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

SESSION 2: WRITING A COMPELLING APPLICATION ESSAY (LIVE Q&A, OCT. 26, 2022)

TRANSCRIPT

Shandol Hoover: Hello, everyone and welcome. I'm Shandol Hoover, Science Programs Officer at the American Psychological Association. Thank you for joining us today, and please let us know where you're from by saying hello in the chat. Today's program is the second 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.

Then we'll host a panel discussion a few days later in which experts in the field and current graduate students will offer advice, share their experiences, and answer your questions. Applying to graduate school can be challenging and deeply personal but is worth the effort. We hope our time together brings you closer to success. Today's topic, Writing a Compelling Application Statement, will offer tips and strategies for writing a statement that makes a strong case for admission to grad school.

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 a question during the program using the Q&A feature on your dashboard, and we'll add them to our list. Also, this program is being recorded. Everyone who registered will receive an email with a link to the recording in about two weeks. Without further ado, I'll turn things over to Dr. Adrienne Stith Butler, Deputy Chief for the APA Science Directorate.

Adrienne Stith Butler: Thank you so much, Shandol. Welcome, everyone today to the next installment in our series. A warm welcome to our panelists today. I'm going to be serving as the moderator. We'll first field some questions that were provided in advance, and then we will go to live audience questions. First, I will introduce our panelists. Then we will get right to it. First, we have Hayley Brooks, who is a six-year. Thank you for the wave. PhD student at the University of Denver. Her research combines behavior, psychophysiology, neuroimaging, and computational modeling to understand and characterize how temporal context influences risky monetary decision-making.

She works in many places, but she works also in the lab of Dr. Peter Sokol-Hessner, who is also here today, who I'll introduce in just a moment. She leads the editor group for the Application Statement Feedback Program or AFSP, which supports psychology PhD applicants from across the globe who identify as first generation, underrepresented, or as

someone without access to PhD-informed mentorship. The editor group provides high-level and fast-paced feedback on applications.

We also have Becky Suzuki, who is a third-year doctoral trainee in clinical psychology in the traumatic stress studies group at the University of Denver. She is a community-engaged researcher who's interested in improving access to, and quality of services for survivors of gender-based violence. Becky taught English as a Fulbright scholar in Germany and served with AmeriCorps. She worked as a research assistant studying anxiety, trauma, and grief at NYU School of Medicine. Becky also helps to run ASFP.

Next, we have Dr. Natasha Cabrera who is Professor of Human Development at the University of Maryland. Her research focuses on father involvement in children's social and cognitive development, adaptive and maladaptive factors related to parenting, and cultural variation in ethnic minority families, and the mechanisms linking early experiences to children's school readiness. She's an associate editor of child development and is co-PI at the National Center of Research on Hispanic Families and Children, co-directing the fatherhood and healthy marriage focus area.

Dr. Peter Sokol-Hessner is associate professor at Denver University. In his work, he integrates the perspectives and methods associated with different fields, including cognitive psychology, cognitive neuroscience, behavioral, and microeconomics to understand how we assess value, how we use value to guide behavior in ways that emotion is integrated into those processes. Peter founded the professional development program called Paths in Psychological Science within the Psychology Department at Denver University.

He's an academic advisor for psychology undergraduates and was the department's professional development coordinator for 2020 to 2022. He founded and leads ASFP. Welcome to you all. Let's see, I will throw the first question to Natasha, and it's a big one. What should be the primary focus of my statement of purpose? Should it be more focused on passion or experience?

Natasha Cabrera: Oh, my goodness, that's a hard one. You gave me the hard one. [laughs]

Adrienne: No easy ones here.

Natasha: That's an interesting question. I think when I often talk about my work, I get really passionate about it, I think that can engage people. I think if you have experiences that are related to your passion, maybe begin there. In all the years that I've been doing this, it's not even what's the right way to approach, it's very unique to each person, but how authentic, how real can I see a person in this statement. Sometimes, students will begin with a personal story I completely connect to it because they've taken me in this journey all the way to apply for the graduate school. I'm going, yes, and come into my lab.

I think it really is about storytelling in a way, and your past experiences. You are a whole person, everything that you've done or are doing makes you as a person, and you bring that to graduate school. I think those are our assets. If you can tell us a story of how you got

here and how the research or the graduate experience will enhance you as a person, as a professional, I think it's always nice to see. I appreciate that a lot because I think all of us have different journeys and all of us have different ways to understand our experiences. The more you make sense of them and the more you see yourself situated in a place, I think, oh yes, that makes sense to me. Come to us.

Adrienne: Thank you. It sounds like it's not passion or experience, but you're infusing both as you tell a story. Thank you. Becky and Hayley, you're both currently graduate students. I'm wondering if you have a thought about that very question. Maybe I'll ask Hayley.

Hayley Brooks: I think I would just add on to what Natasha said, that it's going to be a little bit of both. I think that one thing about going to grad school is your passion might change a little bit. It's okay as you're writing the statements that if you're demonstrating that you're interested at some broad level in this topic that that PI is working in, and that's really good.

Then backing up the experience that even if maybe you don't have experience in that specific topic or you don't have a lot to show in the ways of how you're passionate about it, you can at least use your experiences to back you up say, I am capable of pursuing this area of interest. I think relying on your experiences are also really important to demonstrate that you're ready to take on this really big endeavor.

Adrienne: Thank you. Let's see, here is another. This is a question for Becky. What are some topics or just general mistakes to avoid when writing your application essay that might not seem obvious?

Rebecca Suzuki: I think it's really difficult because there are so many things that you're trying to balance in writing a statement. You're trying to show that passion. You're trying to show your experiences and how they've led you to this place of applying to this person, to this school. You're trying to balance a lot of things. I think that it's really important to focus on not regurgitating your CV.

There are so many things that you've done in your lives that are really relevant and important, but being really reflective and thoughtful about the parts of your experiences that are particularly relevant to the questions that you're interested in answering or asking throughout grad school is going to be more important than saying I did 14 projects and I worked in X, Y, Z thing, on multiple projects in this way.

Getting out of those small details remembering that your statement is about who you are and who you want to be as a scientist, and using those experiences to draw a picture, so to speak, for your potential PI or committee for the place that you're applying to. I think making sure that you're really reflective in trying to draw that picture in that story is really important to remembering. Remember, you don't have to do every single thing. You don't have to write every single thing. No one is going to fact-check every single little thing that you say, but it's rather about creating that story.

Peter Sokol-Hessner: If I could just back that up really briefly. One thing that I think Becky said which is so true is that your statement has a goal. It's trying to convince people that you are ready for your PhD, that you'll succeed in your PhD, and that this place is the place to do your advanced training. The answer, what shouldn't you cover? If it's not advancing that argument, it's probably not the place for it. There may be other ways to address it. You want to remember your statement is one piece. You also have letters of recommendation.

You can talk to your recommenders and say, I would really love it if you'd be able to maybe cover this thing, or emphasize this aspect of me or my training, or my experience. You also have a CV. If your statement is too much of a CV, you're just submitting two of the same thing, one that's formatted like a CV and one that's formatted like a statement. That's not making the strongest case. You want to make sure that you're picking things to write about that, establish what the application statement can uniquely do, which is exactly this blend of passion and experience, and this path, this sense of how you've gotten to here, and what that means about the scientist and PhD student you'll be.

Adrienne: I'm going to ask a question that is related to that and has got a little different angle to it. The question is, how do I make my personal statement not just a regurgitation of my CV when I don't have a very compelling why story to tell? Anyone have a thought about that?

Rebecca: I would push back on that and say you probably do. You probably do actually have a why psych story. Not everyone has to have-- You don't necessarily have to have a crystallized reason of why you want to do this, but you probably do. I don't know, anyone feel free to jump in, but I would say something that helps me is to think through why do I want to do this? What sparks my passion for this? Then what comes to mind? Then start there with that concrete thing and move from there for a why psych story, because there probably is something.

Natasha: I agree. I'm going to agree with Becky. I think everybody has a compelling story. It's really how good a storyteller you are. Don't undermine your life. You got here, you are an interesting person, you like yourself, all those things. Make us make us feel that. I think we're people, people reading these papers, these statements are people just like anybody else. If we get excited about someone's interesting path or curious, I myself appreciate curiosity. Sometimes students will say I did this and I don't know why, it's completely unrelated.

I go, "Oh, my God, that makes you so interesting." That's fascinating. Actually, any experience that you've had, you can draw some lessons from it, for everything. Telling the why, the why this school? Why me? Why this program? Like Becky was saying, allows you also a little bit of self-reflection. Those are probably good things to ask anyway. Can you envision yourself with this person, with this program for five years, or why would you want to do that? That should be good questions to ask no matter what.

Adrienne: Thank you. Something that just popped up, there were a lot of questions about this, and then I'll move to another topic, about weaving a story when, especially in research

programs who want to see your skill set and giving specific examples. How to craft the personal statement when you're trying to get those things in.

Hayley: One of the things that I would recommend is thinking about what you're not able to tell with your CV. You can list your experiences, but you can't really provide a whole lot of detail about those experiences. You can't really provide in your CV what you learned. Maybe you wouldn't phrase it as mistakes made, but how did you grow as a scientist and a person from those experiences, and how does that prepare you for this next step? Those are things that you can't mention in your CV, but the personal statement allows you to personalize the things that you're listing and tell a story. Maybe you'll do chronological order, or maybe you'll break it up into themes and show the reader how you got there. I'm going to stop there.

Peter: If I may, just one little thing. I feel like people often feel like they need to have a very linear story when they're writing these statements. They have a picture in their head that this should be this story that's full of amazing research experiences, all of which look like the research experience they hope to get as a PhD student. You're applying to be a PhD student; you are not one yet. It's okay that the experiences are not an ideal fit. That's almost expected. A positive spin on that is a way to say, I've tried other things and I learned during that that some of that wasn't for me, and I learned what was.

That can be part of making a case for your maturity and the fact that you're making a very informed choice when you say, "I'm committed to this, and I want to do this. I'm deeply excited about it," that comes from a place of knowledge. You didn't just decide that that's something that you've figured out over a whole bunch of different experiences, some of which may be off the mark of where you hope to go eventually.

Don't expect yourself to have a linear story. Very, very few stories are linear. Often, some of the most interesting ones and the deepest motivating ones are the ones that aren't linear. The ones that took a left turn, that has a change, that had challenges, those were all learning opportunities. Don't try to expect yourself to write some beautiful, totally linear story. Be honest about where you've been and what you've learned, and how that has shaped the very informed choice you're making now.

Natasha: I agree. Just to chime in quickly. I tend to think, even in my own children, that sometimes taking the scenic route is more interesting. It may take you longer, those detours that Peter was talking about. Science is also discovered on those detours. Just allow yourself to be curious. I think if I were to be asked what's the most important, or one of the most important skills or characteristics, I would say curiosity. Being curious is really a nice thing.

It allows you to grow and to learn, to make mistakes, to move, to be committed to all the things that we want you to do in graduate school. Then to have a personal investment in the growth for you as a person, but also as a professional. I think it's fantastic once you have that curiosity, but it's really hard. If you're not curious, then everything's a chore. Then it's long. I always know when I'm not interested and it's like, why is this taking 20

years when it has only been two seconds? It feels forever. Curiosity does really allow you to play and to try, and experiment, and explore, and basically to do science in that way.

Adrienne: Wonderful. Thank you. Here's a question. Natasha, I'm going to pose this to you. Are there any pieces of advice for learning how to keep the essay relatively short?

Natasha: Yes. I do have something to say about this. My mentor, a long, long time ago from Canada, he sat down with me and he basically said I have too many words and I'm saying nothing. That I should be more economical with my words. Be precise, take my time. Say what I mean, not-- because I thought to sound smart, I had to use a lot of long words and say a lot. Simplicity. He's right. Simplicity is just so hard to achieve, and so important. Be simple, be to the point, be direct. I don't think you need you need to sound obscure or complicated.

Just crisp, beautiful sentences. If you like to read fiction, I would suggest read a fiction book before you write your personal statement. You'll be totally inspired by how beautiful language comes to writers. I try to get inspired by those people and say, I just want to write those beautiful crisp sentences that get put together in a short three or four pages, and don't say a lot and say a lot at the same time. I would go for simple and for crisp, and not too many words, but succinct.

Adrienne: Wonderful. Thank you. Any other comments actually before I maybe move on? You all play off each other very nicely.

Rebecca: That was such a great way of putting it, Natasha. I was thinking also, sometimes it's really great to just say the thing, just write it down. Just actually say it instead of writing around it or trying to find those words, and make it sound so like eloquent and articulate, because we tend to do a lot of writing around the thing instead of actually just saying I want to do this because of X, Y, Z thing. When you actually write it down and it doesn't sound very pretty, then you can make it sound better later. Often, we can say things in way less words than we actually say it because we think it has to sound a certain way. That's usually what I tend to do, is just actually make myself write it down first and then make it sound better later.

Adrienne: Very good advice. Let's see, here is a question for Hayley. For applicants whose research experience is varied, how can they best communicate their desire to focus on one topic?

Hayley: I think a lot of this actually relates to what Peter has already said, to some extent, that you can think of this as a feature and it's not a bug to your application statement. It's something that you can show as a positive. You can show you've tried cognitive psychology and social psychology, but now you're interested in something that's more clinical. You can talk about your previous experiences as what you learned.

Maybe if you were in a cognitive lab, you learned something about the way that cognition is happening and that made you wonder what's like when people are interacting with each other. I went to a social lab where I got some experience doing this, and then I was thinking what happens when something like this goes wrong or is connected with things

like depression? That's what's led me here to want to take the clinical route and try to figure out not only the research behind it, but how I can apply this and help people.

You can connect those things in ways that maybe you're not seeing right now, but if you can try to make a connection between each of those areas, it doesn't necessarily have to be very smooth, but you made the jump, so why did you make the jump? There's got to be a reason. You can talk about what that reason is. You might find that you're able to connect that much better than you think. Then also relying on the tools that you learned, the methodologies that you use, and how that's going to set you up for success to focus on whatever research question you're interested in right now.

Adrienne: Thank you, Hayley. Here is a question about master's application. For example, a master's application in counseling psychology, should you still base personal statements around research?

Rebecca: I can answer as a clinical person. Here's the thing, I don't know. Honestly, I think that it depends on the type of program. I think that the program will tell you what it wants. There's so many clinical work programs out there, whether that's social work or counseling. This is doctoral student being a PhD student or being a PhD in clinical psychology is going to be most of the time research focused.

A master's in counseling if that's going to get you a license, if that's going to be something where you're going to practice in the future, then it may be a totally different type of application. We probably aren't necessarily the best people to answer that question, but I think the best thing to do would be to go to the website of the program and see what they say about themselves. Do they want researchers? Are you applying to one person? Then change your statement accordingly.

Natasha: That's good advice. I agree with that. I know some counseling colleagues who are very much into research, and so they probably would want someone who has the experience or background or interest. I also would just say research is a good thing. Even if you don't want to become a researcher. Those skills of learning, exploring, understanding, synthesizing information, knowing where to find it, how to vet information that's not credible from credible. I think those are important skills. Even if you're not a researcher and you're a clinician, for example, how would you learn information to pass it on to your students or to shape your practice?

I think having those research skills are really important for anyone. We lived in a world that, oh my goodness, I don't know about you guys, but I can't keep up with all this reading. There's so much every minute of the day, how do you vet what you should read and ignore? I think the more literate we are about research skills, I think the better for any job. You'll probably also be more attractive as a counselor. Imagine going to your doctor and saying, "I don't know any research skills." I went to graduate school or to medical school in 1901 and I haven't read any research. You go, [gasps]. You want to keep up with the research, so you want your skills, so you can translate it into your science, into your clinical practice.

Peter: I'll note that this is also-- a version of this question applies to even just applying to clinical psychology programs themselves, let alone a master's in counseling. I'm sure Becky will be able to speak so much better than me, but even among clinical psychology PhD programs, there's variability in the relative balance between clinical work and research. This question is actually quite big. Ultimately, I think Natasha's right, that you want to look at what these people are doing.

What does the program tell you? When they describe themselves, how do they describe themselves? What are the people you're applying to work with and learn from, what do they seem to do? At the very least, you could always ask to what extent does this program balance research and clinical training? The answer might be very informative and might help you understand, here's how I can best situate myself to help them understand what I would be like in that setting.

Adrienne: Great, thank you. Let's see. Here's a question I'm going to pose to Becky. At what level does personal experience become off-putting in an essay? When does it simply just sound overboard?

Rebecca: That's a big one. That's a really big question and there's a lot of different answers to it. I think you'll hear lots of different answers to it as well. At ASFP, the way that we've thought about this is giving applicants the pros and cons of doing it. Especially if you are someone coming from a minoritized background, we need your experiences and your lived experiences in the field, and they make the field a lot better. That being, whether that be racial minoritized experiences or mental health experiences, whatever that is, it's really, really important for us to have.

At the same time, it's also true that especially in clinical programs, often there are on the back end, people that will not even entertain applicants that talk about their personal lived experiences, especially to a large degree. I think that it's a yes/and. Yes, it's important to talk about, especially if it feels like it's really relevant to the questions that you want to answer. If you are interested in depression and anxiety, and you're someone who's dealt with depression and anxiety, that's interesting and helpful. You don't want to sit and talk about that so much that it becomes the point of your essay.

The idea is to take your experiences and then also reflect on how they tie to the larger thing that you're trying to say. I wrote about personal experiences in my essay because it was really important to me as a researcher, and as in terms of the things that I was interested in. They started from a place of my personal experiences. Instead of spending a lot of time there, starting with that and then moving forward to tie that really into your larger argument, and really think through the pros and cons of talking about it, I think are really important.

I think it's easy for me to be like, yeah, talk about it, or no, don't talk about it, but it's not that simple. The reality is that everyone on this panel may have completely different ways of thinking about it. I think that the end of, I guess, what I'm trying to say is that there are pros to it and there are cons to it, and you need to think through exactly is it serving your purpose and your larger goals to talk at length about any personal experiences and how

they're related to your larger goals? I don't know if that was super articulate, but that's how I think about it. Peter, I'm sure, or anyone, feel free to jump in with more.

Adrienne: That was really helpful. Actually, there's a related question, super related that maybe I'll pose to Natasha. It was a specific question about talking about overcoming a mental health struggle in the essay. Becky, you definitely spoke to some of that. I'm wondering if Natasha, there are other things that you would say about that.

Natasha: Becky, very articulate. I really appreciated your answer. As you were talking, I was thinking of this story. I have a colleague of mine who's a cardiologist, and I said, "Why did you become a cardiologist and not a gallbladder person?" I don't know. He told me the story. It was so interesting. He went back to when third grade with this teacher who had a heart attack, the teacher that he loved. Anyway, I was thinking, this is so compelling. He made it a life out of this story, out of that personal experience. I think those are really important. I always want to know why you chose this and not the other.

I think it tells a lot about the person you are, the interests you're in, your passion or your commitment to that issue. I love personal stories myself. Of course, if you're just going to talk about the third-grade teacher for five pages, maybe that's not good. Often, the story gives a window into your personality, your soul, who you are more so than other things. I will let the story tell itself. Then because you're telling that story I'm sure that you're reflective about it. You know what made you tell this story and not the 20 million other stories that you have in your life. That in itself is a really nice way to get to know you. I love personal stories.

The question specifically, sorry, Adrienne, it was about overcome mental health issues. Those are also important. You have an insight into how dark this place's things can be for yourself, and having incredible amount of empathy for yourself, for other people. I think those are really in the struggles that we all have. Whether we can overcome them in whatever timeline. I think those are again, part of your story. This is who you are and who you bring to the table. I think it's really important to make that part of who you are. We all have adversities. I try to think that the pathologist of everyday life, we all live with something. Yes, just telling who you are in the whole package is probably a good thing.

Peter: I think my one addition there would be that your guiding principle is always, is this making a case for me as a PhD student? If it is, then there's an argument for potentially including it. If it's not, it can still be important to you, and it can still be a big part of who you are and part of your life, and something that you're not denying or turning away. You're just saying it's not advancing that argument that I need to make right now in this statement. It's okay if you end up deciding that about some things having to do with your lived experience.

That's an okay way to do it, as well as to evaluate what you are choosing to include. Is it making that argument? Can I help it make that argument better? Can I focus it a little more? I might not need to provide all the details. Can I make that case a little quicker or more directly, and so on? With clinical programs, what can happen is that people treat the statement like something you would tell a potential client. They treat the statement like

something you would share relatively publicly. Self-disclosing in that kind of context as a clinician isn't always a good idea.

That's part of why some people will see that in a statement and say, "No, that's not okay. I'm not going to consider this application any further." Regardless of how we feel about it, which is that we think this is important, this is part of your lived experience, we do not want to further stigma around mental health and mental health providers. Never. Absolutely not. That is how some people up there are doing this. That's worth knowing. That's part of making this cost benefit analysis for yourself and understanding what these folks might be looking for. We're certainly not advocating it, but in terms of trying to help you understand your application process, that's some of the truth that you might encounter out there.

Natasha: Maybe Peter, just to pick back on that, not just tell the story, but how you tell the story and what you choose to write, and what you choose to make exactly to share of yourself. I think we all have private sauce, and we don't have to share everything all the time. I agree.

Adrienne: Very, very helpful. Thank you. Let's see. Here's a question that's coming recently about, how can an applicant use their essay to bolster their application if other aspects of it are not as it like? For example, the grades, test scores aren't what you hoped. How can you use the essay to couch that or supplement it, or mention it, not mention it?

Natasha: That's a good question. The elephant in the room, do you just pretend that you didn't get the C and they're never going to see you?

[laughter]

Adrienne: Do you talk about that in the story of how you come to the place you are?

Natasha: I was just talking about this with a student of mine, that how in general with students, we just don't like to get bad grades. We think that's a terrible indictment or a character, on our knowledge. Back in the day, I don't know, Peter, how old you are, but back in the day, my professor will say to me, "How are you going to know that you don't know if you don't get a bad grade? How are you going to learn?" Seeing the growth and the opportunity for-- A lot of business people, people who are business gurus will tell you don't get anywhere unless you make a mistake.

Your mistakes are where you learn. Mistakes are actually the ingredients for growth and learning. I don't know. I think there's a way to appreciate one's experiences without jeopardizing our life. Making account that I want to know how, not so much what mistakes you made, but how did you learn from them, and whether that contributed to something unique or interesting about you and your approach to growth is, I think, important and a good thing too. Admit that you made a mistake, that's okay too.

Adrienne: Thank you, Natasha. Any other thoughts on that?

Peter: Yes. This can be absolutely part of that growth story, absolutely part of your saying this was a moment where I realized or I learned, or here's how I turned things around. In that respect, there can be absolutely nothing wrong with a bad grade, or any other kind of negative experience that you have where you took a job or a position, or you joined a lab and it ended up not going how you wanted to.

Maybe that informs the things that you're looking for and why you're choosing the current lab you're choosing. The current PI program. That's part of why you value it so much. That could be turned into a strength. I know we're talking about the application statement; this is also the kind of thing that sometimes letters can help with. You can ask letter writers to help you handle some of your weaknesses. That's a little more indirect. It can sometimes be easier for a letter writer to do that than for you to do that.

You want them to do it in close collaboration with you so that they say what you're hoping to communicate in some way. That can be a way to address this where you say, I'm going to focus on all this stuff in my statement. Listen, letter writer number one, I've got this one weak spot, can you help people maybe understand or contextualize that, or help them see the positive side of that in your letter? That's a great place for some of those things.

Natasha: Yes. I agree. If I could just quickly add here, also in addition to the bad stuff that you might need to explain or contextualize why that contributed, also understand omissions, sense of omission. For example, in our department, we make a lot of we put a lot of emphasis in research experience, and if so, the applicant doesn't have a lot of research opportunities we go, "What happened? Do you know what you're getting into?" All these things.

I think explaining why you don't have publications or whatever research presentations, or whatever you want to do, is also a good thing, especially if you read online that the department is heavily-- If they do a lot of research, like Peter was saying earlier, then by all means explain why you don't have that research experience that they might be looking for, because they want to see that you fit to their requirements.

Again, this is your story. We had a young applicant a long time ago who applied and she said she had to walk, go take a bus, I don't know, for an hour to the next town so she can be part of a lab and do her research experience, so it explains why her research was limited, but she did these other things to compensate it. I thought, wow, she's so resilient. Give her 100 for resilient." The lack of research experience was really not that important when I saw how resourceful she was. Those are things important to make sure that your skills, even in the negative things, but also what you don't have, match or explain why you don't have what the university wants you to have.

Adrienne: Thank you. Let's see, here is another question. What are your tips for connecting my research to showcase that it aligns with the professor I want to work with? If they've got a specific research study going on. Let's see. Becky or Haley, do you want to see what you think about that?

Hayley: Sure. I have some ideas. I think the first step would be to check out the person's website to see what they're working on in recent publications. You can look for things like topics that you might be able to connect with, or also some of the tools that they're using. I think it's easy to really get bogged down with this idea of your research interests have to line perfectly with the person that you're applying for. Oftentimes, it's actually hard to get a sense of what they're actually doing because if you think about the publication process, it takes a long time.

When you look at their website and you're seeing these publications, this is data that they likely collected at least a year ago, maybe more depending on the type of research, so they might actually be doing different types of research. When you're approaching the website and getting information from their publications or the way that they're describing their research, try to keep it at a big picture level because the specifics might not necessarily be what they're doing at the moment, and thinking about how you can connect your broad interests to what theirs are. Then it might be good to ask a couple of more specific questions.

You also don't want to be super specific where you're showing that you don't really have a lot of flexibility in the things that you're interested in pursuing, and the questions that you're able to ask. Because ultimately, you can have interest, but once you go into somebody else's lab, they're the one that's guiding the direction and you're under their wing, at least for a little bit. I guess looking for big picture connections that you can make with them is plenty, and to try not to get stressed out or worried about really making like super specific things. You can also say things like, I'm interested in using this methodology that you know the lab uses to explore what those questions are.

Rebecca: I think one thing I would add to that, Hayley said it super well, but is also--I think we had said this a few times, you don't have to be that, you're not supposed to be a mirror image of your PI. I don't know if any PI really wants you to just come and do exactly the same thing. They want you to be able to extend their work and bring new things to the table. You don't want to be like, "I'm interested in exactly what you're doing right now." Because everyone's research interests change, and likely yours will too.

I feel like I pretended a little bit to some extent for what I actually was interested in because I was interested in a lot of things. It's about figuring out how you can say, "Look, this is what you do, this is what I am curious about. This is why your experience makes you a great fit to help me reach the goals that I have. These are the questions that I have based on the work that you're doing and the work that I am interested in."

Being able to mold those things together and say, "This is how I'd extend the work that you're doing." Rather than trying to be exactly the perfect candidate, because that person doesn't exist. There's so many ways that research changes and questions change. Remembering that you don't have to fit all of those boxes, I think, is really helpful to not feeling like, there's nothing I could do to be the perfect candidate. Because, like Peter said earlier, you're not supposed to be the PhD student yet, you're applying to be it.

Hayley: I think Becky brings up a good point that I just want to add onto is about being honest about what you're interested in and who you are, because you're going to go potentially spend five to six years in a place that you want to approach with your authentic self so that they're like, yes, this person, we want you to come and be in this department. Then so when you go in there, you're feeling like you can truly be who you are and explore the things that you're really, really interested in.

Otherwise, if you're just maybe stretching the truth a little bit on what you're really, really interested in because you just want to get in the door to a PhD program, you might end up being unhappy with the questions that you're answering. It's really important to reflect on, could you be happy in these labs based on these broad research interests, even if they aren't fitting exactly into what you see yourself doing? Then you want to be able to communicate that with them so that you can feel the best when you're doing this really hard thing for several years.

Adrienne: That's a very, very good point. There's a question in here about how to do your personable statement so it's competitive. I'm sorry, I'm talking louder because there are leaf blowers and weed whackers going on out there. It's like, working at home. Apologies for that noise. About making it competitive. It sounds like, Hayley, what you're saying is that you'd make yourself competitive by coming with your authentic self and what your real interests are.

Hayley: Exactly. I also think it can come through on the personal statement. I think you'd be surprised. I think being an editor with ASFP, because I'm not really reading application statements myself at this point, I'm just a PhD student, but reading them through ASFP has been really helpful. You get a sense of who people are in their language and the way that they're talking about their experiences, and it's really cool. Trying to write the statement with that goal, I think is really important too.

Adrienne: Thank you. Here is a great question about diversity. How safe is it to talk about the lack of diversity in the field and wanting to fill that gap?

Rebecca: My first thought in this question is if that person doesn't recognize that that's a problem, then you probably don't want to work with them. That being said, I wouldn't spend your entire very short statement being like, "Everything is wrong with everything." This is just terrible. You want to show this is actively what I'm bringing, we need more of this in this field. Because we know that it's not just an opinion. There's so much evidence that psychological science needs to grow and diversify and has been built on a foundation of whether it's research, or whatever it is, of white western people. I don't know.

Personally, I think it's really important. I think that the way that you talk about it can also vary depending on how important it is to the picture you're trying to create. I wouldn't necessarily spend a lot of time being like, it's really important for this field to diversify, but rather be like, "Look, these are my experiences. These experiences might be different than people that have been in this field before. These are the questions I'm interested in asking. This is why it's important for me to be here and to contribute to this discourse also." That shows it rather than you saying it in that way.

Adrienne: I like that. Thank you. Peter, did you want to say anything?

Peter: I have almost no notes. That was wonderful. I think it's a combination of keeping that goal in mind. Remember, your primary goal here is-- this is also why in your statement, for instance, when you're describing your research. You don't want to spend a ton of time, say, describing your research in terms of the findings. I'm not reading your application statement to find out about your findings.

I'm reading it to find out about you as a PhD student and what you would be like as a scientist. You want everything to be working toward that goal. When you are mentioning this, you want to have it working toward that goal. How does this establish who I'm going to be as a scientist and as a student? That can help you focus it and also make it most effective. Becky said it brilliantly. I'm just low on space.

Adrienne: [laughs] Thank you. I thought I sensed a reaching for the mouse to unmute. Thank you. There are a few questions about using one primary essay for different sorts of programs, versus tailoring them. Any comments that anyone has about that? [silence]

Natasha: You said tailoring the essay to a certain--

Adrienne: Yes, tailoring your essay to different ones, and how many personal statements should you have if you're applying to multiple? It seems like some are about maybe multiple schools within a certain sub-discipline or if you're maybe a counseling or a clinical, how you deal with the essays and whether they should be a primary one or they should be tailored.

Natasha: I wouldn't make them too generic in case it seems-- then when people read two generic statements they tend to think, "Oh, well, someone else is going to get them." You're disengaged from the application. I think each, you would have to tailor it somewhat. The most important thing is to show that there's a fit between you and the department. I'm not a big fan of generic statements just because then I think this person will be happy anywhere.

If you want to convince me that you want to come to this place, to this university, to my lab. Then there must be a little more tailoring of-- at the end of the day, it's really a fit between you and this person and how well you jive, and you connect. It really is relationships. You have a relationship with a person that's going to allow you to grow or not to grow. I would definitely make it more tailored to that program in that. Even that lab. We all are different. We all have different preferences so.

Hayley: I'm thinking about ways that it would make it easier for people to tailor their statements, because it's a lot of work to write an application statement. The thought of redoing it for however many schools you for is really daunting, and no one really has the time for that. Then you run into the fact of will it be quality if you're just rewriting a statement 10 times to however many schools you're applying to? You can reuse the facts because those are just facts.

These are your research experiences, your path, maybe your story in how you broadly got interested in psychology or whatever area it is. Then you can try to connect those two

things that are more specific to the department. Then the things that the PI in the lab that you're interested in or studying. I would say that the first part of your statement will mostly be consistent across statements, but what's really going to change is when you're talking about the PI and the fit.

Peter: Practically speaking, that a lot of people expect a final paragraph to be tailored. You write most of your statement and most of it's just a base statement that you just keep applying, and the final paragraph is the place where you make that change. It can be worth it to consider bigger changes than that, especially if you're applying to people who have very different emphases in their research. Can you help them see the threads that connect you to them?

That might mean that you emphasize slightly different things when you describe the same research experience, for example. Hopefully, you're the same in all these places, and so the whole part of your statement that's establishing who you're going to be as a scientist is consistent. That makes the last paragraph, that's the place where you do the most of this work, last paragraph or two, something like that.

For that, you really want to make sure you do a good job with that. They're paying a lot of attention to that. They know who they are. Do you? If you miss the mark on that, that can make a pretty rough impression where they say, this person doesn't actually understand what I'm doing in my lab and who I am. You do want to try to invest some time in that link. Then understanding who you're applying to work with. It's also part of doing your homework and making smart applications for yourself.

Natasha: Just to add to that, I totally agree with everything. It's important to do both, but I have seen applications, so personal statements where someone forgot to edit the common part, and instead of saying Dr. Smith, they called me Dr. Patricia or something. I chuckled, but it was like, okay, you got to get that Patricia. [laughs] Because my name is not that. That happened to me too. Be very careful, just edit. Edit the thing, look for so that it doesn't look like you just copy and paste it from someone else. It's not the deal-breaker for me, but it does show a little sloppiness.

Adrienne: Cool. Wonderful. Maybe I'll just sneak one more in here before we end today. It's a question that came in about how to talk about research and research topics, which I think you answered, but it came from someone who identified as an international student. It made me wonder if you had any thoughts about considerations for international students. [silence]

Natasha: About anything?

Adrienne: About anything, yes.

Natasha: About any aspect of--

Adrienne: Yes. Anyone who's international applying that they should be thinking about, other than all the wonderful things that that we've talked about today.

Natasha: I love international students. I think it's so great to have people from other countries and other cultures. Tell us who you are and why you want to come here. The same things. I welcome diversity a lot because that's how I grow my tree. I think if we don't have diversity, you just don't grow and evolve much. It's much slower. Having a different lens to see the same things that I see, I think it's such a privilege. Totally, it's an asset. Please apply.

Rebecca: Absolutely. I think international applicants are fantastic. I do think that it's really important to do your homework and really know what programs the United States are asking for, or in wherever you're applying to. Because I know that's a whole other hurdle to be able to understand how your experience might fit with the different country's expectations. It's not something that you can't bridge, it is something that you should know about though.

Making sure that you have a sense of whether you need-- Like in some countries, maybe you need a master's to apply to a PhD program. You don't have to do that in the US, or what types of experiences. All of these experiences you have are probably really, really relevant, but knowing how to make them applicable, I think, is something that comes with doing a little bit more work in the front end of trying to figure out what it is programs are looking for, and the expectations there.

Adrienne: Thank you. I can't believe an hour has gone, but it is. I want to thank you all so much for participating today, and for all your great insights and guidance for the listeners. It's been wonderful. I've enjoyed it. I am going to turn this back over to Shandol to close this out.

Shandol: Thanks so much for joining us today. We hoped you enjoyed hearing from our panelists. We'll be sending you a one-minute survey after this broadcast. We value your feedback, so let us know how we're doing. Feel free to share topics you'd like for us to cover in the future. You can email us at sscience@apa.org with your recommendations. Much thanks to Peter, Becky, Hayley, and Natasha for sharing their insights and expertise. We hope that you'll join us for other sessions in this series.

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