

The advantages of applied experience during graduate school: Perspectives from an environmental psychology student

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Studying psychology at the graduate level requires students to think both theoretically and practically. Environmental psychology, in particular, calls for a combination of application and supposition. Environmental psychologists study transactions between individuals and their physical settings. My work often centers on built settings, such as offices and schools, and their effects on occupants' social and environmental attitudes and behaviours. Approaching this kind of research often requires a degree of technical knowledge. Therefore, lacking immediate access to courses in urban planning or architecture, I have sought applied experience with space programming to ensure that my work aligns with real-world constraints and assumptions.

I began working as a contract consultant with a private programming firm at the start of my second year as a Master's student. In architectural terms, "programming" is the stage of the design process during which information about functional and behavioural requirements of a building and its users are gathered. I visit buildings with the Principal of the firm and provide input where I can, gaining exposure to the business of making buildings more functional for occupants. I listen to concerns

about air quality and privacy. I learn about floor loading specifications and power requirements, equipment clearances and office configurations that enhance productivity. I research which sustainable finishing materials to recommend in order to make the inner workings of a building more efficient and healthy. Because of this role, I feel more confident studying the effects of office settings on pro-environmental behaviour among employees, or whether building occupants feel more satisfied and engaged when a building has environmentally friendly aspects integrated into its design. I believe my approach to research has become more thorough because of this active consultation into how buildings work and what users have to say.

Considering the attitudes and behaviours of building occupants from the standpoints of both programmer and researcher has guided the conclusions I have drawn from my work and the work of others. A graduate degree in an applied domain consists of more than taking classes and reading literature; I believe psychology students who network with professionals can build a comprehensive and personalized education as well as a diverse and informed research career in the future.