Helping Students Avoid the *Kisses of Death* in the Graduate School Application Process

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The rationale behind our study was that . . .

- . . . many publications offer psychology majors suggestions about ***what they should do*** when they apply to graduate school, but few offer advice about ***what they should NOT do***.

- We decided to remedy this situation by collecting empirical data from the people who make the actual decisions about who will and who will not be accepted into psychology graduate programs—**the chairpersons of graduate school admissions committees**.

The purpose of our study was to . . .

- . . . discover information that will enable psychology faculty to help their students avoid including things in their graduate school applications that can decrease their chances of acceptance.

- In other words, we wanted to collect examples of **kisses of death** that can prevent otherwise strong candidates from being admitted into the psychology graduate programs of their choice.

We collected data by . . .

- . . . sending letters to the **chairpersons** of the graduate admissions committees of all **457 programs** listed in the 2001 edition of *APA's Graduate Programs in Psychology*.

- These letters stated, "Please provide us with a brief description of one or two examples of things that otherwise strong applicants to your program included in their application materials that caused your admissions committee members to draw less positive conclusions about them than if they had not included these "kisses of death.""

We analyzed data from 88 respondents . . .

- . . . qualitatively by identifying the central concepts in each of their responses . . .

- . . . and then comparing, contrasting, and combining these concepts into major themes and their constituent sub-themes.

The four major themes we identified were . . .

1. Damaging personal statements (53)*
2. Flawed letters of recommendation (45)
3. Not doing your homework (22)
4. Lack of writing skills (21)

The number in parenthesis after each theme is the number of examples of this theme given by our 88 respondents.

We also identified three minor themes . . .

1. Misfired attempts to impress (6)
2. Academic problems (3)
3. The "Maternal" Kiss of Death (1)

The following slides provide examples . . .

. . . of each of these themes and their sub-themes in the form of direct quotations from the participants in our study.

Major Theme #1:
Damaging Personal Statements

- Sub-Themes
  - Altruistic Personal Statements
  - Excessive Self-Disclosure
  - Nonspecific Research Goals
  - Professional Inappropriateness

Altruistic Personal Statements

- "I want to help all people live happy lives."
- "I'm destined to save the world."
- "I want to help people because of how very much I have been helped."

Excessive Self-Disclosure

- "Personal problems or therapy disclosure is a kiss of death. It is unacceptable when students highlight how they were drawn into graduate study because of a significant personal problem or trauma."
- "Way too much honesty. Making personal statements REALLY personal. 'Being a recovering drug addict daughter of a sexually deviant and alcoholic mother has given me profound insights into the field of psychology.'"

Excessive Self-Disclosure . . . Continued

- "An extremely personal life event was shared (i.e., a son was diagnosed with autism). This event was associated with the applicant's interest in pursuing graduate studies in psychology. Unfortunately the applicant indicated that the graduate degree would be used to 'get' the drug companies responsible for the child's condition."
- "One applicant described, in excruciating detail, his yearlong struggle with painful hemorrhoids."

Non-Specific or No Research Goals

- "Statements like 'I'm open to any area of research' or 'I love all of psychology' are statements that show no focus on a specific area."

Non-Specific or No Research Goals . . . Continued

- "If a person is applying to a clinical program, they should not list one of their reasons for going the clinical route as being their lack of interest in doing research."

- "Although I understand the value of research, my real interests lie in working with people with clinical problems. My primary interests are in getting trained in clinical skills rather than research."

Professional Inappropriateness

- "One applicant noted on his application under 'prior employment,' that he had performed (i.e., acted) in pornographic movies . . . this was not well received by the department in consideration for his acceptance in the graduate program."

Professional Inappropriateness . . . Continued

- "[We] received a statement of purpose labeled 'Statement of Porpoise' that contained drawings of this sea creature and a description of [the applicant] frolicking in the ocean with one on a visit to Florida."

Professional Inappropriateness . . . Continued

- "References to God—being religious is ok, but it has little relevance to research or psychology graduate school."

- "I am a gifted therapist naturally. God has given me natural talents that make me a very good clinician. This was recently demonstrated when I helped my devil-worshipping brother go on the right path—God's path."

Professional Inappropriateness . . . Continued

- "Cutesy/Clever stuff. One applicant affixed a purple ribbon to the corner of the application to 'symbolize commitment to graduate school goals.' Another applicant enclosed a drawing from his son showing daddy in graduate school."

Professional Inappropriateness . . . Continued

- "I am applying to your Ph.D. program because I ran out of funds for touring Europe with my band and doctoral studies seem to be the next logical step in my development as an adult. An otherwise <u>OUTSTANDING</u> applicant rejected outright."

Major Theme #2: Flawed Letters of Recommendation

- Sub-Themes
  - Inappropriate Authors
  - Undesirable Personality Characteristics Mentioned

Inappropriate Authors

"We once received a very positive letter of recommendation telling about the applicant's good character and work habits. Unfortunately we couldn't use it because it was from her mother."

Inappropriate Authors . . . Continued

- "The biggest KOD is having your therapist write a letter about you . . . no matter how positive the letter is."

- "A letter of recommendation written by the applicant about himself."

Inappropriate Authors . . . Continued

- "The applicant had a letter that began, X asked me to write a letter of recommendation for her. She informed me that she took my class last semester. I'll have to take her word for it; I don't remember her. If she was in my class, she did nothing to distinguish herself from the other students. Needless to say, I can't comment on her qualifications."

Inappropriate Authors . . . Continued

- "Letters of recommendation from professors that include spelling and grammatical errors. This makes us wonder whether or not good writing skills are taught at his/her undergraduate institution."

Undesirable Personality Characteristics Mentioned

- "Perfectionist"
- "Painfully shy"
- "Immature"
- "Unstable"
- "Underachiever"
- "Bright, but sensitive to criticism"
- "Significant problems with procrastination"
- "John is learning to let others have their opinions."
- "Not a team player"
- "Communication in English is not usually a problem."
- "Extremely efficient when she comes to class."
- "His personal hygiene has improved."

Major Theme #3: Not Doing Your Homework

- "A mismatch of interests between the student and the department faculty. When it is clear that the student has not done his/her homework in selecting programs which match their interests; that's a kiss of death."
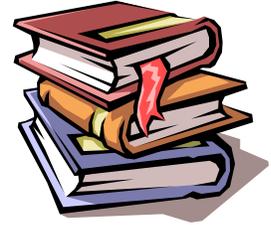
Not Doing Your Homework . . . Continued

- "Failure to read program information—sometimes students note that they wish to work in an area we don't offer or with a faculty member who has retired, died, or relocated."

Not Doing Your Homework . . . Continued

- "During a phone interview, a student confused our training program with not just another school, but with another profession. When corrected, she asserted that *we* were wrong."

Not Doing Your Homework . . . Continued

- "Statement that the program is 'just perfect' without evidence that the applicant knows much about the program. The applicant should do homework on each program and know specific activities and faculty."

Major Theme #4: Lack of Writing Skills

- Sub-Themes
  - Failure to Proofread
  - Handwritten Applications

Failure to Proofread

- "Applications that are poorly written, have misspellings, or other careless mistakes take an applicant out of the running."

- "Poor grammar, misspellings, whiteouts, lack of structure…People getting their doctorate should already know how to write."

Failure to Proofread . . . Continued

- "Spelling and grammar are taken **VERY** seriously here. One of last year's decisions to deny admission to any applicant was the misspelling of our university's name."

Handwritten Applications

- "Don't handwrite the application . . . it sends a message that is not professional. Type everything you send."

- "A handwritten application is an immediate kiss of death for me."

Minor Theme #1: Misfired Attempts to Impress

- "I received a statement of purpose that began, 'I've never really enjoyed the company of other students. I much prefer talking to my professors.' This applicant was trying to tell us that he's super intelligent and mature. But we inferred that he doesn't get along with his peers and that he is most comfortable following his professors around."

Misfired Attempts to Impress . . . Continued

- "In student bio statements, they elaborate on their family work history in the area of psychology or mental health and/or name drop some recognized practitioner without any substantive evidence of having any real connection."

Misfired Attempts to Impress . . . Continued

- "A student wrote a six or seven page biographical statement when the application form clearly requested a one or two page statement."

Minor Theme #2: Academic Problems

- Sub-Themes
  - Erratic Grades
  - Blaming Others for Poor Academic Performance

Erratic Grades

- "Highly variable academic performance"

- "Erratic grades and many dropped courses"
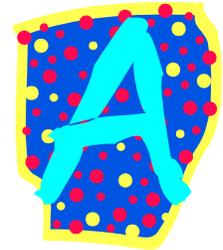
Blaming Others for Poor Academic Performance

- "My undergraduate program was really bad because of x, y, and z. I didn't really learn anything, so I'm applying to your program so that I will actually learn something."

A kiss of death can also come from the person who you least expect . . .

Your Mother

Minor Theme #3: The "Maternal" Kiss of Death

- "An applicant's mother called to request applications be sent to her immediately so she and her son could work on them over winter break. When told the deadline was several months away, the mother replied, *if we don't work on them while he's home, he'll never get them done!*"

How *NOT* to get into Graduate School

The Top Ten List

#10

- Make sure the admissions committee knows you would prefer to socialize with them rather than with your fellow graduate students because of your unusually high level of intelligence.

#9

- Drop those tough classes, and pad your schedule with easy courses to boost your GPA.

#8

- Blame as many people as possible for your bad grades
  - Unfair professors
  - Other students
  - Your ex-boy or girlfriend
  - Roommates who kept you up all night

#7

- *Handwrite your application with purple ink on pink paper.*

- Be sure too inclood some speling and grammer erors in you're application two proove your not a perfectionyst.

#6

- Have your mother write a letter of recommendation for you.

- Better yet, write one for yourself!

#5

- Tell the admissions committee you're not interested in research—especially the kind of research being conducted in their department.

#4

- Make sure you identify your main professional goal as, "I just want to help people."

#3

- Make sure your letters of recommendation stand out by . . .
  - Not getting to know your professors.
  - Rarely attending class, and making sure you are late when you do.
  - Sitting in the back of the classroom when there are plenty of empty seats in the front row.
  - Asking intelligent questions like, "Will that be on the test?" or "Did we talk about anything important today?" after you missed class.

#2

- Describe how graduate school is your next step in personal therapy.

#1

- Have your mother communicate to the admissions committee that you would like to do research with a deceased faculty member in an area of specialization that is not offered by the program.

A final important issue to consider is that . . .

. . . although many of the kisses of death described in this presentation appear to have been committed by students who are not very bright, we firmly believe the majority of them resulted from a lack of appropriate mentoring in the graduate school application process.

Unless undergraduate psychology programs provide appropriate advising and mentoring opportunities, their majors are likely to commit some of these kisses of death—not because they are unintelligent, but because they have never been exposed to the experiences or advice that enables them to understand the <u>culture</u> of graduate school and the <u>requirements</u> of the graduate school application process.

One extremely valuable source of information for those who plan to apply for graduate school is a PowerPoint presentation created by Patricia Taylor-Cooke, an IUPUI Psychology Department alumna who is currently a graduate student in pediatric neuroscience at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. You and your students can access her presentation at the following url:

www.psynt.iupui.edu/Users/dappleby/undergrad/images/process.ppt