



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

BECOMING A PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENTIST: A SERIES TO SUCCESSFULLY APPLY TO GRAD SCHOOL AND HELP DIVERSIFY THE FIELD:

SESSION 6: APPLYING TO POST-BACC POSITIONS

TRANSCRIPT

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Dr. Mitch Prinstein: Hi, I'm Mitch Prinstein and I'm excited to welcome you to the next in our series on *Becoming a Psychological Scientist: A Series to Successfully Apply to Graduate School and Help Diversify the Field*. Other videos in this series include Top 7 Things You Should Know as You Apply to Graduate School, How to Write an Essay and Interview, Guidance Specifically for Students of Color, Selecting a Program that is a Good Fit For You.

Today we'll be talking about Applying to Post-Bacc Positions, and specifically, I'll be covering, what is a post-bacc, and why do you want one? How do you find these positions and successfully apply, and how do you make the most of these positions? Let's dive right in. What is a post-bacc? Well, in case anyone has asked you, "What are you doing after college? Why aren't you going directly to graduate school?" It's important to let them know that graduate school admissions to become a psychological scientist is actually pretty tough.

In fact, in some areas of psychological science, it's more competitive than getting into med school, law school, or even school to become a veterinarian. About 8% of those who apply into clinical science programs, for instance, are accepted nationally with some universities only accepting 1% to 2%, but that doesn't mean that you can't get in. You absolutely can. That's what this series is for, and we're going to make sure that you are one of the ones who are successful.

One way to do that is to take a couple of years between your undergraduate time and your application of graduate school to get what's called a post-baccalaureate research assistant position, or here a post-bacc. This is not required, but in a lot of programs, it seems to be increasingly common that folks who get a post-bacc are more likely to get admitted into a doctoral program in psychological science.

In order to do that, there are a variety of different steps that we'll go over here. They usually are one to three years of research experience that you're getting in these positions. It's most common for this to be a two-year position. It is modest pay, usually in the high twenties or low 30,000 for a year, but it is a very helpful way for you to focus your goals, decide what it is that you're most interested in, develop really specific interests that you can articulate in your graduate school application, and develop a few specific skills as well.

In particular, it is really important that we further diversify the fields in psychological science. This is a slide that you could pause and look at in great detail if you would like. The bottom line is that we need more psychological scientists from diverse backgrounds.

One interesting way in which you can be successful in getting a funded position is to write what's called an NIH Diversity Supplement with a prospective mentor. A diversity supplement is something that can be awarded to someone who already holds an NIH-funded research grant. A supplement is a very small application that is written jointly between a potential mentor who already has a grant and a student who is interested in getting more experience. Together, they write this application, and the government will fund, offer additional money to the grant recipient to hire you, the diverse applicant, to be able to get extra research experience through that person's research grant project.

This is actually available not just for post-bacc research assistants, but also for graduate students, postdocs, and even junior faculty, but very commonly, it's a way that post-bacc applicants are able to get funding to be able to create their own position with a mentor who has grant funding. Go ahead and check out all the information about that at the link listed here, or just Google NIH Diversity Supplements.

How else can you find these positions that might already be listed where someone is being sought for a post-bacc research assistant position? Well, there are a variety of different ways, and it does take a lot of persistence to get there. For instance, NIH also offers in addition to diversity supplements, intramural post-bacc positions for research projects that are happening right there at NIH. You can look those up.

It's also really important that you make sure you're getting on listservs of professional associations because people are posting post-bacc ads all the time on there. You can also ask folks who are already members of psych societies if they could forward posts to you that might look relevant. It is important to use your network and get all this information that you can sent to you.

Of course, the APA is one of the psych associations that you can join. There are 54 different divisions, and if you join a division as a student member, it's not terribly expensive at all, but you will get on their listserv and get lots of postings, very relevant, but also look for other psych societies as well that might be very specific to your research interests. A lot of things are posted on social media nowadays, so make sure you are following folks on social media who might be advertising or forwarding advertisements about post-bacc positions. Most commonly, however, people will find post-bacc positions simply by sending an email to a professor that they think they might want to work with.

Now, it's important to know that this is not a backdoor way to get into graduate school. In fact, many folks might say, "If you work with me as a post-bacc, I'm definitely not going to accept you to be my doctoral student because it's important that you get lots of different kinds of training over the course of your career."

You might not want to apply to a post-bacc position if your sole interest is thinking that it will be an automatic way of getting admitted into that doctoral program. In fact, that's

something you can talk about directly on the interview to assess whether the potential mentor will or will not be willing to consider you if you ultimately wanted to apply to them to be their graduate student, but it is okay to go ahead and send notes to any professor that you'd like, whose research is of interest to you and say that you're interested in a post-bacc position.

A couple of quick tips on that. Do not send a group email to a list of many faculty all at once asking them or BCC-ing many of them. It is really important that these emails seem specific to the person you're writing to and show that you've read their website, or you've at least looked over an abstract or titles of a few of their articles if you want to capture their attention. Because folks usually don't have the time, or they don't have the knowledge yet about whether they're going to accept a post-bacc, you might want to go ahead and write them back after a few weeks. Your persistence will pay off.

There are also some sub-disciplines like in clinical science, for instance, that have some bulletin boards or postings up that are available. For instance, you can go to clinicalpsychgradschool.org and you'll see that lots and lots of post-bacc positions are posted up there.

Another way that you can do this is to follow the money. The way that you will get hired for a post-bacc position that's paid is if that person has funds available in order to hire you. Now, the folks that have funds are likely to be either junior faculty members who are just starting a job and might have startup money that they were given as they started that position. That means they will have money to fund a post-bacc or someone that has a grant.

For instance, if they have an NIH-funded grant, you can go to NIH RePORTER, the website is right here, and you'll get this great form that you can fill out any field that you want. You can enter the institute, National Institute of Mental Health, or Child Health and Human Development. You could look at drug abuse or alcoholism, and you could type in the text of some different keywords you're interested in studying.

You could type in the state where you're interested in working, any or all of the fields that you want, and it will tell you exactly what grants are being funded right now. If they have a grant, that means they have money. If they have money, there's a good chance that they're hiring a post-bacc. That's a good way of figuring out who you might want to direct your attention towards.

Now, what do you say in these emails? You do want to keep it brief. I have to admit that sending a really long in-depth email, it might not be read with as much detail and care as you wrote it because the professors do get quite a lot of these kinds of notes. It's perfectly appropriate simply to offer one to two sentences about what university you've gone to, if you want to brag about your GPA, if you want to talk about some of the experience you had while you were in undergrad, that is perfectly appropriate.

You might want a sentence or two to show that this is directed specifically to them, and you've read some of their research interests or maybe even some of their manuscripts. That

is going to be very helpful to you. Then you simply ask if the position is open. It can be a very brief email. You can attach a resume or a CV or offer that you'd send them one as a follow-up if they would like one. That's all you have to do.

You might hear back that they don't have paid positions, but they're open to volunteer positions. A really important note about that, there's nothing that says that the research experience that you get between undergrad and graduate school has to be paid research experience. In fact, that probably won't even be listed on your CV or in your application essay, so no one will know one way or the other.

If you have the means to do research as a volunteer or if you do research part-time while you work full-time, let's say, as a server or as a retail employee, that's perfectly appropriate and fine as long as you're getting research experience you can talk about in your application essay when you apply for doctoral programs.

When you apply for a post-bacc position, you'll probably send along a CV. You'll probably be asked for some folks that either will fill out a form in order to evaluate you, your potential for a post-bacc position, or will need to send a letter of recommendation. You'll probably do an interview. Very often these are remote, just done over Zoom, pretty easy. You want to be relatively formal for it. It is an official interview position, but they might be relatively brief, and in fact, you might be meeting with other post-baccs who are serving in the role and vacating the role to go to graduate school that you are now up applying to get into.

Then you're made an offer. It's usually very informal, the way this process starts. Ultimately, that might require sending all of your information via the university website and getting all of that information up there. Keep in mind, you don't want to just look at university websites to see what positions are available. Sometimes that's just to process the paperwork for candidates that have already been discovered through a variety of the other sources that we talked about earlier.

Once you get a post-bacc position, what do you do? Well, there are a lot of different things that you can do while you're there. You're probably going to be helping to run a research experiment or study while you're there. Now, you might feel that it's really important that you're getting the best high-quality experiences while you're there. It's true. You want to get some good high-quality experiences, but it's very important for you to know that it's not the quality of the activity, whether you're doing just data entry or whether you're doing interviews or you're running people using fancy equipment.

What's probably equally, if not more important, is that you understand what you're doing and what the overall study is about because even if you have the most boring task, you were just doing data entry for two years, which hopefully would not be the case, but even if you were doing that, if you could strongly articulate what the study was about, what you learned, theory and research and findings from the articles relevant to the study that you were working on, if you could talk about how that inspired your own interests in either the same topic or different topics in psychological science, then that research experience in that post-bacc will be very valuable to you.

Sometimes there's some competitiveness or there's some issue with people feeling like I only want to get the most sophisticated research skills when I'm there, and that's fine, that's a great thing, but it's not as important as making sure that you get good exposure to the literature and the theories and the understanding of what that research project is about. That's what you're going to articulate in your application essay one day.

Sometimes there's competition also around whether post-baccs are getting lots of conference presentations or getting their name on empirical journal publications while they're on post-bacc. Look, here's the deal. Every faculty knows that probably if you're getting your name on presentations and publications, it might be because the mentor is pretty generous with letting folks get on there.

It's just that before you go to graduate school, you're probably not writing up a journal publication all by yourself. Some mentors are generous and will go ahead and put the names of some of their post-baccs on there. When folks evaluate an application, they know that someone who has a lot of those things on their CV versus not, might not tell you very much about the applicant as much as it does the mentor that they worked with.

If you can get those experiences as a post-bacc, great. If you can ask to learn how to get more and more autonomous and develop those experiences and take the lead on them, fantastic. You do not have to be concerned that those are mandatory for you to be able to succeed as a post-bacc and ultimately get into graduate school. The GREs may or may not be required for the graduate school that you are ultimately-- the schools you're applying to, but if they are and you're thinking you're taking them, the post-bacc is also a good time where you can study, really focus on those GREs, and take it before you apply.

A very good idea during your post-bacc is to go to professional conferences, network with others, learn about the field, read lots of posters, and learn from as many graduate students and faculty as you can. That's all going to be critical when you do your graduate application essay and you want to talk about your understanding of the field.

Perhaps most important though is that you're using these two years to figure out what you care most deeply about. It might not even be psychological science. There are plenty of people who do a post-bacc and decide, "I don't think I want to go to graduate school in psychology." That's a perfectly fine outcome. Much better for you to know that before you go through the process of applying and going through graduate school than in the middle of graduate school or after.

It's a great use of your years as a post-bacc, but if you are still interested in psychological science and figuring out specifically what questions, what research, what hypotheses you might want to study, and which people you might want to study that with is going to really help your graduate application essay and your decision making, and that's how to make your post-bacc really successful.

Good luck to all of you. All our resources and all our videos on becoming a psychological scientist are available here at this website, and I hope this is helpful to everybody.

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