

GRAD SCHOOL INFORMATION SESSION SEPT 27, 2024

Overview:

1. What is graduate school and what types of programs are there?

What is Graduate School?

Something you pursue after you finish your bachelor's degree – it can be just master's, master's then PhD, or just PhD

Kinds of Grad Programs in Psych

- A. Some programs are research based (these are the ones we will be focusing on today). These include research master's and PhD programs. You can specialize in developmental, cognitive, CNS, social, I/O research. You can also get a clinical master's and/or PhD. These are also research intensive, but you are simultaneously training as a practitioner
- B. Some programs are less research based, like applied master's or PsyD (which would train you more directly for practice, without research training)

There are plenty of other (non-psych degree) options for people who are interested in mental health/wellness careers (these are often master's degrees)

- Counselling Psychology (master's, can go to PhD)
- Clinical Social Work (master's)
- Psychiatry/Medicine (MD)
- Psychiatric Nursing (Nursing Bachelor's)
- Psychotherapy (master's)
- Art Therapy (can be a certificate)
- Speech-Language Therapy (masters, can go to PhD)
- etc.

How can you decide what type of program is right for you?

Go to the websites and look at various programs and their requirements, ask people in those programs what kinds of jobs graduates get after doing their program. You need to make sure you are applying to a program that is legit and will set you up to be able to get the type of job you want

2. Some myths/misunderstandings about grad school

You have to pay for grad school – For most research degrees, your tuition is covered, and you get a small stipend (through things like being a teaching assistant). In Canada, this is true for domestic students/permanent residents. You will need to look more carefully if you are an international student (our department currently funds a very limited number of

international students). In the US, research programs are also funded (and in some cases you can take Canadian tri-council PhD funding with you to study at a US university).

However, there are many programs where you will pay – professional programs, for-profit master's degrees. Make sure you look for info about funding on the websites of the programs you're interested in!

Grad school is like a more advanced version of undergrad – This is not true. You do coursework (particularly in early years), but grad level programming involves you learning by doing in labs (e.g., designing and programming experiments, testing participants, etc) and classes are much smaller and more seminar-style.

If you are applying to research programs, you already need to have fully developed research ideas to apply – This is not true. You will develop your research program together with your graduate supervisor/advisor. What you need is a sense of which direction you want to go in, so that you can look for potential advisors who have interests that are compatible with yours.

You need clinical experience to apply to clinical programs – This is not true. It is very difficult to almost impossible for an undergraduate to have clinical experience when they apply. Programs are looking for other kinds of experience (see more below).

3. Applying to graduate school

How might you identify a program/advisor?

Lists

Databases

Websites

Talking to your profs at UW! We're a good resource and we love to talk about psych programs!

It is important to keep an open mind -- search outside Ontario (& Canada) – look for people doing the type of work you're excited about!

Emailing a professor (pre-application) to let them know you are interested in working with them

You are allowed to (and in some cases encouraged to) email potential supervisors before submitting your application. If you do, tell them why you are interested in them and why you would be a good fit for the program. Be succinct! Professors do not have much time and will not read a long email! Attach your transcript and CV. If you would like to meet with them, ask if they would like to meet and talk about your application. Some profs will respond and say yes, some profs will respond and say that they do not meet with

applicants in advance, some won't respond. But it's fine to email just in case they do say yes. More on this below.

4. Components of application

Grades – These are important, but matter in some programs more than others. People do understand there can be bumps along your undergraduate journey or that your early grades might not be reflective of your ability (for example, maybe you improved once you got into a major that you were excited about). If you have this kind of trajectory, you can comment on it in your statement – where I started out wasn't a good fit, and now I'm in a place I love and excelling in my courses.

GRE (graduate record exam) – This is sometimes required, but these days there is a lot of variability across departments and schools in whether you need to take this exam. Even in our dept, one area requires the GRE (I/O), some areas allow you to submit your scores if you think they are helpful for your application, and one doesn't allow you to submit them at all (clinical). Look into the programs you're applying to early and see if they require the GRE so that you are not surprised by this requirement and can take it in time. You can sign up at multiple points during the year at testing centers.

Reference letters (2 or 3) – The big thing with reference letters is knowing who to ask. Think about what qualities the program is looking for and choose letter writers who can speak to those qualities. The ideal people to ask for letters are generally professors with whom you have interacted more than sitting in a large class. This can be profs of upper level courses (smaller seminars), who have had a chance to see your writing and how you think. It is also often profs whose labs you have worked in – volunteering, doing directed studies, doing an honors thesis. If you mostly interacted with a grad student supervisor, you can ask if the grad student will co-write the letter with their faculty supervisor. The way you can stand out to your letter writers (so that you can get strong letters) is to show interest in your class or the work you are doing in the lab, show good communication skills, show independence in your thesis, and by being responsible and reliable. When you contact your letters writers, give them as much information as possible to help them craft their letter – 'I started working in your lab on this date, these are the skills I acquired, this is what I did in your lab, this is how long I was in your lab', remind them of what you did in their course. You can also tell them what specifically you want them to mention in your letter (for example, if you helped out other people in the lab, you can ask the prof to mention that you were a good team player)

Statements of interest – You are selling yourself to the program and supervisor. Craft your statement to the program and people you are interested in working with.

Q&A:

Below follows a list of questions and answers that came up during the session:

1. Is there any flexibility in start dates for grad programs?

This will depend on the program. The application cycles are fixed, but sometimes you can change your start date (except in clinical or more structured programs, because they have a very fixed curriculum).

2. What made you want to pursue a career in academia after your graduate program?

Fell in love with research, love the environment. It is hard to know whether it's for you until you've done it (keep an open mind going into grad school).

It is a very big investment of time and energy to do a master's/PhD, so you shouldn't pursue it unless either a) you are open to the idea of academia (knowing of course that most – 80% in Canada – PhD graduates do not go into academic positions) or b) you see it as an investment in developing skills that will be valuable for other careers – for example, perhaps you know you want to go into industry, but also understand that the skills you will learn in grad school – project management, data analysis, communication skills – will be seen as valuable by certain other employers. You can also do research as a career even if you don't stay in academia (e.g., for tech companies, the govt).

3. How do you balance research and teaching as a grad student?

What you do as a graduate student changes as you progress through the program (for example, with more coursework early on). As a grad student, you do wear many hats (teaching, research, coursework, clinical experience). You need really good organizational skills. But you should have conversations with your supervisor about your ultimate career goals and they will help you prioritize what will help you achieve those goals. If you want to pursue an academic career, they will help you prioritize research. If you want a teaching career, they will help you get more teaching experience (like as a sessional instructor). If you want to work as a clinician, they will help you focus on that.

Programs do vary somewhat in what they require/what options they have (how much coursework there is, what types of applied options there are, how much teaching students do, etc). So you should talk to students currently in the program and see whether they are doing the kinds of things you want to be doing. For example, if you know you want to go into research, talk to current students and see if they have time for research.

4. What are good ways to spend a gap year?

All of the faculty are in agreement that a gap year can be a good thing (and many of us took our own gap years)! There are lots of reasons to take a gap year:

- one reason is that it gives you some time to think about next steps. It's a big commitment to go to grad school, so taking some extra time to think about what interests you can be helpful

- another reason is to get additional experience – e.g., working as a lab coordinator or research assistant. Don't limit yourself to looking at Waterloo – there are lots of other universities you can apply for positions at. More experiences will give you a better perspective on what you want to do, will strengthen your application, and will also open up more possibilities for people who can write you letters of recommendation

- your honors thesis will be done by the time you apply, so you will have more to say about it in your application (and your supervisor can write about more skills in their letter)

- mature students often come back to school with more focus and good communication skills, which is desirable to potential supervisors. Even if you don't stay in the academic realm during your gap, talk about how your experiences have been relevant and valuable for what you want to do in grad school

5. What is the difference between counselling psych, psychotherapy, and a clinical PhD?

Counselling psych is offered through the Faculty of Education. It might be course based only, or could have thesis. When you are done with the program, you would register with the College of Counsellors, not the College of Psychologists. But in terms of what you will do in practice, it is similar to clinical psych in the act of psychotherapy. Often counselling psych programs require you to have taken some undergrad counselling courses.

Psychotherapy is often a 2-year program offered through private institutions or departments in university.

In clinical psych, you learn to engage in psychotherapy as well, but also learn more about diagnosing and assessment.

6. Is lab work outside of the field of psychology still a selling point on app?

A big yes. Potential supervisors are not looking at the content of what you have done research-wise previously. Content is easy to acquire in grad school. It is the skills you are learning, and how to think about and conduct research that are important. So you don't need to limit yourself to psych departments for research experience. Potential supervisors just care that you understand the research you are doing and that you can talk about it.

7. What does a competitive graduate application look like?

High grades, good reference letters, well-crafted statement, research experience, interpersonal skills. Some of these elements are more critical for some programs than others (for example, some programs put more emphasis on grades than others).

Demonstrate in your statement that you a) understand the program, b) understand the skill sets you have and how they will be useful for the path you want to take, c) have good personal boundaries (and don't disclose too much personal info), and d) have a unique perspective. Make sure to get feedback on your statement from other people (like profs whose lab you are in). Don't think about it as applying to a university – think about it as applying to a lab/person.

Another thing that can look good on your application is having applied for a scholarship. You can apply for tri-council grad scholarships as a 4th year undergrad. Most undergrads don't get these, but if you apply and get it, great! And if you don't, it still looks good to the program that you applied – it will show that you took the initiative.

8. Other application questions

What do you do if some grades aren't very good?

Address this head on in your statement: 'This is what happened, and this is why you should take me anyway'. If the early GPA is not great and improves that is a good trajectory. But if there's a different pattern, you should explain it.

What other kinds of experiences look good on an application?

For clinical, many people volunteer with help lines, as peer mentors, or as tutors, etc. These experiences look especially good when you have stayed in them for a long time, because that shows commitment. For other areas, there might be other kinds of experiences that are relevant to what you want to study – for example, if you want to study developmental, an experience as a camp counsellor would look good – as long as you talk about it not as "I love kids!", but rather about how that experience showed you something about kids that you would like to understand better. Anything that shows leadership ability will also look good.

Should you contact a potential supervisor in advance?

There are varying opinions on this. Some faculty members say that it is desirable for students to reach out about a meeting and that they consider that a plus (in terms of showing interest, but it also allows you as the applicant to see whether the supervisor is a good fit). Other people will not meet with applicants in advance (they don't want to advantage people who know to ask and want everyone to be on a level playing field). But you might as well reach out and see what happens. The worst case is that you don't hear back. But you might hear back (and sometimes you might even hear back that they're not accepting students, which is good to know before you waste money on an application). Another approach is to send an email after you apply, saying 'Just so you know, I've

submitted my application, this is what I'm interested in...' – then you indicate interest, without asking for their time.

9. Is it typical to stay in a narrow area vs. branch out in your research?

Once you get to the faculty level, you do a lot of branching out and collaborating across areas. As a grad student, some programs will encourage it more than others, some labs will encourage it more than others. Do your research looking into the labs/programs. If you interview, you should ask – are there opportunities for me to work with other people too?

10. If you are applying to clinical programs, do you have to know in advance whether you want to specialize in child vs. adult clinical?

Some programs have different streams (like York, has child stream, adult stream), so you would apply into different streams. But our program at UW is a generalist program and trains you in both. After grad school, when you apply to the College of Psychologists to be registered, you will need to have experience in the area you are registering in. So, if you are in an adult program and want to register as a child clinical psychologist, you need to make sure there are opportunities for you to get child experience, like practicum/internship experience, or pursue additional experience after your grad program. Otherwise, you won't be able to register with that specialty.

11. If you do a degree outside of Canada will it be recognized here?

For sure if you do a degree in the US for non-clinical research programs.

For clinical psych specifically, if you want to register in Canada, there are certain criteria that the College of Psychologists looks for. So you need to make sure the program you're applying to meets those criteria. The province does not matter though (e.g., you can study in BC and register in Ontario).

12. Does your honors thesis have to be aligned with the professor's research program?

Yes, it has to be related in some way to the profs or grad students' research program. That's what we have expertise to supervise you in. So be flexible when you are looking for supervisors.

Remember, you don't need to keep going with the type of research you do in your honors thesis, masters, PhD, postdoc. You will have the opportunity at multiple points along this process to change your research emphasis or direction. You're being trained to be a scientist.

13. Can you switch programs/advisors once you're in a program?

It depends on the program, but students sometimes do move labs/areas. The key is that when you start to realize that where you are isn't right for you, communicate to your supervisor about it. And keep doing a good job while you talk about switching (so they can recommend you in good faith as someone who will do a good job in the new lab/program).

There is one exception, however. You cannot switch into clinical from another area of the department.

14. What stands out to you about Waterloo's dept of psychology? Why are you still here?

We love our department culture – people are so excited about the research they do, there is a lot of collaboration, there is a strong grad program, we all like each other, it's a very positive work environment

Remember, when you apply to grad schools, it is not the school that matters most – find a supervisor who is interested in what you are passionate about, and appears to be someone who will support you in being productive and who you will get along with (you will be spending a lot of time with them!)

15. Last questions about recommendation letters:

is there any downside to have your preferred supervisor write your letter of recommendation? Not at all – in fact, if you are applying to work in the same lab, it would be very weird if you didn't get a letter from them!

Make sure when you ask for letters, you ask people whether they can write you a strong reference letter, not just a reference letter.

Right now is the season for asking for letters if you are applying this fall, so start asking!

Some final thoughts

Academia is a wonderful path – we get to run with our passion, have a lot of freedom in what we study, there is a lot of variety (research, teaching, mentoring). But it is not for everyone and that is ok, too!

Waterloo has one of the best graduate programs in Canada/World – as you're considering programs, look far and wide, but don't forget about Waterloo 😊

Finally, be kind to yourself as you deal with all of this uncertainty, you're in a very stressful, transition period of life. We have all been there!