an individual's character may actually be normal responses to difficult situations. Dr. Collins thinks situational influences such as social roles and power differences contribute to such things as personality, psychopathology, personal distress, and societal gender roles. Perhaps if men and women held equally powerful roles in society, there wouldn't be any differences in how the two groups behave!



Dr. Collins is also interested in the experiences of women who become professors. Dr. Collins and colleagues Joan Chrisler and Kathryn Quina have written a book, *Career Strategies for Women in Academe: Arming Athena*, published by Sage in 1998, that addresses some of the challenges facing women in academe.

*Author note.* I'd like to express my appreciation to Kate Connolly for her assistance with this article. Send correspondence concerning this article to Lynn H. Collins, Clinical Director, Doctor of Psychology Program, P.O. Box 273, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA 19141; e-mail: [collins@lasalle.edu](mailto:collins@lasalle.edu).

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