

SPECIAL INVITED ARTICLE

## Role of Psi Chi in Preparing Students for Graduate Study in Psychology

WILLIAM BUSKIST

Auburn University

MARCIA ROSSI

Tuskegee University

*Students seeking admission to graduate study in psychology must successfully clear several hurdles during the application process. To determine the role that Psi Chi plays in providing students information about this process, we surveyed over 100 Psi Chi chapters. Although most chapters hold meetings on "how to get into graduate school," the frequency, content, format, and timing of these meetings varied considerably across chapters. We offer suggestions for improving these meetings and underscore the role that faculty may play in helping students gather information about graduate school and the application process.*

PSI CHI, THE NATIONAL HONOR SOCIETY IN Psychology, was founded in 1929 at Yale University and has evolved into an organization of 937 chapters throughout the United States (Wilson, 1999). Psi Chi's primary objective is to contribute to the development of a "well-educated, ethical, and socially responsible member committed to contributing to the science and profession of psychology and to society in general" (Jackson, 1997, p. 62). This mission is achieved primarily through local communities or chapters of promising psychology majors who participate in activities related directly to their scholarly and professional interests in psychology. At some schools, similar objectives are achieved through psychology clubs with membership open to all psychology majors (Satterfield & Abramson, 1998; see also Murray & Wilson, 1999).

*Editor's note.* In this special invited article, Buskist and Rossi indicate how Psi Chi can facilitate the preparation of students for graduate school. We are appreciative of their time and effort in preparing this article for the readers of the *Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research*.

Because many Psi Chi members are interested in earning an advanced degree in psychology, Psi Chi chapters often sponsor activities aimed at helping their members get into graduate school. The purpose of the present research was to identify the different means by which Psi Chi chapters help their members apply to graduate school.

### Method

#### Participants and Procedure

We mailed a cover letter, informed consent information, and questionnaire to the presidents of 181 Psi Chi chapters, representing all regions of the U.S., randomly selected from chapter addresses listed in the Summer 1997 issue of *Eye on Psi Chi*. One

*Author note.* We thank Charles I. Abramson, Stephen F. Davis, and Randolph A. Smith for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this article.

Address correspondence regarding this article to William Buskist, Psychology Department, Auburn University, AL 36849-5214. Electronic mail may be sent to buskist@auburn.campus.mci.net.

hundred and four (57.5%) of the Psi Chi presidents (or, in a few cases, faculty advisors) responded to the survey.

### Survey Instrument

Item 1 asked respondents to identify their college or university affiliation. Item 2 inquired as to how many members belonged to the chapter. Item 3 asked whether the chapter held meetings or featured guest speakers on the topic of getting into graduate school. If respondents answered "yes," we instructed them to respond to Items 4 through 8; if "no," to skip ahead to Item 9. Item 4 inquired how many students attended the most recent meeting on this topic. Item 5 asked how many times during the academic year chapters hold such meetings. If respondents answered "once" to Item 5, we instructed them to reply to Item 6, which inquired as to which academic term the activity is typically held. Item 7 asked respondents to identify which topics are typically addressed in the meeting. We also asked respondents to describe any other relevant activity or topic included in the presentation. Item 8 asked respondents to identify the departmental role of the most recent guest speaker(s), if any, at the most recent meeting on the topic. This item also asked respondents to describe any other type of guest speaker(s).

Item 9 requested respondents to describe any kind of course or workshop on getting into graduate school that departmental faculty offer regularly. Item 10 asked respondents to describe any other ways that

faculty assist undergraduates in preparing for graduate study in psychology. Finally, Item 11 asked respondents to describe any other activities or resources that the chapter uses to help prepare students for graduate school.

### Results and Discussion

Three respondents indicated that their chapters were not active and did not complete the survey. Thus, the subsequent analysis is based on 101 completed surveys.

Membership of Psi Chi chapters ranged between 2 and 230 ( $M = 33.6$ ,  $Mdn = 28$ ). Eighty-two (81%) chapters hold regular meetings on the topic of getting into graduate school. Thirty-nine (47.6%) of these chapters hold meetings on getting into graduate school once a year, 24 (29.3%) twice a year, 9 (11%) three times a year, and 10 (12.2%) four or more times a year. Of the chapters that hold one meeting a year on getting into graduate school, 26 (70.3%) hold it in the fall term, 3 (8.1%) in the winter, 7 (18.9%) in the spring/summer, and 1 (2.7%) varies its timing. Attendance at the last meeting ranged from 1 to 100 ( $M = 23.2$ ,  $Mdn = 20$ ).

### Content of Meeting

Table 1 lists key topics typically covered in the getting into graduate school meeting and the number of chapters that addressed these topics in their last meeting. Some respondents (11%) wrote in one or more other topics: identifying careers in psychol-

**TABLE 1**

**Number and Percentages of Psi Chi Chapters Addressing Key Topics on Getting Into Graduate School at Their Most Recent Meeting on Preparing for Graduate Study**

Topic	Chapters discussing topic	
	<i>n</i>	%
Involvement in research as an undergraduate	68	82.9
Different kinds of graduate degrees in psychology	66	80.5
Graduate school admission criteria	64	78.0
Obtaining letters of recommendation	56	68.3
Preparing for the GRE	53	64.6
Timetable involved in preparing for graduate school	41	50.0
Writing the letter of intent	33	40.2
What the first year of graduate school is like	28	34.1
Preparing a vita	9	11.0
Preparing for the personal or telephone interview	5	6.1

ogy, matching graduate programs to the student's interests, assessing whether graduate school is the right career choice, financial assistance, good and bad reasons for attending graduate school, available campus resources, undergraduate activities (other than research) related to graduate school admissions, how to obtain a mentor, various kinds of graduate programs, hot topics in psychology, and specific strategies for getting into graduate school.

The topics discussed in the respondents' last meeting varied substantially. Although some topics, such as undergraduate involvement in research, were discussed in most chapter meetings, other equally important topics, such as drafting a vita, writing a letter of intent, and the timeline for preparing applications for graduate study, were addressed much less often (see Table 1).

Creating a vita is an important step in the application process because it centralizes, in a single document, all the key personal data needed to fill out graduate applications, which greatly reduces the time and effort required to complete them. For most undergraduates, the letter of intent represents their first and perhaps only opportunity to communicate their academic goals and career plans to admissions committees. To the extent that undergraduates can be taught to write effective letters of intent (i.e., good content, logical ideas, and clarity of expression), their chances of favorably impressing an admissions committee are increased.

Finally, the timetable involved in preparing for graduate study is important if only because it serves as a guideline for, among other things, completing course work, becoming involved in research projects, and contacting faculty for letters of recommendation. It is our experience that students who lack familiarity with this timetable are poorly prepared to undertake the application process and, in general, have less impressive academic credentials.

### **Format of Meeting**

The most common format for the meeting involved a regular (nonadministrator) faculty member as a speaker; 23 (28%) chapters used this format. The second most common format (21 chapters or 26%) involved a panel of two or more speakers. Different chapters used different combinations of persons to fill the panel. For example, in some chapters, the panel consisted of two or three faculty members; in others, of different departmental administrators. Other formats included the following types of speakers: department head/chair (10 or 12%), graduate student (8 or 10%), graduate program director (7 or 9%), chapter advisor (6 or 7%), career center advisor

(2 or 2%), graduate program admissions chair (1 or 1%), adjunct faculty (1 or 1%), alumni (1 or 1%), former chapter president (1 or 1%), and a Kaplan representative (1 or 1%).

Although the format involving only one speaker is most popular, it may not be the most interesting or effective. For example, the panel discussion format, including more speakers, has greater potential for presentation of contrasting perspectives and strategies regarding the application process. This format also is more likely to introduce students to a broader array of information about graduate school and to alternative tactics for undertaking the application process.

### **Timing of Meeting**

Most chapters that hold their meeting annually hold it in the fall, which coincides with preparing for the typical January or February application. However, holding the meeting more than once a year would seem to provide undergraduates a greater opportunity to learn about the application process, particularly if the meeting content is varied. More frequent meetings would also increase undergraduates' awareness of graduate school and career opportunities in psychology.

In addition, because the application process is complex, waiting until one's senior year to prepare for and begin that process is not optimal. Ideally, Psi Chi chapters should encourage sophomores and juniors to attend these meetings to get a head start on the application process and to provide them with at least some information on effective strategies for developing career plans and selecting appropriate graduate programs. If nothing else, the meeting may stimulate students' thinking about whether to attend graduate school in psychology.

### **Faculty Support for Preparing Students for the Application Process**

Sixty-three (77%) of the respondents who reported that their chapters hold regular meetings on getting into graduate school indicated that their departments do not provide any formal undergraduate course, workshop, or other meeting that addresses graduate study in psychology. Thus, in these departments, the Psi Chi meeting is the only *systematic* means of providing such information. However, the remaining 19 (23%) respondents stated that their departments do provide some form of formal counseling on preparing for graduate study in psychology. The different formats used to provide this information included senior seminars (6), regular courses (4), workshops (3), special evening lectures (3), freshman

seminars on college life (1), research methods and statistics courses (1), and mock interviews (1).

Forty-nine (78%) respondents who indicated that their departments provide no additional counseling beyond the Psi Chi meeting stated that the chief way students obtain further information is to approach individual faculty. The remaining 14 (22%) who indicated that Psi Chi is the chief source of information noted the following resources as helpful: departmental Web pages and handbooks, consultations with career counselors, brown-bag lunches with faculty, undergraduate research assistantships and volunteer opportunities, workshops on careers in psychology led by graduate students, graduate associate programs in which graduate students live in residence and provide counseling, and seminars on résumé preparation.

Sixty-eight (67%) of all respondents indicated that their Psi Chi chapters maintained a library containing books, pamphlets, and other printed materials related to graduate programs and getting into graduate school. Other types of activities and resources available to Psi Chi members included hosting an annual Psi Chi conference on preparing for graduate study in psychology, maintaining a bulletin board of graduate school flyers and brochures, maintaining a chapter website, offering practice GRE examinations, discussions with former members who are now in graduate school, and graduate school fairs where nearby colleges/universities publicize their graduate programs.

Because a single Psi Chi meeting is not likely to address all of the important topics thoroughly, some colleges and universities offer undergraduate courses or workshops on preparing for graduate study in psychology (e.g., Buskist, in press; Dodson, Chastain, & Landrum, 1996). By expanding the time frame in this way to cover the critical issues, faculty may greatly increase their students' knowledge of graduate school and the application process. Moreover, a course or workshop format permits faculty to work one-on-one with students, allowing multiple feedback opportunities on drafts of vitae, letters of intent, and so on.

Although the responsibility for seeking information on admission to graduate school rests ultimately with the student, the responsibility for supporting students' search for that information rests with faculty. By encouraging students to attend Psi Chi or psychology club meetings, enroll in courses and workshops, consult books on getting into graduate school

(e.g., Buskist & Sherburne, 1996; Keith-Spiegel, 1991; Peters, 1992), and visit with faculty in their offices, professors may greatly facilitate the information-gathering process and, potentially, student success in gaining admission to graduate school.

## Conclusions

To the extent that psychology departments can provide systematic, thorough, and timely information on graduate school opportunities and the application process, the burden of applying for admission is greatly eased. Psi Chi meetings held to inform students about getting into graduate school represent a positive step in this direction. In some psychology departments, Psi Chi's function is more critical: The meeting may represent the chief source of information on the process.

Unfortunately, the information presented at some chapter meetings appears neither systematic nor thorough. The application process involves several key elements that must be undertaken within a strict timeline (see Table 1). Meetings that do not address these elements or their timeliness do little to prepare undergraduates for successful application or to ease their uncertainty about the process. Combined with the fact that many departments do not offer assistance in helping their students prepare for the application process, many students may not be receiving the necessary information, placing them at a competitive disadvantage relative to better informed students.

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