



## Advising Psychology Majors About Graduate School in Psychology: Current Practices and Challenges

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High-quality advising helps undergraduate students gain admission to graduate programs in psychology. Yet, little is known about the current practices psychology departments use to advise students about applying to graduate school. We conducted the present research to better understand these practices. Psychology department chairs from across the United States ( $N = 176$ ) completed an online survey asking about their department's advising practices and advising challenges. The results show that most departments provide students with useful resources about applying to graduate school but that few departments have formal mechanisms in place to help students become competitive applicants for psychology graduate programs. Participants frequently expressed the need for their departments to develop more systematic approaches for delivering information and assistance to students regarding graduate school. Our findings provide insight into current advising practices in psychology departments, challenges that departments face in providing effective advising to their students, and practical strategies that departments can implement to enhance advising effectiveness.

**Keywords:** advising, psychology, undergraduate students, graduate school

The *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* outlines strategies for psychology departments to help students discern and take steps toward their professional development goals (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). For many students, graduate school is fundamental to achieving postbaccalaureate success. High-quality advising can be vital in helping students gain admission to psychology graduate pro-

grams. However, little is known about the strategies that psychology departments use to advise students about graduate school. We conducted the present research to better understand these strategies.

The job outlook for psychology majors who earn graduate degrees is quite good. In fact, the demand for psychologists with graduate degrees is expected to grow much faster than the demand for most occupations (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Further, the national median salary for those who earn a graduate degree in psychology is 25% higher than the median salary for those who hold only a bachelor's degree (Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, n.d.). Yet, admission to psychology graduate programs can be competitive. Median acceptance rates for most subfields in psychology range between 40% and 60% for master's programs and between only 7% and 16% for doctoral programs (Michalski, Cope, & Fowler, 2016). Psychology departments that provide high-quality advising to their students can help to increase their prospects of gaining admittance to

This article was published Online First September 23, 2019.

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Parts of this research were presented at the 2017 Midwestern Psychological Association meeting in Chicago, Illinois. This research was supported in part by a grant from the Department of Psychology at Metropolitan State University of Denver. We thank R. Eric Landrum for providing us with a database of psychology department chairs.

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graduate programs (Appleby & Appleby, 2006; Ware et al., 1993).

Although frequent one-on-one advising predicts acceptance to psychology graduate schools (Stoloff, Good, Smith, & Brewster, 2015; Stoloff et al., 2010), undergraduate programs often fail to provide effective advising to their students (Appleby & Appleby, 2006; Brucato & Neimeyer, 2011; Sanders & Landrum, 2012). A national survey that assessed psychology majors' understanding of factors that contribute to graduate school admissions revealed significant knowledge gaps (Sanders & Landrum, 2012). Although students correctly noted that research experience, letters of recommendation, personal statements, GPA, and program fit are important factors, they erroneously attached relatively low importance to conference presentations, publications, and the thoroughness of application materials (Sanders & Landrum, 2012). Appleby and Appleby (2006) found that the shortcomings of many psychology majors' applications to graduate programs resulted from "a lack of exposure to information that would otherwise enable [the applicants] to understand the graduate school culture, the requirements of the graduate school application process, and the exact nature of some of its components" (p. 22). Appleby and Appleby point to "a lack of appropriate advising and mentoring" (p. 22) as largely responsible for problems with students' applications to graduate programs that diminish their likelihood of gaining admittance. Thus, there is a need for psychology departments to improve the quality of the advising they deliver to undergraduate students about applying to psychology graduate programs.

According to the National Academic Advising Association (2007), successful advising programs must articulate both what students should learn through advising and how advisors will convey that information. Yet, little is known about the practices that psychology departments use to advise students about graduate school. We conducted the present research to better understand these practices. We invited psychology department chairs from across the United States to participate in a study about the mechanisms their departments use to advise undergraduate students about applying to graduate programs in psychology. We also asked respondents to share the challenges they encounter in

providing this advising. We collected data from department chairs because we expected they would be most aware of their department's advising practices. Research participants completed an online survey that included questions about the resources, the requirements, the mechanisms, and the challenges related to helping students become competitive applicants for graduate programs in psychology.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

Data were collected online using the Qualtrics survey platform (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). We recruited participants from a list of 1,361 psychology department chairs in the United States.<sup>1</sup> We sent the department chairs e-mails inviting them to complete a survey about the ways that undergraduate students in their department received advising about applying to graduate school in psychology. The e-mail stated that participants could choose to be entered in a random drawing for one of six \$50 Amazon gift cards as compensation for their participation. Participants gained access to the survey via an anonymizing link included in the e-mail. From the initial e-mail database, eight addresses were flagged as duplicates and 88 e-mails were returned as undeliverable. We were able to correct 14 of the undeliverable e-mails, resulting in 1,279 valid e-mails. After the initial invitation to participate, we sent two reminders. Ultimately, we received responses from 176 department chairs, a response rate of 13.8%. The respondents represented departments that varied considerably in size and type. The number of psychology majors served by the departments ranged from 1 to 1,900, with a median of 189. Just over 27% of the departments served 80 or fewer students, 25.5% served between 81 and 180 students, 27.5% served between 181 and 400 students, and 19.6% served between 450 and 1,900 students. The number of tenure-track or tenured faculty in the departments ranged from zero to 36, with a median of eight. Fifty-seven percent of the departments were housed at a baccalaureate college or university,

<sup>1</sup> We thank R. Eric Landrum of Boise State University for making this database available to us.

26% at a master's college or university, and 17% at a doctoral-granting university. According to a study of undergraduate psychology programs in the United States conducted during 2003–2005, there were 1,149 bachelor's-level psychology programs and 435 programs that also offered graduate degrees (Stoloff, Sanders, & McCarthy, n.d.). These numbers indicate that about 73% of the programs offering a bachelor's degree in psychology in the United States are housed at a baccalaureate college. Thus, the current sample may underrepresent psychology departments that offer only a bachelor's degree.

## Measures

The survey instructions stated that the purpose of the study was to gather information about “the procedures and resources used by your department to help your students prepare competitive graduate school applications.” Whereas undergraduate psychology students may receive advice about applying to graduate programs in areas other than psychology, the purpose of the current work was to understand departmental advising practices regarding psychology graduate programs in particular. To ensure that participants understood this goal, we also included the following instruction: “You have been invited to participate in this survey because as the chair of a department of psychology you can provide valuable information regarding how undergraduate students receive advising about applying to graduate school in psychology.” The survey included five quantitative, close-ended questions asking about the priority participants attach to graduate school advising, the formal department requirements for students to learn about graduate school, the ways that students in their department learn about graduate school, the resources their department provides to students about graduate school, and whether and in what ways their department formally assesses the efficacy of the advising they provide to students about the graduate school application process. The full text of these questions and the response options are listed in the tables and figures in the Results section. After responding to the close-ended questions, participants provided written responses to the following open-ended question: “What do you see as challenges or barriers that your department needs to overcome to best pro-

vide undergraduate students in your department advising about applying to graduate school in psychology?” Participants were given no suggestions or constraints as to the type or the length of responses they should provide. Finally, participants answered questions about the size of their department, the type of institution in which their department is housed, and the proportion of their department majors that apply to graduate school in psychology.<sup>2</sup>

## Results

### Quantitative Analysis

We analyzed data from the close-ended questions by calculating the number and percentage of responses that participants selected for each question. Because participants could select more than one response option for the questions about their department's formal requirements for students to learn about graduate school and the resources their department provides to students about applying to graduate school, frequency statistics for these questions are based on the number of responses selected across participants. Statistics for the other close-ended questions indicate the number of participants who selected particular response options.

Although just over 18% of the department chairs indicated they were unsure about what proportion of their department's students apply to graduate programs in psychology, those who could provide estimates reported that, consistent with national estimates (APA, 2016; Halonen, 2011), nearly 40% of students in their department apply to these programs ( $M = 38.92\%$ ,  $SD = 19.51$ ). Evaluations of the relative priority that participants attach to graduate school advising are shown in Figure 1. Seventy-one percent of participants indicated that providing advising to students about the process of applying to graduate school in psychology is an equal or

<sup>2</sup> The survey included questions regarding various aspects of graduate school advising, including advising for students majoring in fields other than psychology. Because this article focuses specifically on advising about graduate school in psychology, we do not report participants' responses to these items. Additionally, we exclude responses to items that yielded redundant information that did not provide additional insight to departmental advising practices related to graduate school in psychology. The full survey is available at <https://osf.io/3deyx/>.

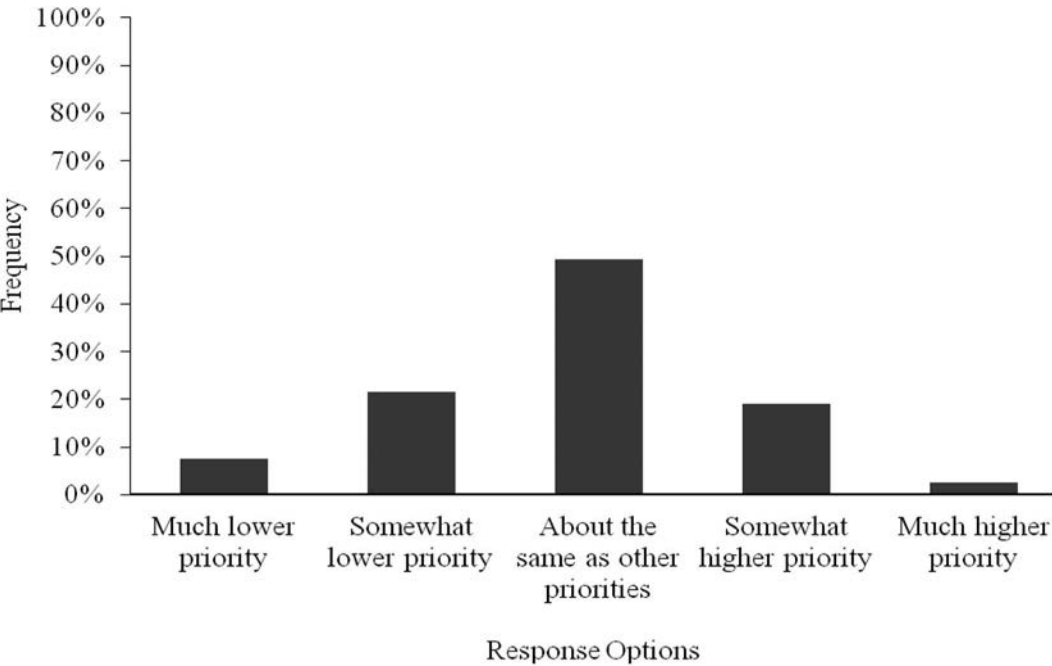


Figure 1. Frequency of participants responses to the survey item “Compared to your department’s other educational goals for psychology students, how much of a priority is it to provide students advising about the process of applying to graduate school in psychology?”

higher priority compared to their department’s other educational goals, whereas 29% regarded graduate school advising as a lower priority than other educational goals. Table 1 presents responses to the question regarding formal requirements for students to learn about graduate school in participants’ home departments. A little more than a third of departments required students to complete a careers or professional development course or course module(s) that included information about graduate school, and 25% of departments required that students

meet with a department advisor about graduate school. Forty-eight percent of participants indicated that their department had no formal requirements for students to learn about graduate school.

Table 2 shows participants’ perceptions regarding the most common way that students in their department learn about the psychology graduate school application process. Over half of the participants (57%) reported that their students are most likely to gain this information by participating in formal department-spon-

Table 1  
What Formal Requirements Does Your Department Have for Students to Learn About Graduate School in Psychology? Check All That Apply

Answer	%	n
No formal requirements	47.9	78
Completion of a careers/professional development course or course module	35.6	58
Required meeting(s) with a Department advisor	25.2	41
Other	4.9	7
Required attendance at a presentation on careers/professional development	4.3	4
Required meeting(s) with an advisor from outside the department	1.2	2
Unsure	.6	1

Table 2  
*What Is the Most Common Way Undergraduate Students in Your Department Learn About the Psychology Graduate School Application Process?*

Answer	%	<i>n</i>
By participating in formal department-sponsored activities	56.7	93
By being approached by a faculty member to discuss graduate school options	18.9	31
Unsure	18.3	30
By conducting a web search	3.7	6
From other students	2.4	4

sored activities. Approximately 20% of participants reported that the most common way students gain this information is by being approached by a faculty member. Eighteen percent of participants indicated that they were unsure how students in their department usually learn about applying to graduate school.

Figure 2 presents the types of resources that participants indicated their departments provide to students about applying to psychology graduate programs. Almost all departments provided students with some type of one-on-one faculty

mentoring, and three quarters of the departments offered information sessions or presentations about graduate school. Close to 50% of departments provided information modules about graduate school to their students, and over a third of departments provided relevant websites or other electronic resources to students. At the same time, less than 20% of departments offered a formal graduate school track or prep courses, and only 3% of departments had formally designated advisors who focus on assisting students who are interested in applying to

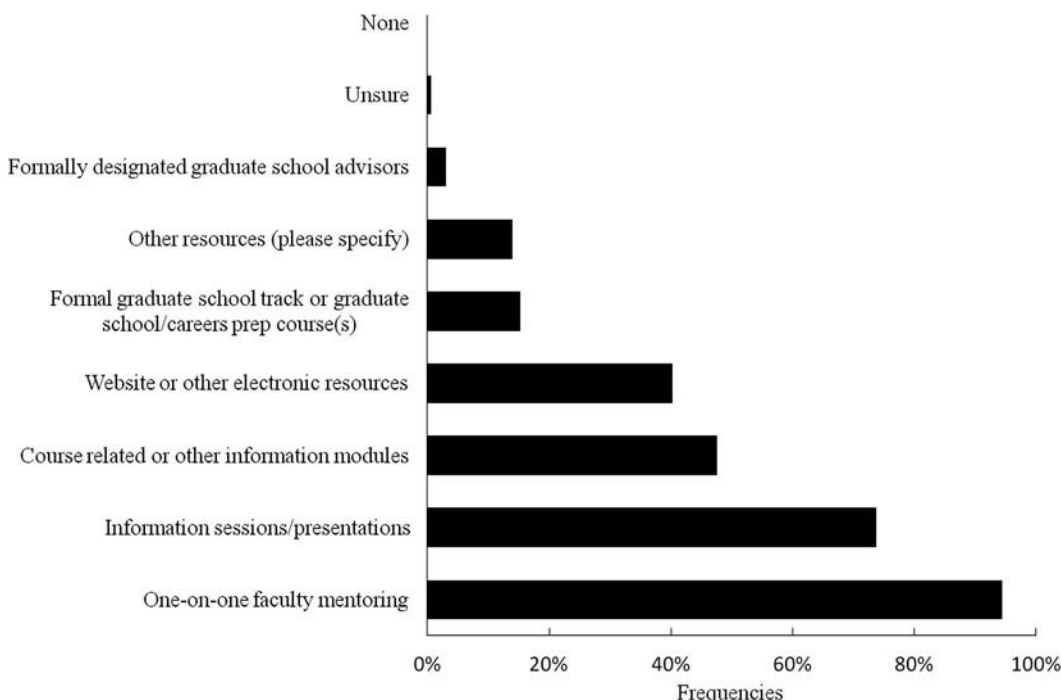


Figure 2. Frequency of participants' responses to the survey item "What resources does your department provide to your department's undergraduate students about applying to graduate school?"



Table 3  
*Does Your Department Formally Assess the Efficacy of Advising Provided to Students About the Graduate School Application Process?*

Answer	%	<i>n</i>
Yes	14.37	23
No	84.38	135
Unsure	1.25	2

graduate school in psychology. Further, as shown in Table 3, participants' departments rarely assessed the efficacy of the advising they provided to students; fully 85% of participants indicated that their department had no formal means of assessment. Of the departments that did assess advising efficacy, the most common forms of assessment involved gathering feedback from current students, gathering feedback from alumni, and tracking graduate school admissions.

### Qualitative Analysis

We adopted an inductive approach to analyzing participants' responses to the open-ended question regarding the challenges their department faces in providing advising to students about applying to graduate school in psychology. Inductive analysis involves detailed readings of the raw data to derive significant concepts or themes that emerge through interpretation of these data (Thomas, 2006). This approach is appropriate when the primary goal of the analysis is to capture key meanings inherent in participants' responses without imposing an a priori theoretical model on the data. Specifically, we conducted a thematic analysis of the responses that was guided by the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These procedures involve multiple readings and codings of the text to interpret the content of predominant themes in the data.

To gain a sense of the depth and breadth of the content, we first familiarized ourselves with the data by independently reading participants' responses. This phase of the analysis involved actively searching for basic features of the responses and noting preliminary ideas for themes. We then met to discuss our nascent interpretations and to generate a list of potential themes that could be used to guide a second

independent reading of the responses. The primary goal of this reading was to devise more formal candidate themes. After discussion, we developed a revised set of themes. In developing these themes, we employed Patton's (1990) dual criteria for judging categories: *internal homogeneity* (i.e., meaningful coherence within themes) and *external homogeneity* (i.e., clear and discernable distinctions between themes). With this more formalized thematic framework in mind, we reread the responses a third time to ascertain how well the data fit within the new structure and to identify additional potential themes. We then met again to agree upon the final set of themes reported here.

Table 4 shows the names of the themes, the number and percentage of responses that fit the themes, and examples of the responses that participants generated for the themes. Table row entries are based on the number of participants who generated responses that fit each theme.<sup>3</sup> It is notable that two themes, *disseminating information* and *faculty time/resources*, accounted for half of participants' responses. Responses fitting the disseminating-information theme express the need to develop more systematic approaches for getting information about graduate school to students. These approaches include designing a department curriculum that educates students about preparing for and applying to graduate school, providing formal advising to students about graduate school, and devising other formal mechanisms to disseminate information and assistance to students about graduate school. The faculty time/resources responses point to demands on faculty members' time and to the need for resources such as course releases, funding, and additional support staff that would allow faculty to focus more on advising.

Insufficient time and resources to concentrate on advising might partly account for the challenges related to the *faculty knowledge/experience* theme, the third theme listed in Table 4. These responses refer to deficits among faculty members in the expertise that is required to provide effective advising to students about graduate school, such as current information about admission requirements and opportunities

<sup>3</sup> The table does not include responses from 12 participants who failed to identify any advising challenges or who provided responses that could not be categorized.

Table 4

*What Do You See as Challenges or Barriers That Your Department Needs to Overcome to Best Provide Undergraduate Students in Your Department Advising About Applying to Graduate School in Psychology?*

Challenge	%	<i>n</i>	Examples
Disseminating information	32	52	Getting information to students effectively. No formal mechanism to ensure exposure to graduate school application process.
Faculty time/resources	20	33	We each have 30–40 advisees. Money time.
Faculty knowledge/experience	8	13	Ability to mentor effectively. We often don't know which programs would provide the best fit for our students.
Student effort/initiative	7	12	Students need to be more proactive. Some students do not seek out help from faculty.
Student constraints	7	12	This is a commuter campus . . . many students have great difficulty coming to meetings outside class time. Many of our students cannot leave the area due to family responsibilities.
Student planning/time lines	7	12	Students get involved in research too late. Students seem to wait until junior year to begin seriously thinking about graduate school.
Student interest	6	9	Not all students are interested in graduate school. Our students don't really apply that often.
Student resources	5	8	Having adequate research and field work opportunities for all interested students. Perhaps providing monetary support for the GREs or application fees.
Assessment	4	7	There is no easy way to track students or follow up to find out who actually applies to graduate school, gets in, etc. We do not have means to track graduate school admission success.
Faculty interest/motivation	4	6	Lack of encouraging students to apply. Some faculty do not take advising seriously and do not think it is their job.

for students to gain the skills and experience they need to be competitive applicants. Unlike the faculty time/resources responses, responses fitting the faculty knowledge/experience theme do not mention time or resource constraints. In keeping with the semantic approach to identifying themes, we categorized these responses as a distinct theme.

The next four most commonly emerging themes listed in Table 4 concern issues related to the student. Responses in the *student effort/initiative* category indicate that students lack the determination to acquire the knowledge and experience they need to gain admittance to competitive graduate programs. *Student constraints* refers to factors such as work schedules, family obligations, and low standardized test scores that limit students' ability to attend graduate school. Responses fitting the *student planning/time lines* theme state that students wait until late in their undergraduate experience to think

seriously about applying to graduate school, to seek advising about graduate school, or to begin the process of applying to graduate school. The *student interest* responses note that some students are not interested in applying to graduate programs and so do not participate in department-sponsored activities about graduate school.

Thirteen percent of participants' responses express sentiments that reflect at least one of the three remaining themes. *Student resources* refers to the need for departments to provide more information, experience, or monetary support to students who are interested in applying to graduate programs. *Assessment* refers to the need for formal processes to gauge the effectiveness of graduate school advising and to track student alumni. The last set of responses, *faculty interest/motivation*, state that some faculty members do not wish to take on the responsibilities of graduate school advising.

In categorizing the challenges, we discovered that their sources could be traced back to one of three department constituents: students, department faculty, or the structure of the department itself. Table 5 lists the challenges that stem from these sources and the aggregate number and percentage of responses across the challenges associated with each source. Most responses point to challenges related to the department: (a) developing more effective mechanisms to advise students and to assess advising efficacy and (b) providing more resources to faculty and to students. About a quarter of participants' responses refer to challenges that are associated with the department's students. Two of these (student effort/initiative and student planning/time lines) emphasize the student's responsibility, and capability, to gain the requisite assistance and opportunities to be a competitive applicant for graduate programs. Only 12% of responses suggest that faculty are a source of the challenges departments must overcome to provide effective advising to students about graduate school.

## Discussion

The present study is the first to describe the practices used in American psychology departments to advise undergraduate students about applying to graduate school in psychology. The findings indicate a need for departments to develop more programmatic means to deliver information and assistance to their students. To be sure, the clear majority of department heads reported that graduate school advising is at least as important as other educational goals and that their department provided useful resources to their students. Yet, almost half of the departments had no formal requirements for students to learn about graduate school in psychology, and few departments offered any sort of formal advising program. Fewer than a quarter of departments offered

a graduate school track or graduate school preparatory courses, and only a small fraction of departments had designated advisors who focus on assisting students who are interested in applying to psychology graduate programs.

In their written responses, many participants stated that their departments did not provide faculty with the resources they need to focus on advising. The prevalence of responses representing the faculty time/resources theme (20% of all responses) suggests that this challenge poses a significant impediment to delivering effective advising to students. This challenge can also impede faculty efforts to provide effective career advising to psychology majors (Vespia, Freis, & Arrowood, 2018). Responses representing the student resources theme indicate a significant, though less frequently noted, need for greater resources to support students who wish to apply to graduate programs in psychology. Yet, the most often cited advising challenge was not insufficient resources but rather insufficient means of disseminating information about graduate school to students. The disseminating-information theme accounted for more responses than did the faculty time/resources and the student resources themes combined. Some disseminating-information responses expressed the need to improve existing advising mechanisms used in the participant's department, whereas other responses indicated that no such mechanisms currently exist. It is important to point out that participants did not assert there were no department faculty who assisted students who are interested in applying to graduate school; indeed, several participants noted that their faculty mentored students on an individual basis. Rather, participants explained that advising practices in their department were sporadic and that faculty members varied greatly in how much time they invested with students.

Although our findings spotlight the many challenges departments face in providing stu-

Table 5  
*Sources of the Challenges or Barriers to Providing Advising to Students About Graduate School in Psychology*

Source (challenge)	%	<i>n</i>
Departmental program (disseminating information, faculty time/resources, student resources, assessment)	61	100
Students (student effort/initiative, student constraints, student planning/time lines, student interest)	27	45
Faculty (faculty knowledge/experience, faculty interest/motivation)	12	19



dents with effective advising about graduate school in psychology, they also suggest strategies to meet these challenges. The good news is that departments can implement these strategies in cost-effective ways that do not strain department resources. First, departments can significantly enhance the advising capabilities of all faculty members simply by making faculty more aware of the resources already at their disposal. Many educational resources, such as the APA's *Preparing and Applying for Graduate School in Psychology* video series (<http://www.apa.org/education/grad/application-video-series.aspx>) and the APA's *Affording and Repaying Graduate School* toolkit (<http://www.apa.org/apags/resources/affording-repaying.aspx>), are freely available online. Integrating information from resources like these into a course curriculum requires minimal expenditure of funds and follows a similar recommendation regarding career advising for psychology majors (Halonen & Dunn, 2018). Another powerful, and inexpensive, way to create a robust graduate school advising program is to develop relationships with local graduate programs. These relationships can facilitate communication between undergraduate students and their prospective graduate programs and potentially create a pipeline from the undergraduate program to the graduate program. Further, fostering professional connections between faculty who teach undergraduate students and those who provide graduate education can help undergraduate advisors to stay current regarding factors that influence graduate school admissions and expectations.

We believe it is important for departments to develop programmatic mechanisms to make information about graduate school accessible to all students. Without these mechanisms in place, opportunities for students to learn about graduate school will often be contingent on developing special relationships with individual faculty members. A surefire means of disseminating information about graduate school to students is to incorporate this information in the required course curriculum. Meetings with academic advisors also provide opportunities to educate students about graduate school. We further encourage departments to take a developmental approach to implementing advising programs. Early in their undergraduate career, students should understand the purpose of graduate school and why they may, or may not, care to pursue a graduate degree in

psychology. Information about graduate school that would help students to gain this understanding could be presented in online course modules or as part of a Careers in Psychology course. Academic advisors could help students select courses that would best prepare them for entry-level jobs as psychology baccalaureates or for careers that require a graduate degree in psychology. For those students who wish to obtain a graduate degree, departments could offer a graduate school track, whether formal or informal, that includes specialized courses and other opportunities to gain the experience and skill sets needed to be competitive applicants for graduate school. Students should also be encouraged to establish working relationships with individual faculty mentors who are most able to sharpen their readiness for the types of graduate programs that advance their career goals.

The findings reported here need to be examined in the context of the possible response biases present in our sample. Department chairs who would respond to an external cold call survey on graduate school advising are likely to view this topic as especially important. Thus, the proportion of respondents in our study who indicated that graduate school advising is as or more important than other departmental education goals (71%) probably overstates the priority that psychology department chairs attach to graduate school advising. Additionally, as we noted earlier, department chairs from baccalaureate-level programs may be underrepresented in our sample.

Further, we want to reiterate that our findings are based solely on the perspectives of psychology department chairs. Because chairs are tasked with overseeing departmental operations, they should be particularly knowledgeable about their department's advising practices. However, it is important to gain the perspectives of faculty and students as well. Input from faculty is crucial to understanding the challenges faced by many front-line providers of graduate school advising and to devising practical strategies to meet these challenges. Input from students is vital to understanding the perspectives of the would-be recipients of advising. Students' perceptions (and misperceptions) can help to detect shortcomings in current advising practices. It is also important to solicit input from alumni who currently attend graduate programs. These alumni are uniquely positioned to provide feedback on the effectiveness of their alma mater's program in preparing its students for

the rigors of graduate-level work. They also may serve to inspire and to coach future aspirants for graduate degrees in psychology.

Graduate school advising is an important but often overlooked component of successful undergraduate psychology programs. Our research provides valuable insight about the current state of advising practices in psychology departments and about the challenges that departments face in providing quality advising to their students. This knowledge can inform departmental efforts to develop successful advising strategies that help students gain admittance to the graduate programs that will prepare them for a professional career in psychology.

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Received June 2, 2018

Revision received August 1, 2019

Accepted August 6, 2019 ■