

Preparing for life after your bachelor's degree

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When it came time to choose a university, most of my friends aimed for big universities, hoping the "name" would help land them careers. But I wanted something small where I wouldn't drown in the system.

And that's how I found myself in Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario. And I can say I don't regret my decision at all. The close contact that I had with my professors definitely changed the way I viewed research in Psychology as a career. And I was lucky to learn early on that getting your foot into research would require more than a Bachelors degree, and that your preparation had to start months (or years) in advance.

Talk to Your Professors. As simple as it sounds, people sometimes forget this step. Talking to your professors definitely helped because they were in the same boat before becoming who they are today. I learned valuable lessons about the kind of research that was being done as well as exploring my interests and suitability. I also learned about the kind of work I would need to put in to get there. Your professors also often have helpful pointers and contacts they can put you in touch with. And having contact with professors also help when you need that all important recommendation/reference letter.

Get Involved! I'm sure all professors will tell you if you asked (did I mention you need to talk to them?), but research experience will do wonders for your CV. I learned in my second year from a wise professor not to pigeon-hole myself when it comes to research because diverse research

experience shows my future supervisors that I am versatile as a researcher. This is not to say I poked my head into every corner, but I made sure to have a nice balance of different research experience while concentrating fully on a certain field.

It's also important to explore your university/department's options when it comes to research. I had the opportunity to do research for credit in two different labs and write my undergraduate honours thesis in one of the aforementioned labs. I also volunteered periodically in two other labs for the experience.

Don't be Afraid to Try Something New. There will be people who will tell you otherwise, but I will tell you it's not true. Volunteer work outside school does help, if you plan it well to fit in with your research interest. While I concede not all professors/researchers are interested in what you do outside the classroom and lab, there are quite a few who will be interested to know you bring with you some community-based work and skills. After all, you have to remember that Psychology as a science deals with people, and people are not typically found in labs hooked up to a machine or filling in questionnaires.

Grades Do Count. As much as we all hoped it wouldn't, let's face it: Grades do count. And in some cases, so do your GREs (again, start early!). But I learned early on that it's not such a bad thing. The time I put in studying helped me retain more information and manipulate it in interesting

ways. This was definitely helpful when it came to lab work as I was now able to put my classroom-learned information into practice. The “Ah-ha!” moment you get when you realize you know what you’re doing and where the information is coming from? Pretty priceless.

Be Realistic. Which brings us to the next point: Be realistic. If you find out in your second year that you hate lab work with a passion, do you really think you’d be able to do it for the rest of your life? You also have to be realistic about many other things such as grades (will a 65% get you into grad school?), competition (do you really think you’re the only one who is eligible to apply?), funding (not all professors who express interest necessarily have the funds) and that maybe you’re just not a good-fit for that lab (so don’t take it personally). Research positions, whether as a graduate student or as a full-time research assistant, are notoriously hard to come by because of the competition. If you don’t believe me, go to online forums where students discuss these issues. And remember, the road to your M.A./M.Sc or Ph.D. is a long one.

You Don’t Have to go to Graduate School Immediately. When all my friends in the honours thesis class were applying for grad school, I felt a little left out. After all, everyone was comparing schools and swapping GRE notes, and there I was not even applying. Instead I was going the path of looking for a full-time RA position. Talking to my professors made me realize quite a few of them did that before going to grad school, and the experience is invaluable.

Network! Need I say more? You’d never know which lab has an unadvertised opening, or if your cousin’s friend’s boyfriend’s sister’s uncle might actually be a professor in some big, well-funded lab who just might have a spot for you, unless you ask. And sometimes, connections are made between student-and-potential supervisor simply because the two of you got along and you happened to have the necessary skills. And that supervisor might just fight for you when applications come rushing in.