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**UNDERGRADUATE PREPARATION FOR GRADUATE TRAINING
IN FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY**

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(2005 Instructional Resource Award recipients)

Overview

This resource provides information for advisors and their students interested in graduate training in forensic psychology. The results from a survey of individuals involved in selecting students for graduate study in forensic psychology plus results from an investigation of forensic psychology programs provide this information. A series of 8 tables present results in a format that is easy to use and understand. Narrative descriptions of the results offer further guidance for advisors and students that will help students make wise use of their undergraduate time.

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Introduction

To prepare students adequately for graduate school, undergraduate advisors need reliable and valid information based on quantifiable data so that they can appropriately advise students. Studies such as Smith (1985) and Lawson (1995) provide useful general information on undergraduate course selection and nonobjective criteria (e.g., extracurricular activities and work experience) often required or preferred by graduate departments in psychology. Data for the Smith and the Lawson study came from the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Graduate Study in Psychology* series (*GSP*; 1982 for Smith; 1993 for Lawson).

Unfortunately, little or no research is available that addresses these advising issues for undergraduate students interested in the growing field of forensic psychology. According to APA Division 41's Web site (American Psychology-Law Society [APLS], n.d.a, Employment Opportunities and Demand for the Specialty section, ¶ 1), "forensic psychology, and the larger area of psychology and law, have both enjoyed steady growth during the last two decades." Evidence of this growth is the number of graduate training programs that have at least a part of their program devoted to forensic psychology. The APLS Web site (n.d.b) lists 15 clinical PhD/PsyD programs, 13 nonclinical PhD/PsyD programs, and 9 Master's programs that emphasize forensic psychology.

Despite the growth of forensic psychology, the lack of information about undergraduate preparation specific to this field makes it difficult even for the best advisor to know what suggestions to give prospective graduate students. Only studies by Smith (1985) and Lawson (1995) provide substantial quantitative information on preparation. Unfortunately, both of these studies divided information into clinical/counseling, educational, and experimental graduate programs. As a result, undergraduate advisors may be unable to substantiate statements they make to students about more specific areas of study (e.g., forensic psychology).

The purpose of this project was to provide advisors and students with specific information regarding undergraduate course selection and nonobjective criteria for students hoping to pursue graduate training in forensic psychology. (For this endeavor, "forensic psychology" included all areas falling under the larger umbrella "psychology and law." According to Bottoms et al., 2004, p. 3, "This field encompasses contributions made in a number of different areas--research, clinical practice, public policy, and teaching/training among them--from a variety of orientations within the field of psychology, such as developmental, social, cognitive, and clinical.") Although many of the results reported by Smith (1985) and Lawson (1995) may be similar for forensic psychology programs, the overlapping nature of the field with other disciplines (e.g., criminal justice, law, and sociology) supports the need to investigate this area of psychology in more depth.

This project encompassed two separate studies. The first study investigated what individuals involved in selecting students for graduate training in forensic psychology reported as the courses and nonobjective criteria (e.g., extracurricular activities and work experience) that are most helpful in obtaining entry into and preparing undergraduate students for success in graduate school in forensic psychology. The second study investigated what the major graduate programs in forensic psychology suggest in these same domains (i.e., courses and nonobjective activities/criteria). This information should be useful to any advisor who has students requesting direction in their undergraduate preparation for graduate study in forensic psychology.

Study 1: Survey of Individuals Involved in Selecting Students for Graduate Study in Forensic Psychology

Method

Participants. Participants were individuals who registered for the APLS 2004 conference and who were included on the conference Web site in the registration list. The list included the person's name, affiliation, and e-mail address. We e-mailed surveys to all 539 individuals on the list. We received 250 responses (response rate of 46.4%). Of the 250 responses received, there were 177 total usable surveys (70.8%). Thus, 32.8% of the 539 individuals on the list provided usable surveys. The unusable responses included spoiled surveys (e.g., less than half completed), blank e-mails from participants with no survey attached, and refusals to complete the survey.

Fifty participants indicated that they were involved in graduate student selection (28.2%), 123 participants reported that they were not involved (69.5%), and 4 participants did not answer this question (2.3%). Due to the nature of the research question (i.e., graduate school preparation), we analyzed data only from those individuals who indicated involvement in the selection of graduate students.

The mean number of years of experience in forensic psychology was 11.46 ($SD = 7.26$, $n = 49$). Participants had a mean age of 38.7 years ($SD = 9.6$) with a range of 24 to 61. Twenty-two were men (44%), 27 were women (54%), and 1 did not answer this question (2%). Participants included 1 African American (2%), 41 Caucasians (82%), 2 Hispanic Americans (4%), 1 Native American (2%), and 2 "other" (4%). Three did not report their race/ethnicity (6%).

Participants included 36 with a PhD (72%), 6 with a JD/PhD (12%), 6 with a MA/MS/MEd (12%), and 2 with a BA/BS (4%). Participants' major field of study in graduate school included clinical psychology ($n = 16$, 32%), forensic psychology ($n = 4$, 8%), experimental psychology ($n = 6$, 12%), social psychology ($n = 10$, 20%), developmental psychology ($n = 1$, 2%), and "other major field of study" ($n = 13$, 26%). The "other major field of study" encompassed a variety of areas, including community psychology, counseling psychology, sociology, and neuropsychology. Participants included the words *law* or *legal* as a part of the "other major field of study" in 9 of the 13 areas listed (69.2%).

Participants reported their main work setting as primarily graduate education ($n = 20$, 40%), primarily undergraduate education ($n = 11$, 22%), currently graduate students ($n = 7$, 14%), "other" ($n = 6$, 12%), a prison or correctional setting ($n = 3$, 6%), and a forensic hospital ($n = 2$, 4%). One participant did not indicate a main employment setting (2%). Five of the six who indicated their main setting as "other" indicated approximately equal amounts of time spent in undergraduate and graduate education. The remaining one of the six indicated the juvenile and family court system as the main employment setting.

Procedure. The survey requested participants to indicate whether they would make a course a requirement, a recommendation, optional, or not necessary in reference to helping students prepare for graduate study in forensic psychology. The courses listed were the same as those used by Smith (1985) and Lawson (1995), but we added a course in "Introduction to Forensic Psychology" and two blanks for other courses the participant could list and rate. In addition to the course ratings, the survey asked participants to rate, based on their experience, several other nonobjective activities/criteria undergraduates could address to increase the likelihood of their admission into and success in a forensic psychology graduate program. Participants rated the nonobjective activities/criteria as low, medium, or high. The list of activities came from GSP

(2005) and is the same as the list in the studies by Smith and Lawson, except we added two blanks for other activities/criteria participants could list and rate. The survey also included demographic questions relating to age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational background, employment, experience in the field, and involvement in graduate student selection. Participants e-mailed completed surveys to us. As noted in the informed consent section, return of the completed survey indicated consent to participate. Once received, we printed the survey so that it could not be connected with the accompanying participant via the e-mail address. We then coded the surveys and entered the data into the database.

Results

Courses. We scored the responses 3 for requirement, 2 for recommendation, 1 for optional, or 0 for not necessary. Results for each course appear in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 shows the mean course preference ratings.

Table 1. Mean Course Preference Ratings for Participants Involved in Graduate Student Selection

Course	<i>M (SD)</i>
Research Methods	2.98 (.14)
Statistics	2.96 (.20)
Abnormal Psychology	2.44 (.71)
Experimental Psychology	2.29 (.71)
Introduction to Forensic Psychology	2.24 (.69)
Social Psychology	2.18 (.70)
Psychological Testing	1.98 (.87)
Personality Psychology	1.92 (.78)
Developmental Psychology	1.90 (.80)
Cognitive Psychology	1.88 (.73)
Learning	1.58 (.70)
Child Developmental Psychology	1.54 (.76)
Physiological Psychology	1.50 (.86)
Perception	1.26 (.75)
History and Systems	1.06 (.73)

Note. Means based on *Require* = 3, *Recommend* = 2, *Optional* = 1, and *Not Necessary* = 0. The *ns* ranged from 48 to 50.

Table 2 gives the percentages of participants rating a course as a requirement, a recommendation, optional, and not necessary. Research methods ($M = 2.98$, $SD = .14$), statistics ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .20$), abnormal psychology ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .71$), and experimental psychology ($M = 2.29$, $SD = .71$) topped the list of courses. Although Introduction to Forensic Psychology was the next highest rated course ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .69$), only 36% would “require” it.

Nonobjective Activities/Criteria. We scored participants’ nonobjective activities/criteria responses 1 for low, 2 for medium, or 3 for high. Table 3 provides the mean ratings for the nonobjective activities/criteria and the percentages of participants rating an activity/criterion as low, medium, or high. Previous research activity ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .24$), letters of

recommendation ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .44$), statement of goals and objectives ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .46$), and the interview ($M = 2.38$, $SD = .67$) topped the nonobjective activities/criteria list.

Table 2. Course Rating Percentages for Participants Involved in Graduate Student Selection

Course	Require	Recommend	Optional	Not Necessary
Research Methods	98.0	2.0	0.0	0.0
Statistics	96.0	4.0	0.0	0.0
Abnormal	56.0	32.0	12.0	0.0
Experimental	42.9	42.9	14.3	0.0
Intro to Forensic	36.0	54.0	8.0	2.0
Social	34.7	49.0	16.3	0.0
Psych. Testing	32.0	38.0	26.0	4.0
Personality	26.0	40.0	34.0	0.0
Developmental	24.5	42.9	30.6	2.0
Cognitive	18.4	53.1	26.5	2.0
Physiological	14.0	32.0	44.0	10.0
Child Development	12.0	34.0	50.0	4.0
Learning	6.0	52.0	36.0	6.0
Perception	4.0	32.0	50.0	14.0
History and Systems	0.0	29.2	47.9	22.9

Note. The n s ranged from 48 to 50.

Table 3. Nonobjective Activities/Criteria Rating Means and Percentages for Participants Involved in Graduate Student Selection

Activity/Criterion	$M (SD)$	High	Medium	Low
Previous research activity	2.94 (.24)	93.9	6.1	0.0
Letters of recommendation	2.82 (.44)	84.0	14.0	2.0
Statement of goals and objectives	2.70 (.46)	70.0	30.0	0.0
Interview	2.38 (.67)	48.0	42.0	10.0
Work experience	1.96 (.64)	18.0	60.0	22.0
Clinically related public service	1.84 (.59)	10.2	63.3	26.5
Extracurricular activity	1.36 (.56)	4.0	28.0	68.0

Note. Means based on $High = 3$, $Medium = 2$, and $Low = 1$. The n s ranged from 49 to 50.

Study 2: Review of Major Forensic Psychology Programs

Method

Graduate Programs. We reviewed the major graduate programs in forensic psychology for this study. To be included as a major program, the program had to be listed on the APLS Web site (n.d.b) or in the *GSP* (APA, 2005) program area index under “forensic” (p. 852) or “law and psychology” (p. 853). The combined list included 39 degree programs in 35 different schools. Some settings had multiple programs (e.g., PhD and JD/PhD). Table 4 provides a list of settings, available degree programs, and program or department Web address.

Table 4. Degrees Offered by the Major Programs in Forensic Psychology and Program Web Site

Institution	Degree(s) Offered	Web Site
Alliant International University: Fresno	PhD, PsyD	http://www2.alliant.edu/ssps/forensic/index.htm
Alliant International University: Los Angeles	PsyD	http://www2.alliant.edu/ssps/forensic/index.htm
American International College	MS	http://www.aic.edu/pages/513.html
Argosy University, Washington, DC	MA	http://www.argosyu.edu/washingtondc/programs.asp?plid=76
Carlos Albizu University, Miami	PsyD	http://mia.albizu.edu/web/academic_programs/psychology.asp
Castleton State College	MA	http://www.castleton.edu/forensic/index.htm
Chicago School of Professional Psychology	MA	http://www.csopp.edu/prospectivestudents/default.asp?pagename=forensicmaadmit
CUNY, John Jay College of Criminal Justice	MA, PhD	http://johnjay.jjay.cuny.edu/forensicPsych/
Drexel University	PhD, PhD/JD	http://www.drexel.edu/coas/psychology/default.asp
Florida International University	PhD	http://www.fiu.edu/~psylaw/
Fordham University	PhD	http://www.fordham.edu/Academics/Programs_at_Fordham_/Psychology/Graduate_Psychology/Clinical_Psychology/Forensic_Specializat_5574.asp
Georgetown University	PhD	http://www.georgetown.edu/departments/psychology/grad/gradnew.html
Marymount University	MA	http://www.marymount.edu/academic/sehs/ps/forensic.html
Nova Southeastern University	PsyD	http://www.cps.nova.edu/

Pacific Graduate School of Psychology	PhD/JD	http://www.ggu.edu/school_of_law/academic_law_programs/jd_program/joint_degrees
Sam Houston State University	PhD	http://www.shsu.edu/~psy_www/phd.htm
Simon Fraser University	PhD	http://www.sfu.ca/psyc/law/
The Catholic University of America	MA	http://psychology.cua.edu/graduate/malaw.cfm
The Sage Colleges	MA	http://www.sage.edu/academics/schoolofartsand_sciences/psychology/
Tiffin University	MS	http://www.tiffin.edu/livepages/1234.shtml
University of Alabama	PhD	http://psychology.ua.edu/index.html
University of Arizona	PhD	http://psychology.arizona.edu/programs/g_each/ppl.php
Univ of British Columbia	PhD	http://www.psych.ubc.ca/graduate.htm
University of Denver	MA	http://www.du.edu/gsp/MAFPMain.htm
University of Florida	PhD/JD	http://www.psych.ufl.edu/
University of Illinois at Chicago	PhD	http://www.uic.edu/depts/psch/psychlaw/
University of Minnesota	PhD	http://www.psych.umn.edu/areas/social/index.htm
University of Nebraska, Lincoln	PhD	http://psycweb.unl.edu/psylaw/
University of Nevada-Reno	PhD	http://www.unr.edu/cla/socpsy/
University of Texas, El Paso	PhD	http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=26647
University of Tulsa	MA, JD/MA	http://www.law.utulsa.edu/academics/jtdegoff
University of Virginia	PhD	http://www.virginia.edu/psychology/graduate/
University of Wyoming	PhD	http://uwadmnweb.uwyo.edu/psychology/psylaw/psylawconcentration.htm
Valparaiso University	JD/MA	http://www.valpo.edu/psych/graduate/degree/jointlaw.htm
Widener University	PsyD/JD	http://www.widener.edu/?pageId=4783

Descriptions of the forensic psychology graduate programs provided by the schools varied. However, the largest proportion described their program as forensic psychology (33.3%; $n = 13$), psychology and law (30.8%; $n = 12$), or clinical psychology with a forensic psychology concentration or emphasis (15.4%; $n = 6$). The remaining schools described their programs as social psychology with a concentration in psychology and law (5.1%; $n = 2$), a minor in psychology and law (10.3%; $n = 4$), counseling psychology with a psychology-law concentration (2.6%; $n = 1$), and psychology with a concentration in human development and public policy

(2.6%; $n = 1$). Eighteen programs offered a PhD, 11 offered an MA or MS, 4 offered a PsyD, 3 offered a PhD/JD, 2 offered a JD/MA, and 1 offered a PsyD/JD.

Procedure. We entered the list into a database. We derived a program's course preferences and strength of those preferences from the program's Web site. We derived a program's other criteria (i.e., Graduate Record Exam [GRE] scores, grade point average [GPA], and nonobjective activities/criteria) from a combination of information from the *GSP* (APA, 2005) description and from the program's Web site.

Results

Courses. We scored the programs' course preference ratings 3 for requirement, 2 for recommendation, and 1 for optional. Tables 5 and 6 provide the results for each course. Table 5 shows the mean course preference ratings.

Table 5. Mean Forensic Psychology Graduate Program Preference Ratings for Courses

Course	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Introduction to Psychology	3.00	.00	1
Psychological Testing	3.00	.00	1
Psychology	3.00	.00	1
Research Methods	3.00	.00	5
Statistics	2.83	.39	12
Experimental Psychology	2.75	.50	4
Abnormal Psychology	2.33	.58	3
Child Development Psychology	2.00	.00	1
Developmental Psychology	2.00	.00	2
History and Systems	2.00	.00	1
Learning	2.00	.00	2
Personality Psychology	2.00	.00	3
Physiological/Comparative Psychology	2.00	.00	2
Sensation	2.00	.00	1
Social Psychology	2.00	.00	1

Note. Means based on *Require* = 3, *Recommend* = 2, and *Optional* = 1.

Table 6 gives the percentages of programs rating a course as a requirement or a recommendation and the percentages of programs not rating a course. No programs rated a course as optional, and most programs did not rate most courses. Of those courses rated by more than one program, Research Methods ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .00$, $n = 5$), Statistics ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .39$, $n = 12$), Experimental Psychology ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .50$, $n = 4$), and Abnormal Psychology ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .58$, $n = 3$) had the highest means.

Table 6. Forensic Psychology Graduate Program Rating Percentages for Courses

Course	Required	Recommended	Not Rated
Statistics	25.6	5.1	69.3
Research Methods	12.8	0.0	87.2
Experimental Psychology	7.7	2.6	89.7
Abnormal Psychology	2.6	5.1	92.3
Introduction to Psychology	2.6	0.0	97.4
Psychological Testing/Measurement	2.6	0.0	97.4
Psychology	2.6	0.0	97.4
Personality Psychology	0.0	7.7	92.3
Developmental Psychology	0.0	5.1	94.9
Learning	0.0	5.1	94.9
Physiological/Comparative Psychology	0.0	5.1	94.9
Child Development Psychology	0.0	2.6	97.4
History and Systems	0.0	2.6	97.4
Social Psychology	0.0	2.6	97.4
Sensation	0.0	2.6	97.4

Note. The *ns* ranged from 1 to 12.

Nonobjective Activities/Criteria and Other Criteria. We scored the programs' ratings of the nonobjective activities/criteria and other criteria (i.e., GPA and GRE scores) as 1 for low, 2 for medium, and 3 for high. Tables 7 and 8 provide the results for each criterion. Table 7 shows the mean ratings for the nonobjective activities/criteria and other criteria.

Table 7. Mean Program Ratings of Nonobjective Activities/Criteria and Other Criteria

Activity/Criterion	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Letters of recommendation	2.81	.47	36
GPA	2.78	.42	37
Statement of goals and objectives	2.78	.48	37
Interview	2.68	.48	31
GRE scores	2.47	.63	30
Previous research activity	2.44	.81	36
Clinically related public service	1.89	.63	35
Work experience	1.86	.68	36
Extracurricular activity	1.32	.54	34

Note. Means based on *High* = 3, *Medium* = 2, and *Low* = 1.

Table 8 furnishes the percentages of programs rating a criterion as low, medium, or high. Letters of recommendation ($M = 2.81$, $SD = .47$, $n = 36$), GPA ($M = 2.78$, $SD = .42$, $n = 37$), the statement of goals and objectives ($M = 2.78$, $SD = .48$, $n = 37$), the interview ($M = 2.68$, $SD = .48$, $n = 31$), GRE scores ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .63$, $n = 30$), and previous research activity ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .81$, $n = 36$) had the highest means (i.e., means indicative of a medium rating or higher).

Table 8. Program Rating Percentages for Nonobjective Activities/Criteria and Other Criteria

Activity/Criterion	High	Medium	Low
Letters of recommendation	83.3	13.9	2.8
Statement of goals and objectives	81.1	16.2	2.7
GPA	78.4	21.6	0.0
Interview	67.7	32.3	0.0
Previous research activity	63.9	16.7	19.4
GRE scores	53.3	40.0	6.7
Work experience	16.7	52.8	30.6
Clinically related public service	14.3	60.0	25.7
Extracurricular activity	2.9	26.5	70.6

Note. The n s ranged from 30 to 37.

Discussion

The first study clearly showed that people involved in selecting students for graduate study in forensic psychology preferred students to complete courses in Research Methods, Statistics, Abnormal Psychology, and Experimental Psychology. In addition, over 50% of the participants rated their preference for Research Methods, Statistics, and Abnormal Psychology as required courses.

The first study also sheds light on nonobjective activities/criteria. Participants rated previous research activity, letters of recommendation, the statement of goals and objectives, and an interview as the most important activities/criteria. They did not rate work experience, clinically related public service, and extracurricular activity as strongly.

The second study produced some interesting findings. For example, even the course listed and rated most often by programs (i.e., Statistics) was not rated by almost 70% of the programs. The second most often listed and rated course (i.e., Research Methods) was not rated by 87.2% of the programs. Eighty-nine percent or more did not rate the other courses. These findings led us to believe that programs are less concerned with specific courses than with the other activities/criteria. This belief is supported by the fact that *GSP* (APA, 2005) no longer includes course preference ratings for the programs. When this change in *GSP* occurred is unclear. Consequently, all results for these program preferences came from the programs' Web sites. This situation prompts concern about this portion of the results because programs may not have these requirements readily available in their materials online. Even so, the consistency between these two studies as well as with Lawson (1995) and Smith (1985) is noteworthy. Research

Methods, Statistics, Experimental Psychology, and Abnormal Psychology appear to provide important preparation for graduate school in forensic psychology.

Concerning nonobjective activities/criteria and other criteria, the second study, in large part, corroborated findings of the first study. Letters of recommendation, the statement of goals and objectives, an interview, and previous research activity had mean scores above 2.00 (medium importance). GPA and GRE also had mean scores above 2.00. Because of this overlap, these four nonobjective activities/criteria and the two additional criteria are important in preparing for graduate education in forensic psychology.

Conclusion

We hope that this research provides undergraduate advisors with some empirical information to address student questions and concerns about preparation for graduate study in forensic psychology. Perhaps the most important results to glean from this research and share with students are the ones that are consistent. This first result is that Research Methods, Statistics, Experimental Psychology, and Abnormal Psychology appear to be standard requirements for those wanting to enter graduate school in forensic psychology. Second, letters of recommendation, the statement of goals and objectives, an interview, and previous research activity are important for gaining admission into graduate training. Third, the student's GPA and GRE scores are important in gaining admission as well. The fourth result, that may not be as obvious, concerns time management. Specifically, advisors may recommend to students that they spend less time in extracurricular activities and clinically related public service and more time in those areas listed previously. We do not make this recommendation to suggest that these areas are unimportant, but the results of a cost-benefit analysis are clear about where to spend limited time to get the most benefit.

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Author Note

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