

How to Succeed as a Student in Psychology

Christine T. Chambers, Ph.D.
University of British Columbia

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As Chair of the CPA Section for Students, I received many e-mails from students asking for advice about how to get into grad school, how to apply for internship, and how to find a job in psychology. While these questions came from students at all stages of their psychology careers, there was remarkable similarity in the kinds of answers and advice I was providing. As I step down as the Chair of the CPA Section for Students, I thought it would be a good time to stop and reflect on my last nine years as a psychology student and summarize some of what has worked for me (no guarantees provided!).

1. Become involved in research early on. One of the major factors that had a positive impact on my ability to succeed in graduate school was becoming actively involved in research as an undergraduate student. I was fortunate to complete my undergraduate degree in a psychology department that provided many opportunities for undergraduates to become involved in research and to work with a researcher who welcomed undergraduates into his lab. Seek out opportunities to complete research projects as an undergraduate student, either as a summer project, directed studies, or honours thesis. It was as an undergraduate student that I became “hooked” on research (prior to that, I had always wanted to be a full-time clinician). It’s never too early to start.

2. Love (or at least most of the time, really like) what you do. Choose an area in psychology that you feel passionate about. It

may take you a while to figure out what that area is. Read, talk to faculty, and think about what intrigued you most from your psychology courses. If you’re not having fun and feeling excited by what you do (realizing that no matter what you choose, there will be ups and downs), it’s going to be a long road!

3. Attend academic conferences. I attended my first psychology conference as a 3rd year undergraduate student (a CPA meeting in Charlottetown). It was a very positive and exciting experience for me. As a graduate student, I invested quite a bit of time (and money!) attending conferences. I tried to attend two meetings per year, usually a general meeting (like CPA) and then a more specific meeting directly related to my research. Conferences provide the opportunity to network, present your research, and hear what others are doing. I still leave conferences feeling excited and motivated about my work and new friends made. (But don’t attend so many conferences that it interferes with #5 below!).

4. Find your family of mentors. As you progress through your psychology studies, identify individuals who you can trust and rely on for support. Rather than replacing mentors as you move from school to school or program to program, add them to your family of mentors. I now have a trusted group of psychologists (and other professionals) who I have added to my “family” through undergrad, graduate,

practicum, and internship experiences. I value the different perspectives and input that these various individuals provide.

5. Finish what you start. This is critical. Whether it is finishing some data coding, writing up your thesis, or simply returning a phone call or sending a paper to someone that you said you would. Follow through on what you say you will – if you can't, be upfront and let the person know. You may think that, if they don't mention it, they have forgotten about it – they won't! A sign of a good researcher, clinician, and teacher is someone who can finish what they start.

6. Don't let critical feedback crush you. I once received (what I perceived to be) a very critical comment from a faculty member. It came at the worst of times... I was physically and emotionally exhausted from 3 months of studying for my comprehensive exams, had just mailed off 13 internship applications, and was in the throes of data collection for my dissertation. For some reason, the comment really wounded me. I have heard many stories from other students describing similar experiences. I ended up taking a "break" from psychology for a few weeks to re-assess whether this was the direction I wanted to take with my life. Fortunately, I decided it was. But the experience taught me to extract the constructive part out of such comments (e.g., what can I do to improve myself to prevent against such further feedback?) but then to let it go.

7. Believe in yourself. At times when you feel that no one believes in you, it's important that you do! Don't put limits on yourself. Does this sound familiar? "I think I can" "I think I can" "I think I can"...

8. Be enthusiastic. A colleague recently told me that he was so delighted by my

enthusiastic reaction to an invitation to work on a project together, that he couldn't wait to ask me to do something else. Show people when you are excited - but don't fake it if you're not.

9. Apply for everything. I can't stress this enough. There are lots of student awards out there. Many students don't bother applying because they think they won't be competitive. I can tell you that I know I have won awards that I was the only applicant for! Applying takes little effort (often a CV and a letter) but the benefits can be huge. It is great practice for future grant writing and it gets your name and work out there.

10. Be involved – but know your limits. It's good to join committees, etc., but don't overburden yourself so that you can't follow through on your commitments. The CPA Section for Students offers a number of opportunities for students to become involved (e.g., as an undergraduate or graduate student rep). These can be very rewarding experiences.

11. Join associations. Student rates to join associations are reasonable and (I think) eligible as a deduction on your taxes. Association newsletters often provide very useful and helpful information for students. Be sure to join general associations (e.g., CPA, APA) as well as more focused societies.

12. Be collaborative – not competitive. Learning to work together effectively as a team is an important skill to learn. It's more fun to work together as a team.

13. Set goals for yourself. Setting goals (and more importantly) means and time lines to actually achieve these goals are very important. Review these goals with your

supervisor to make sure that you are on track.

14. Take time to stop and smell the roses. Enjoy being a grad student. But also know when it is time to take a break. There is no perfect recipe for success – every person is different. Talk to other students and people you admire. Find out what has worked for them. Then put it together into something that will work for you. Good luck!

Christine T. Chambers, Ph.D. is Past Chair of the CPA Section for Students and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of British Columbia. She holds career awards from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research (MSFHR). Her research examines familial and developmental influences on childhood pain.