

Advice for the Ambitious Undergraduate Student

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Oh, how I would love to have a career. I yearn for that ultimate dream job. That position of success where I could finally say "I've arrived". However, there are years of schooling remaining for me to complete.

Currently I'm finishing my undergraduate degree in psychology, yet I'm only half way there. I intend to go to graduate school and that means four or five more years to complete my Ph. D. Unfortunately, five years is a long time for those of us who are ready to get started. It is also well known that it is difficult to cut time spent completing a Ph. D. So, it may be a better idea to cut down time spent completing one's undergraduate degree. I know many ambitious students that are unaware of the opportunities available at the undergraduate level. These guidelines will aid undergraduates in finishing their degree in a timely manner with all the essentials for graduate school acceptance. The following is a list I have compiled consisting of specifics.

Take spring and summer courses. This can cut down on either the amount of years that you are in graduate school or the course load you will have in your final year. (This is a huge help as your final year is crazy busy.) Spring courses also usually have smaller class sizes and can likely provide an opportunity for you to raise your GPA.

Decide on your area of interest. Every student is unsure what they "want to be when they grow up". There are unlimited

career options, and even when you narrow it to a discipline (ex. psychology) you must further narrow your interests to a program within that discipline (ex. neuropsychology) and then further still narrow to your research interests (ex. stroke research). There are enough choices to make ones head spin, especially when you are struggling to find your strengths, weaknesses and even interests. Some excellent advice came from my mom when she said "just pick something, because if you don't, you won't end up doing anything". Pick something and go with it, if it turns out that it's not for you then pick again, and again until you are sure you are in the right spot.

You will need references letters. This one is tough. You will need letters of recommendation whether you are thinking of applying for a graduate school or applying for a job. It may be difficult to know your professors on a personal basis in a larger university. So plan ahead of time by taking as many courses as possible from the same instructors. In class sit near the front, participate in discussions and look attentive. If you must miss a class talk to your instructor in advance so that you may receive the assignment and impress them with your dedication. Visit your professor during their office hours; they're required to be there and few students show up (especially at the beginning of a semester). Ask about their experience with graduate school and any advice they have. This is doubly beneficial as the professors that write

your reference letters often have great advice and valuable contacts.

Take the GRE in your *third* year. Taking the GRE before your last year is beneficial because it is early enough that you can retake the test if necessary. This will also rid you of the stress of taking the GRE in your fourth year when your time is better spent preparing graduate school applications. Late December or early January is a good time to consider undertaking the test because there is a break in the academic semester.

Get involved in research. This is not so much a tip but a necessity. In your third year, preferably in the first semester, talk to a member of the faculty about doing an independent research project in your final year. This is a full year independent research project that will likely count as credit towards your degree. Also ask your professors if they are aware of any research that is happening off campus. There may be a research assistant position available. Graduate schools require applicants to have had research experience, so any research or research related activity is worth undertaking.

Create a worthy CV. You emerge from college with an academic resume or Curriculum Vitae this means “course of life” and it is a summary of professional training and background. Templates for CV’s can be found at various websites. DO NOT make the mistake of assuming a CV is the same as a resume, although there are some similarities. People will not expect you to have a full CV at the completion of an

undergraduate degree. Several sections may be blank such as publications, teaching experience or awards. However, the lack of qualifications in some areas can be displaced by a healthy collection of activities in other areas. Any student can add to the section of professional memberships. It is easy to locate professional associations and obtain student memberships at a discount rate. A Canadian Psychological Association membership is an excellent addition to one’s CV. Another area that undergraduates can develop is the section including relevant academic activities. Any participation in the school’s societies, student association, newspaper, committees, or conferences makes a nice addition to a CV.

Choose a part time job that is related to your field of interest. Many students work part time to aid with expenses however, a part time job can be an additional advantage if it relates to your field of interest. Any work experience that teaches you skills that are needed in graduate school will look good on a graduate application. Work experience that involves research, publishing written work or teaching all look good to graduate schools.

This collection of advice is for undergraduate students that are interested in continuing to graduate studies. There is a wealth of hidden opportunities for those that are eager and willing. It is important that undergraduate students have this information so that they may best prepare for graduate school applications. Students that are anxious to reach their career goals and take advantage of these opportunities will be that much closer to that dream job!