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

SESSION 1: TOP THINGS TO KNOW AS YOU APPLY TO GRADUATE SCHOOL (LIVE Q&A, OCT. 7, 2022)

TRANSCRIPT

Derek Snyder: Hello, everyone, and welcome. I'm Derek Snyder, Senior Director for Science Partnerships at the American Psychological Association. Thanks so much for joining us today and please let us know where you're from by saying hello in the chat. Today's program is the first session of becoming a psychological scientist, a six-part webinar series about navigating the application process for doctoral programs in psychological science.

For each session, we'll post a short video about an important step in the application process and then we'll host a panel discussion a few days later in which experts in the field and current graduate students will offer their advice, share their experiences, and answer your questions. Applying to graduate school can be challenging and deeply personal, but it's worth the effort and we hope our time together brings you closer to success.

Today's topic, Top Things to Know as You Apply to Graduate School, will help you understand what the application process looks like, how it differs across subfields, and what you should be thinking about as you get started. Before we get started, I want to share a few quick announcements. First, many thanks to those who submitted questions for today's program. We'll try to get to as many of those questions as possible.

You can also ask questions during the live feed using the Q&A feature on your dashboard and we'll add them to our list. Finally, this program is being recorded and everyone who registered will receive an email with a link to the recording in about two weeks. Without further ado, I'd like to introduce our panelists who are three of my favorite colleagues at APA Science Directorate.

Today, we have Dr. Mitch Prinstein, our Chief Science Officer; Dr. Mia Smith Bynum, our senior Director for Science, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; and Adrienne Butler, Chief of Staff for Science. Let's begin. Our first question, "How can I decide if graduate school is the right option for me or if now is the time to go?" Mitch?

Mitch Prinstein: Hi, everybody. Sure. Happy to take that one and hello to everybody from all over the place in the chat. That's so good to see. Going to graduate school, it's a rigorous endeavor, so it's going to be probably five years, maybe six years before you're done. You really want to make sure that you found a passion, something that you think,

"I'm so excited about this topic. I can imagine talking about it, reading about it, working on it for every day for about five years."

You want to make sure that you're ready to go back into a formal curriculum. You're going to take some classes again. Depending on what your area is, you're going to be working in a lab as well. I would say going in because it feels like the next step to do is probably not good enough. You really have to find a topic that you say, "I'm passionate about this and I'm ready to read and talk about it for few hours a day for many years in a row."

Derek: Does anyone else have anything to add?

Adrienne Stith Butler: A total agreement.

Derek: What if my grades aren't the best though? What if I'm having questions about whether my background is what people are looking for in a graduate student? How do I navigate that? Mia?

Mia Smith Bynum: My apologies. Can you repeat the question? We just got a question in the chat to the panelist only and I was processing that. Could you repeat the real question? I'm sorry.

Derek: What if I'm not a straight A student? What if my grades aren't the best? What if my background doesn't look, in my view, like what you might be looking for in a graduate student? How do I handle that and how do I make myself look like an attractive candidate?

Mia: That's a really good question. I was having a conversation with one of my long-term career mentors, Dr. Henry Frierson, who led an undergraduate research program for many years when I was at Chapel Hill, and he said that the most important thing he's seen over his long career is engagement in research.

The things that I look for as a faculty member when I was working with students because one of the things that gets lost is students who have to work to put themselves through school often don't have the best grades or maybe they discover their passion a little bit later in their undergraduate careers or later in life.

I think for research doctorates, PhDs, we want to know that you've done some research and that you like it or that you have some really cool questions that you want to answer after a long professional career doing some other things. Perhaps you're drawing on some observations that you've seen professionally.

I advise students that if there's any unevenness in your undergraduate record or other academic record, don't leave it to the admissions committee to speculate about what was going on. If you were working 20 hours a week or in some cases of the undergrads that I know, you're working 40 hours a week and you have C grades, but you are passionate about this work, put it in the personal statement.

Personal statements-- I'm sure we're probably going to get into that, shouldn't be too long. You want them to be about two pages max, but make sure you take a paragraph and

explain what was going on. I'm a late bloomer. I was working. I didn't discover psychology until X, don't leave that to chance. Then the other piece too, call the graduate director of the program.

In a lot of the questions that we got after watching the video on YouTube for this session had to do with how do I figure out if I'm the right fit? Every graduate program's a little bit different. There's about four or five flavors but they're a little bit different. Call the program, speak to the graduate director for that program or the grad director for that department and they know their student market and they can talk to you about what to do for your application for that specific specialty field of psychology.

Then talk to a couple of the students there as well. Really do your research because this is a long-term investment of your time.

Derek: That's really great advice. For some, you'll be able to get started early with getting experience and some people are really go-getters and aren't afraid to approach potential advisors early in the process. In some ways, you should sell yourself as early and as often as possible, but if you're not an ideal student, you will have an opportunity to explain that and to share the experiences that you've had along the way that might have hindered your studies or that might have distracted you.

Those explanations will be taken seriously because what most programs are looking for is someone with a passion for the field and who has done some things to show that passion but may not always have the clearest path. That's part of what we're here for too is to help some of you who have taken zigzag paths toward your education and training and to let you know that graduate school's right for you as well.

Mia: I would add one more thing to that piece. Because I know and I am going through the questions for this session, and I see some of the ones in the Q&A that are tapping on that. A lot of people are concerned like, "What if I'm not the perfect student?" Another pathway in-- because here's the thing, I like to say one graduate course is like three undergraduate courses in terms of the workload.

If you're going to a program in which research training is the primary mission, there are oodles and oodles of graduate programs, master's, doctorate, PsyD, PhD. If your goal is a research doctorate and you want to come out and be able to produce science, we want to know that you can do graduate level work. That's one of the reasons why GPA is so important.

You can go to your local college and university, audit a class, take a class for tuition, it depends on what that department might require, and show that you can do graduate level work. Just take one course. Depending on how competitive you're shooting, you may have to do one or two more, but show that you can do the work and keep up with the reading and that you can write well and that we want the mind. We want to know how you think.

That's another pathway is you take your undergraduate package and any other things you might have done, you take that course and say, "I know I've struggled with this piece here, but I've taken this course at X place and I can do this work." That's another way to manage

some of the concerns about GPA. I would say for myself, I love a good diamond in the rough. I love training passionate students for whom they didn't have the silver spoon.

They didn't have the perfect pedigree, but they got that fire in the belly. I love training those students during my academic career. Make sure you convey that in that-- we're probably going to get into this and I'm going to be quiet, fit. You don't want to just pick any program. You want to pick a program where the advisor is going to train you to be an expert in what you want to know. The thing is you may have to relocate. People are like, "Oh, but I love my local neighborhood." You may have to move across country in order to find that. It's fit, fit, fit, fit, fit.

Derek: It always helps to get to know your professors. These are the people who can give you great advice about where you might want to be looking for graduate school, colleagues who might be looking for students who might have very specific interests in the area that you're showing interest about, and these are the people who are going to be writing your letters of recommendation, and you want those letters to be substantive.

You want them to be more than just, "I had this student in a class, and they got a good grade." You want your professors to be able to say something about you as a person and as a student and as someone they actually have gotten to know. It really helps to be outgoing and approach those professors. They will talk to you; they want to talk to you. Mia brought up a very good question that I'm going to throw to Adrienne. Is the specific research or the institution more important when you're looking for a grad program?

Adrienne: Yes, I will just throw back to what Mia just said so eloquently that it's about the work and the research and the program, not what the institution is. Really, I can't emphasize enough how important it is to think about what's important to you in finding a program and advisor or researcher who will be able to get you in a place where you can do the work that you want to do.

Derek: How do I get that experience before I apply, Mitch?

Mitch: You probably want to get some good research experience and the way that you're going to do that is not just in terms of what research you are doing or who you're involved in, but your ability to actually understand why that research is being conducted.

If you're like, "Oh, I was in charge of pressing this space bar for 20 hours a week while we did data entry," you're not getting credit so much for how many hours you spent in a research lab but your ability to articulate how much you recognize things that stimulated scientific interest. "Gee, I noticed that there was this pattern of results," or, "I had some hypotheses and ideas while I was doing that work." That's really important for how you communicate.

Your potential is the way that you're able to show that you think like a scientist and getting those kinds of research experiences and demonstrating in your statement, which we'll talk about in a couple weeks, is really important to be able to demonstrate that you are ready because you're already thinking like a scientist. Big mistake people make is they think, "I

have worked in a lot of labs assisting others, therefore I'm ready for graduate school." That's not entirely correct.

You're not going to graduate school to be someone's assistant. You're going to graduate school to become an independent scholar in your own right. People are evaluating your ability to show that independent scholarship trajectory. Otherwise, they'd be hiring a postbac research assistant and then they would be looking for someone that could assist them.

Derek: I'll follow up to that question by asking when should I get started thinking about graduate school? I'll also give that one to Mitch.

Mitch: Sure. There are some folks that in their very first semester of undergrad are ready to join a research lab. Not necessary, maybe a little too fast. You want to take some time to adjust to college, but in your sophomore year, that might be a perfectly fine time. You're not too late to really start. That would be the earliest that I would recommend really starting to think about it.

If you do have the opportunity to participate in writing a senior thesis, that's a really great way of demonstrating how ready you are for graduate school because it's like a mini master's thesis. If you want to show that you're ready to write a master's thesis, doing a senior thesis is a great way to show that. When's the latest you should start thinking about graduate school? Well, there's no such thing. It can be decades after you leave undergrad if you'd like.

Many, many students, about two-thirds and some of the more competitive programs, have done a postbac research assistantship where they've taken 1-3 years after undergrad to get some more in-depth research experience. That's also perfectly fine. Some people get those postbac positions because they didn't think about graduate school until their last semester as a senior and that's also okay. That gives you a whole range of when it might be appropriate.

Mia: If you're here in the Washington DC region, I see some folks from Maryland-- go Maryland, there are postbac experiences that you can apply for the National Institutes of Health and they have them gone down as early as high school all the way up to postdoc and some of those are for members of minoritized communities as well.

I would definitely go on their website and put in postbaccalaureate research positions, and you can work in different research labs. I'm typing a response to a question here. When you're applying and you're thinking about the research skills, I really didn't care. Say you were studying aging research and you want to come with me to do racial identity work but there was no one who did that at your college university.

What I want to know is, does a person know how to read a research article? Do they know how to do an annotated bibliography? Do they have some understanding of basic undergraduate statistics? Do they know about data sets and how they're arranged and how to talk about them? This was what Mitch was talking about in terms of doing an honors thesis, which is a really good way to get that experience.

I care about the raw skills because if you come and you're passionate about my topic area, I'll take care of the rest, but if you are at an undergraduate place and you're like, "Well, I'm not really interested in this topic or that topic," but you think the professor is really cool and a great mentor, work with that person because that person knows how to groom a young talent and they will get you ready to apply to graduate school. Don't worry about the topic you're researching as much.

Derek: I would also add to that that research looks very different depending on the subfield that you might be considering. For some people, research is working in a wet lab and doing experiments at a bench. For others, it's conducting interviews. For others, it's doing more reading and scholarly study that results in writing. Many programs include multiple or all of those things. I want you to think about research in the broadest possible light.

The important thing is that you're developing skills that enable you to do scholarship and for those who may not have access to a university, sometimes it can be just as effective to build a relationship with a scholar and say, work with them on a scientific paper or on a book that they're writing. These experiences don't all have to look the same. They simply have to show evidence that you're developing the skills of a scientist.

On a related note, Adrienne, can you address the question of gap years? Do they look bad? Is it too late by that point to consider applying? How do I navigate this process if I'm in a gap year?

Adrienne: I would say-- and I'll be interested in what Mitch and Mia have to say, but I don't think it's bad at all to take a gap year. I think it's great to take a gap year particularly if you've taken a little bit to try to hone in on what's of interest to you. That year might be an opportunity to learn, to focus a little more, and to really think about what it is that you want and gain that experience so that when you do apply, you've got a strong application. Mitch, Mia, what would you say?

Mitch: I would agree. I think that two thirds of folks right now in some of the more competitive programs are doing gap years in advance. Sometimes they're doing a postbac research assistantship, sometimes not, but it's a long rigorous road and some people want to break from undergrad before they take some time. It's also a very different social experience. You're going into a group of folks who might be in their mid-20s. Many might have found partner relationships or different kinds of hobbies and activities.

It's a big adjustment when you go to graduate school to have a very different social experience, scholarly experience, and you want to be ready for that. I think those are all good reasons for gap years.

Adrienne: I think that if you spend that year working and getting experience and in terms of finances, you've got some funds which is always helpful.

Mia: I see a question here in the chat that says how many gap years are too many gap years?

[laughter]

Mia: I don't think there's a number. I think some of the questions that they're wondering if there's a formula, there's really not a formula because I don't want to train a student who they don't know what they want to do because then, you're losing time finding your way in those early years of the program. Take as long as it takes out there.

If you want to go backpack through Europe and get some great experience and some perspective on life, as long as you can take that time and frame it in a narrative in that roughly two-page personal statement, that's going to be the key because in the end, people do make career shifts and particularly in this day and age. Just make sure that the narrative is clear in your application when it comes forward.

Derek: That's great advice. It's not so important how many years is the right number of years between undergraduate and graduate training. What's most important is what you do with them, and how those years are shaping the person that you want to go on to be.

I see a really interesting question from the chat that, "My research assistantships are not in an area of research that I want to go into. Can I apply for programs that are different while demonstrating my ability to use the skills I've learned and extrapolate them to a different area of interest?" I would say absolutely. That is the key to these experiences that you're having before you go to graduate school.

The specific content area may not be your cup of tea, but the experiences that you're getting in that research environment are essential and these are transferable skills. Oftentimes, and you'll have this happen in graduate training as well, you will have experiences in different research areas that you may decide aren't for you and that's okay. Sometimes we hone in on the thing we're interested in by canceling out the other things that we're not.

Yes, the short answer there is focus on the skills that you're pulling out of these experiences and consider how they might be transferable to something you might be more interested in doing. Let's talk about students who come from non-traditional or underserved backgrounds. What are some pieces of advice that you all might have for those types of students? What are some specific challenges that they might have in navigating the process? Mia?

Mia: I think one of the things people are often concerned about, GREs, and what I can say is that the trend around requiring GREs is changing. Check the admission criteria because since 2020, a lot of them are making them optional. If you should choose to submit your materials without GREs, it's really important to make sure that your writing is nice and clear in that personal statement, in your examples and that your research skills are there.

The other thing that I look for that we haven't touched on is undergraduate stats. That was one of the questions that came through in the Google doc a little earlier. I usually prefer to see a student with a B in undergraduate statistics because it shows that their capacity to master graduate-level statistics is going to be okay.

If you know that's a weakness for you, go to Coursera, take a class particularly if you're coming from a background where psychology was not your undergraduate major is that that's one of the big things that I think probably even more so than GPA, in general, is like, "Can they do stats?" Because while we're not mathematicians, we use a fair amount of math in order to be able to answer all those cool research questions.

The other thing that you want to look at is graduate-- the climate. What's the racial and ethnic composition of the faculty? How do they talk about diversity issues on their website? What's the mission statement and what did the coursework look like? Are they dealing with issues of diversity, LGBTQ, race, ethnicity, age? Then talk to the students. The sad reality today is that students from minoritized backgrounds, and I mean all of them, disability, of sexual orientation, so on and so forth, not all places are safe places in higher ed.

You want to see if you're fortunate, a critical mass or an attention to those issues and that the students who are there are happy. Don't be shy, ask that graduate director, "Can I speak to students from x background?" If you get a clutch the pearls, or a long pause, that's probably not a place for you, and keep it moving. [laughs]

Derek: Thank you, Mia. I've decided I want to go to graduate school. Now, we've discussed that the specific research is more important than the institution. How do I go about choosing a school? Mitch?

Mitch: Your academic pedigree, as it were, is just one part of what you'll be evaluated on during the rest of your career. That's made up far more of the mentor that you had, and the work you did with that mentor than it is a school's reputation. You really want to find a fit between what you're interested in working on and what your mentors is going to be working on, and how they can help you to develop an identity as having an expertise in a topic that you're interested in during graduate school.

I'm not saying that people don't look at all at what graduate school you came from, but it's very different from undergrad in that you're really not starting the process by pulling out the *US News & World Report* list and looking for the best school you can get into. This is very different. Some of the best mentors on topics that you might be interested in might be graduate programs at universities you've never heard of, and that's okay.

Your working with that mentor is going to be tremendously important for your development. The best place probably to start is PsycINFO so that way, you're really looking at who's doing that work, and what are they an expert on. The other tip that I can offer is that remember that what's coming out in PsycINFO is something that's been accepted for publication which means they wrote it up at least a year ago, which means that it was a study they probably did a year before that.

If they have any federal funding, particularly from NIH, you can Google NIH RePORTER, and you can type in some names there. You'll see what grant they might be working on right now today. That will give you a good sense of what their current research is, and you can really get a better sense of whether that's a fit for you or not.

Derek: I can't say it strongly enough, that fit is so important here. This is a relationship that you're developing. In the best cases, this is a relationship that will be as influential for your career, and for your growth as a human being as the relationship you have with a significant other. These are people that you're going to spend the next several years of your life with. It's important to consider not only whether you're interested in the work they do but whether you get along well with them.

It always helps to get along very well with your advisor, because then you're going to want to communicate with them more, and you're going to want to discuss science and get career advice from them all the more. You really want to be evaluating not just the work, but the people as well. You want to feel like this is home and these are people that I really want to enter into this long-term relationship with.

Mia: I'd say in addition to checking PsycINFO for some of you all that may have already finished your undergraduate education, Google Scholar can be another place to check although sometimes you can't always get the articles there and then researchgate.net. You can set up a free account and many of the people who are there will post their PDFs of their research articles for free. That's another way to get a sense of what's out there without having to be affiliated with a campus or university.

Derek: That's really great advice. What degree program should I apply for? Should I apply for a master's or a doctorate? Should I apply for a PhD or a PsyD? Any input on that, Mitch?

Mitch: Yes. A master's degree is not required or even expected before you apply to a doctoral program. In fact, in most doctoral programs, you'll be asked to complete a master's thesis along the way. You don't have to feel like you have to apply for those programs separately and in different steps.

However, a master's program is a really great idea. If you haven't figured out what area of research you're interested in yet, or if you're undergraduate GPA doesn't reflect what your real potential is and you want to demonstrate that in a master's program, you can get nice grades in a graduate-level coursework.

As far as the PhD versus PsyD, I know there are a lot of folks here in clinical counseling, in school-- I can tell from the chat, interested in that. What's really hard to talk about with those different degrees is that there's so much heterogeneity within the PhDs and within the PsyDs.

You want to do your homework and look at things like the faculty-to-student ratio to get a sense about whether that's going to be a fit for what you're looking for. The extent to which they're emphasizing research training or clinical training. A common misperception is that PhD only offers research training and PsyD only offers clinical training, both of those are wrong.

They both offer research and clinical training, but the emphasis might be a little bit different and it's the extent to which you're taught to think scientifically, or you're taught to think about how to do therapy more in a practice-oriented, even artistic way, as opposed to

thinking about the scientific underpinnings of it. You want to also look at whether it's an institution that is for-profit or non-for-profit. With non-profits often giving you a free tuition waiver and a stipend.

The for-profit programs might charge you tuition and typically, don't offer a stipend for you. You got to really do your homework between those two degrees and the heterogeneity within each one.

Derek: That's a really great breakdown of the different degree possibilities. What about different types of programs? You mentioned the distinctions between clinical, school, counseling. How do I decide where I want to go with that?

Mitch: Me again?

Derek: Yes and Mia as well, yes.

Mitch: Okay. The field is changing. We're starting to become a field that's having a lot more integration across different areas. There are folks who are developmental social neuroscientists, and that's a huge area. For instance, should they go to a developmental program, a neuroscience program, a social psychology program? Again, this is really where it's super important to think about the mentor. When I was at UNC, I myself took students from both developmental and from clinical.

It was really about fitting with what research you wanted to do. Then the program was more what are the ways in which you might fit for the job you would want to have down the road. If you want to be able to practice independently in any way, shape, or form for mental health, you need to be in a clinical counseling or a school psych program. If you want to do practice that's not mental health like consulting, you want to be in a program for applied psychology, like for instance, industrial, organizational.

Everything else opens up tons of other great doors as well: policy, working in tech, excuse me. The program you're in will probably dictate what courses you're taking, but the mentor that you're with is going to dictate what research you're doing. Think about that when you're thinking about which type of program to apply to.

Derek: That's really great advice. I wanted to ask Mia to address the question, "In this numbers game of graduate admissions, how do I stand out as an applicant?"

Mia: That's a good question because again, that was a lot of the themes in the pre-submission phase is, "How do I stand out?" I wanted for folks who were thinking about that, change your frame. It's not standing out from a sea of 200, it's fitting with the professor or professors at the school that you've chosen. Here's a tough scenario that I'll lay out for you.

Say you're 35 years old and you're realizing it's time for me to go back and get that PhD and you've got a family, kids, a mortgage, and so you think, "I just want to go down to the local university Y and apply," that generally works for master's degrees, which are more generalist kinds of training. It does not work as well for doctoral degrees.

The sad reality of the passage of time is that for folks who figure it out earlier and were able to get on that journey a little quicker after undergrad, it's a little easier to move around.

People who have other responsibilities, it's going to be a different set of challenges. If you're like, "I'm dying to get that PhD," if you apply, you got to look at the 5, the 10 faculty in that graduate program that are there.

If you say, "I want to be an expert in creating Zoom backgrounds for the 22nd century," and there's nobody there who does that, but you've got perfect GREs, you're a stellar writer, you're passionate, you're not getting in. You want to think like-- Let me be very practical here. Say you're like, "I want to get my PhD," and if you're like myself, "I want to practice clinical psychology, I want to help people." That's the thing I think I saw in every graduate statement in every clinical program I've ever trained in.

You better make sure that that personal statement gives a research interest for somebody at that local university Y. If you're like, "I want to be an expert in autism," and nobody at that university does that, in fact, they don't even have any child experts on the faculty, you're not getting in.

It doesn't matter how stellar your credentials are, you could have went to our country's top university, they're more likely to pick a student with a B average, great research training, clear about what they want to do when they get there, than the person who's got perfect credentials, but there's not a research fit.

You're going to be unhappy and the professor's going to be unhappy and you're going to be spending a lot of time working on things that are not your passion and you're more at risk of giving up, particularly with those other family obligations. Would anybody else want to add to that? That's my two cents.

Adrienne: I would absolutely agree, Mia. I think it's about you stand out because you're a good fit. Do the work to find a good fit.

Derek: Adrienne, I'm going to throw this question to you. How do I cope with imposter syndrome?

Mia: One day at a time.

Adrienne: Yes, exactly. I think first knowing that it is normal, you're not the only one who's feeling that way. Many if not most people feel that way at some point or another. It's probably not something that you just deal with and it's done. It's an ongoing issue for many throughout your career. I would say to focus on the facts, looking at what your accomplishments are and have been, and what your competencies are, like really. There are likely many.

Reframe it knowing that you're going to graduate school to learn. You don't know everything, you're learning. You have the ability to learn and the capability, and then move on. Talking with others about it, getting a good mentor that will help check you so that you

know where your growth areas are and how to work on those things are all ways I think to manage that.

Mia: I think the other part of it is mentorship. In thinking about applying for-- and we're going to have actually in our series, I should say a session that focuses on the minoritized experience. We're still planning out what the details will look like, but watch Mitch's Twitter feed, and you'll see that advertised. The key to really addressing that is good mentorship, I think is very important, finding people.

They may not be at your local campus, but you can meet them online, you can meet them at conferences, and finding spaces of community where you can share those experiences and get affirmed. Those are the main things. I think there's nothing like excellent training as an antidote to imposter syndrome. After you have a number of success experiences in the program, then that will start to fall away in many respects, but it's a daily journey. I don't know that anyone ever solved it permanently.

Derek: That's great advice. So many of us struggle with imposter syndrome. Your professors struggle with imposter syndrome. We are all engaging in a career that is incredibly challenging and we all live in a zone lot of uncertainty about our careers, about the work we're doing, about how our students feel about us, and how our professors feel about us. It's totally natural to wonder at times if you're measuring up, and one of the best ways to handle that is to recognize that most of us are experiencing that and to communicate with others, build those relationships so that you feel comfortable in your surroundings, and that you feel more comfortable speaking about the work that you're doing.

Adrienne: Can I just add and underscore Mia's point about mentors and that your advisor can be that mentor, but you can have others, and there are different people that can give you different things and so you shouldn't look to your advisor to fill every need that you have, as wonderful as that person might be.

Derek: There's a question in the chat about whether you should contact professors to your advisor or to be a mentor as an undergrad. Mitch, I'm going to let you field that one?

Mitch: Yes. Once you've gotten the stage you know where you're applying, you know what your interest is, and you've started to identify professors do you want to apply to, there's lots of debate out there about whether you should write to them or not. Let me just give you a little bit of a sense of that. First of all, by now, if you're applying this year, it's October 7th, so they should have put on their website whether they're taken a student or not.

If they have not at this stage of the game, it's appropriate to send them a note and say, "Just want to check, totally excited about your work. Are you taking graduate students or not?" I would not do it though before this point. People get inundated with those emails and to give them until October or so before you ask them that question. Beyond that, sometimes people write a note thinking that just simply introducing themselves on email is going to be really useful for their success on applying later on.

You know something? It really does depend on the professor. There are some professors out there that will keep track of who writes to them and keep a lookout for their application. There are a lot of professors who will not. They're not going to remember your name by the time the application comes and that's not going to be really helpful. I think what's best to do is do what feels really organic. Don't try and game the system by doing that.

If you're like, "I don't know why I'm writing this, I don't know what the point is, I don't actually have any questions to ask," it's not really necessary to send it but think about a real genuine question or what you're communicating that's helpful. Believe it or not, there are folks that will sometimes cut and paste from a faculty member's website into that letter of the professor to say, "I am interested in," paste, "research on blah, blah blah," which comes right from the website.

Obviously, that comes across really badly to the faculty member to see that you just grab stuff off of their own website. You want to be careful not to do that but ask a question that seems genuine, that seems real, and if you don't have a question just saying, "Hi, I'm applying. I'm interested in your work," I don't think is necessary. They're going to see your application, they're going to review it either way. You don't have to crowd their inbox with that.

If you can imagine at some programs, there are dozens and dozens and dozens of people applying to work with any one faculty member and if you think about all of those people that are going to send an email like that, that's just a lot of flow for the faculty members so that's not a necessary thing to do.

Derek: I would add to that, that if you do decide to make contact with a potential mentor or a faculty member at your institution, always remember that you are making a first impression with that communication. You want that communication to be as professional and well put as possible. You'd be surprised at how many students address their professors as, "Hey, bro, I want to work in your lab," and that doesn't come across with the appropriate level of professional respect.

You just want to be certain that what you're writing is substantive and that it's put in a way that's meaningful, but also professional. Mitch, I want to throw another more general question at you. I've decided I want to apply to graduate school. What does that process look like over the course of the coming year?

Mitch: Yes, that's a great question. If you're doing anything now at this moment, that's great, but it's a little early so you don't have to be feeling like you're behind in any way. Probably towards the later part of October, you want to make sure your letter writers know that you like for them to write a letter and find out their preferred way to get information.

By the way, many letter writers would love for you to send them a bullet pointed list of hints and ideas of what they could put in the letter about you to remind them something about you and what you accomplished in their class or working in their research labs. That's all good stuff to be doing during the last week of October so you're going to be

writing your personal statement probably also around-- yes probably this time, we're going to have another session dedicated specifically to the personal statement.

If you are on Science Spotlight, you will get the link to that video immediately and you will get the link to join our Q&A about the personal statements. Make sure you google APA Science Spotlight, fill in your name and email, you'll be subscribed to that. Then you're going to be in a little bit of a waiting game, although the wait is a little bit shorter than it used to be because you might submit some of these applications in mid-November or late November.

You might hear just a week or two later from folks that want to do a pre-interview with you and maybe even an in person or these days, Zoom interview in December. Again, we're going to walk you through all this and talk with you about how to succeed in those parts but keep in mind that your December and all of your January might be spent either obsessively clicking refresh to see if you got an interview offer or actually going out on those interviews and trying that.

Then usually, offers are given out within about a week or two of the interviews, sometimes two or three weeks depending on the school then there's a pause because the rules are for graduate schools that offers are good until April 15th. While the interview processes moved up, up, up to January, the date for accepting them or not is April 15th. We all just sit in a lull for months like a giant game of chicken while everyone's waiting for someone to let go of an offer, that way, they can get that offer and so on.

Then there's this big flurry of activity in that week or two in April for whoever has not accepted their offer yet, then the whole thing finishes April 15th. That's just a broad overview for your calendar and for your ability to sustain through the long process of what this is like over the year.

Derek: That's a great overview. Mia, I want to ask you a question about the diversity statements that many programs are now having as part of the application process. What do I need to include in such a statement that's different from what I would put in a personal statement? What if I don't come from a particularly diverse group?

Mia: That's a good question. I think that must be a new thing. I have been out of the professor game for a while so that might be a new thing. Here's what I would say, and I put a response in the chat about this. Do not be pro forma. Tell your story and so at this panel, we have two, by visibility, white cisgender men, and two black cisgender women, and we should be writing different stories in our statements even though there are four of us, our backgrounds are very different.

People want to see, "Have you thought about it? Have you thought about it in a meaningful way?" Particularly for my kindred spirits who want to be in one of these practice specialty areas, like all of my clients aren't going to look like me. I need to be able to serve a wide array of folks from different backgrounds, particularly in 2022. Tell me that you've thought about it. Tell me how you're going to do it. If you don't know everything, that's okay because it's a lifelong journey.

Make clear your openness to learn and to grow because not all of us come from communities where it's a "melting pot." Don't try to hide that back. Keep it real and have somebody else read it if you are worried about it so if something's off tone or off color, whatever, get some feedback from somebody before you send it in. Be real because clinical practice, whether you do counseling or otherwise, you're bringing a part of yourself into the room and that's what they're wanting to do.

If you're putting up walls and you're trying to be defensive, that will not be viewed favorably by departments who are now including that.

Derek: That's great advice, to always be your most authentic self and if you don't necessarily feel like fit in a lot of diverse faces, you want to give the sense that you've thought about it. How will your research, and how will your approach to your training reflect compassion and recognition of forms of diversity that are present in our culture? Adrienne, I want to throw the question at you. Whom should I be asking for recommendation letters?

Adrienne: Think about the people who know you, know your work, how you think, your work ethic. That could be professors, of course, people who you worked in their lab, you participated in their research. If you're in a working space, people that you've worked for that can demonstrate how you think, how you approach problems. I wouldn't think about more so the categories of who, but people who can really speak to the skills that you have and that you want to portray.

Think about-- before you ask that person, an honest assessment of how you've been in that space. I have definitely heard of people who will ask for a recommendation for someone who is then in an awkward position of saying, "I really should not be writing recommendations for you," so really think about how that person sees you.

Derek: I would add to that that don't take it personally if someone tells you that maybe they don't feel like they'd be the most appropriate person to write on your behalf. You want your letters to be as substantive and as informative about who you are as possible, and some faculty members will be really honest about saying, "I don't really know much about you, and my letter may not be the most helpful letter for your application." It's always important to take that feedback gracefully and consider alternatives.

Adrienne: And that they've done you a service by making that clear.

Mitch: I'll just add, for most-- Oh, sorry.

Derek: No, go ahead.

Mitch: I'll just add real quick that I agree with everything that was said, and to the extent that your letter writers could be doctoral-level folks in psychology, that's better, but anyone can if they can speak to your ability to think scientifically, your participation, your problem solving or critical skills. If you're like, "I just don't have three psych professors to ask," that's okay, but probably rather than a shift manager from your part-time job.

It's not so much like a character reference. It's more like someone that could speak to your scholarly ability. Try and get a professor that can speak to your ability for critical thinking skills maybe if not three psych professors.

Derek: That's great advice. I have one last question that I'm going to throw to Mitch, and then a more general question for all three of you. The specific question, Mitch, is, "How do I pay for all of this?"

Mitch: Oh, I'm so glad that you asked that. A little-known fact is that there are opportunities-- As a first generation myself, there are opportunities to get discounts and free waivers all over the place but remember that the graduate school application that you're applying to is for the entire graduate school of the university that you're applying. The information about that is probably not going to be on the psychology website.

You want to Google the graduate school of that university, and you'll probably find, or you should call because they need to make those more obvious to people, where the link is to get a waiver of your application fee. The GRE allows you to waive your GRE fee also, so you can do that. There are also a number of ways in which you can get help for travel if you're going to travel for interviews.

It's so good to ask because it's so important to remind folks that if we really, really want to have so many voices as part of psychological science, we have to recognize that not everybody has a couple thousand dollars just sitting around ready to submit. Asking is not only good for you, but you are paving it forward to other applicants and for the university to recognize this as a responsibility that they need to do. Please do ask and find out. You can get many, many of these fees waived.

Derek: My final question for all of you is, "Is all of this worth it?" It's a lot.

Mia: I had pulled that question up from the pre-submission thing because I thought that that was really important. If you love this crazy field that is psychology, it is absolutely worth it. I love psychology. I love research. Here at APA, I get to use all of those technical skills for all kinds of cool projects, and it never gets boring. It never gets old. If you're doing some of these things more for the credentialing, I'm trying to get a higher salary, I'm trying to do this or that, the PhD research degree is probably not for you.

It may be, but that'll be a question for you to decide. The other thing too is we've had some questions about masters versus doctoral, PsyD versus PhD. I answered this in the chat. It's easier to find monies for the PhDs because, one, you'll likely be teaching undergraduates and assisting the permanent faculty with that. Then there's available research funding, so you're helping to build the US knowledge base in the behavioral sciences.

You're kind of providing a public good in that way. The PsyD is a professional degree. It's like medicine. It's like dentistry. You're going out to get paid. At least that's the way that is viewed in terms of the world of higher ed, and so it's a little bit harder to do. There're fellowship dollars available. I can't remember because I've been answering questions in the chat, but there's the NIH loan repayment program if you decide to go on for a research career.

I know of several people who have pursued that, so that's the piece around, "Is it worth it?" is that in selecting that degree program, particularly if you're thinking about research, it's the thing that makes you want to get out of bed in the morning and either go to your virtual work, or drive, and take that commute. It's the passion, so that's my answer. I'll let other folks chime in.

Adrienne: I would agree. Yes, it is absolutely worth it. I also think that when you finish graduate school, you go through your career, you have opportunity to use your skills in different ways. In ways that you might not realize or think at the time, so absolutely, yes.

Mitch: Well, I'll make it unanimous. I agree also. A doctoral degree in psychology is one of the most versatile degrees that you can have. There's so many industries you can work in. You can work in policy. You can be in academia. You can be in private practice if you go into a health service psychology field. There's so many things. We just get the best skills in our psychology training, and what we do is applicable to every human's behavior every minute of every day. What's not to love about that, so it's worth it.

Derek: I'll admit that that was a rather loaded question because obviously, we're all here, and we all work for the American Psychological Association. We have a passion for the field, and, of course, we're going to say that it's worth the journey. It is a challenging journey, but it is one of the most rewarding things that you will do in your life. We hope you'll join us. I want to extend our thanks to our speakers: Mitch, Adrienne, and Mia. We hope you enjoyed hearing from them about their experiences.

We'll be sending you a one-minute survey after this broadcast. We really value your feedback, so let us know how we're doing, and feel free to share topics you'd like us to cover in future sessions. Feel free to email us at sscience@apa.org with your recommendations. We really want you to come back and join us for other sessions in this series, so save the date now, October 26th, for our next episode on writing a compelling essay.

Stay tuned for further information in the coming days. Finally, consider subscribing to Science Spotlight, which is your source for the most relevant news and information for psychological scientists by psychological scientists. There's lots of stuff in there that would be of interest to students, so I really encourage you to sign up. Again, special thanks to our wonderful speakers. We really appreciate your time and support.

A huge shout out to our production team, Shandol Hoover and Alison Spannaus, and most of all, thanks to you, our viewers. We're here for you, and we really want to help.