You’re admitted! But which program should you attend?

Parts 1 and 2

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Congratulations! You’ve beaten long odds and a lot of competition to gain entry to a graduate program in psychology. In fact, you have been lucky enough to gain entry to more than one program. Pause and take a moment to feel good about all your hard work that led up to this point. You’re headed for great things: Graduate school will change your life in such a fundamental way. There’s lots of advice we could give you at this point (such as, “Get ready to work your tail off!”), but instead, we’ll focus on trying to help you choose which program to attend. Our advice is oriented toward doctoral-level programs, especially those with a research orientation, but much of it is also relevant to decisions among master’s level and/or purely applied clinical programs.

We start by pleading with you to make a decision quickly because you are holding onto a seat in a graduate program that could be offered to another prospective student—but only if you give it up early enough in the admissions season. That is, programs cannot make so many offers that they risk bringing in a class that is too large for them to support. Programs have until April 1 to make offers to students, and you technically have until April 15 to accept or decline your offer(s). But in reality, most offers are made and accepted well before that time. The program will have the best chance of attracting another good candidate only if you give up your offer in a timely manner. Please do so if you have changed your mind.

So how to decide among two or more programs? Sometimes it will be easy; your gut will have already told you. If not, you’ll need to be systematic, starting with prioritizing the factors that are most important to you. You can then create a decision-making grid with those factors and complete paired comparisons among the different schools. Norcross and Hogan (n.d.) provide detailed advice for doing this. But before you even begin those comparisons, you need to recognize what some of the most (and least) important factors are when deciding among graduate programs. We’d like to help you understand what those factors are because, in our experience, this is a confusing time for most graduate applicants, who don’t yet really understand what graduate school is, much less how to compare them. Let’s get started.

Important Factors to Consider When Making a Decision

Finding the Right Fit: Your Research and Your Future Advisor

There are a number of factors to consider as you make your decision, and the relative weights to give them will differ from one applicant to another. We strongly believe that, for graduate programs founded upon faculty/student advisor relationships, which is true for most research-oriented programs, the two most important factors to consider when making this decision are (a) the fit between your research interests and those of the program, and (b) the fit
between you and your potential advisor. Of course, these two things are highly related. A study conducted by McIlvried, Wall, Kohout, Keys, and Goreczny (2010) revealed that, for doctoral students in clinical psychology, “sense of fit with the program” was the top factor used in the selection of a graduate program.

Understanding your potential advisor’s research. You need to keep in mind that you will be dedicating the next 5 to 6 years of your life to your advisor’s general research area. If you plan to pursue a career in research (and if you don’t, you shouldn’t be entering a research-oriented graduate program), you’ll probably spend most of your professional life devoted to the areas of research you focus on while in graduate school. So, if you’re excited to read articles authored by your potential advisor simply because they’re interesting to you (not because you have to), then you should keep that school at the top of your list. Alternatively, if you struggle to read articles published by a potential advisor, then it will surely be an even greater struggle to conduct this type of research day in and day out for years. You need to be passionate about your work. You should also find out what your potential advisor is currently working on or plans to work on in the future, because this professor might be branching out into new areas different from already-published work (Choukas-Bradley, 2011). Also, most programs encourage graduate student collaborations with faculty other than the primary advisor, which allows you to expand your training and interests. You’ll want to make sure you will have that option if it is important to you, and we think it should be.

Style and personality factors. Considering the fact that you will be working primarily with your potential advisor for a significant amount of time, it is also extremely important to assess the socioemotional match between you two when making a decision. That is, you want to work with an advisor you “click” with. Multiple sources have asserted the importance of a good match between graduate students and their advisors. Choukas-Bradley (2011) argued that “in most cases, the match between you and your advisor is even more important than the characteristics of the overall program” (p. 7). How do you assess that fit? One aspect to consider is your potential advisor’s mentorship style. It’s important that your advisor’s approach to mentoring pairs well with your learning style. Think about whether you would prefer an advisor who is more involved and “hands-on” or one who is more “hands-off.” Even as we write this, however, we can’t help but caution that you should be wary of selecting an advisor who isn’t somewhat hands-on. An advisor is there to do just that—advise. And mentor. No one enters graduate school with the knowledge and training needed to succeed in the field. The purpose of graduate school is to teach you everything possible about the area of research you’re interested in and to help you develop the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in your future career. If your advisor isn’t involved enough in your work, that person won’t be able to guide you effectively. Is your potential advisor dedicated to supporting graduate students? Does it appear that this professor would be willing to help you if you’re struggling with a class, your research, or something else? Will this person treat you as a fellow collaborator with valuable input or like an inferior? If you have doubts along these lines about a potential advisor, you might want to think about a different advisor or different graduate program.

Track record. There are various other points to contemplate when you evaluate a potential advisor. Choukas-Bradley (2011) suggested examining the number of publications your potential advisors have, the quality of their publication venues, evidence of teaching or mentoring awards, the incidence of student coauthors on their publications and conference presentations, and whether they are assistant, associate, or full professors. With respect to using the latter in your decision, we are not so sure. Assistant professors are new to the field, with a
less established track record. But they are also the most motivated to produce quality research and publications because they have only 5 or 6 years to amass a record strong enough to be granted tenure and promoted to associate professor rank. As you can imagine, this will be advantageous for a graduate student who is involved in the excellent assistant professor’s research. Alternatively, tenured associate and full-rank professors will have more connections and reputation in the field (they might be true stars already), more experience, and possibly more time to focus on a graduate student’s development and more willingness to consider new branches of research. As long as the person you seek to work with has a good record of publications in recent years, we don’t really think rank makes that much difference, and certainly don’t think it is something you could predict at this stage.

Other competing responsibilities. Another point to consider is whether your potential advisor is in the psychology department full or part time. It might be argued that potential advisors who are involved in administration, clinical practice, or consulting outside of the department might not be able to provide you with the same level of attention as full-time faculty. Yet many faculty know very well how to balance their time and only accept as many graduate students as they can effectively advise, so this is unlikely to be an issue. In fact, it might translate into additional (often interdisciplinary) research opportunities. This is the kind of thing that is easily explored through conversations with current graduate students in the program.

It would also be useful to know if your advisor is planning on retiring or leaving for another university in the next 5 to 6 years. Of course it might simply be impossible for you to know this because the faculty member might not know it. We don’t know of anyone who would commit to a graduate student with plans to leave shortly thereafter (to us, it would seem unethical), but faculty have to protect their own professional lives, and that might mean taking a job offer elsewhere if it should arise after you enter the program. For example, the second author’s advisor left during her second year in graduate school, and she went with her to the new program, a move that ended up being great for both of them.

Questions for potential advisors. Now, this is a good time to mention the tricky business of asking questions related to all these issues without being offensive. For starters, try to establish a good rapport with your potential advisor. This should be a primary aim anyway, but you certainly don’t want to sit down with your potential advisor for the first time and begin grilling the person with questions about number of publications and plans for retirement.

Oudekerk and Bottoms (2007) explained that you should “ask questions in a polite manner that suggests that you are expecting to gain information, not in a suspicious manner that suggests that you expect to uncover problems.” On a related note, there are great and not-so-great diagnostic questions, and there is a time and place for those questions. Although it is certainly good to ask questions about the program on your first interview, think carefully about the type of question you are asking and what meaning it conveys to the program faculty. Recently, the second author was asked by a prospective student, “What is your mentoring style?” which is a very reasonable question, but that query was followed up with “What areas of weakness as an advisor will you be working on to improve?” Sigh. She has also been asked: “I’ll get to do research on other topics, right? Or do I have to work only on your research?” This might be motivated by a reasonable concern about being able to expand the advisor’s research program with one’s own independent contributions (which should be a given at any good program), but it is worded in a way that conveys a lack of enthusiasm for the advisor’s research, which signals a mismatch between the prospective student
and the program. As we said earlier, if you aren’t excited by your potential advisor’s work, don’t accept an offer from that program (even if it’s your only offer).

**Quality of Graduate Program**

Perhaps it goes without saying that you should choose an accredited, high-quality program at a credible university. National rankings such as those by the National Research Council can provide useful comparative data. Be careful about basing your choice of a graduate program on the perceived quality of the university. A university’s “popular reputation” is usually based upon the institution’s undergraduate reputation, which may have little relation to the quality of its graduate programs. As noted by Mark Leary (n.d.), “Many universities that are not known as particularly strong undergraduate schools have fine master’s and doctoral programs. Likewise, some strong undergraduate schools have weak graduate programs.”

Markers of graduate program quality that you should care about include the following:

- Does the program produce leaders in its field?
- Does the program have relevant accreditations?
- Does the program provide some level of financial aid (the best research programs provide full tuition and a stipend for teaching or research assistantships)?
- How closely do the faculty members work with the students?
- Do faculty members and students regularly publish and attend conferences?
- Are the faculty tenured or tenure-track (as opposed to non-tenure short-term hires)?
- What is the reputation of the faculty?
- What is the job placement record of recent graduates?

**Training Opportunities**

Another factor to take into account when you are making a decision is the type of training opportunities offered by the program. For instance, does the program offer or require a minor curriculum? If so, this can help you to develop a set of skills that can enhance your ability to do research and teach, and make you more competitive in the job market. For example, a program that emphasizes quantitative training (statistics and methods) will benefit a student by providing an extremely valuable and increasingly sought-after skillset. If you hope to work as a professor after you earn your degree, you might want to find out whether the programs you are considering offer opportunities to develop your teaching skills. If you hope to work in a clinical setting, you will want to know about opportunities and preparation for clinical training (practica, internships). Also, consider the setting of the school and training opportunities: A city setting might provide you with more opportunities and experiences than other settings.

**Socioemotional Environment of the Program**

First, it is necessary to consider the overall atmosphere and environment of the department, program/division, and research laboratory you will be working in. The socioemotional fit between you and those you will be spending the majority of your time with over the next 5 or 6 years is key. Did you feel comfortable when you visited the school and met with the current graduate students, your potential advisor, and the other faculty? Will you fit in and “mesh” with those around you?

Consider whether graduate students collaborate with faculty members other than their major advisor within the program and/or department and beyond. If they do, you’re likely to have more opportunities. That is, if you’re interested in examining a certain concept or approach, but your primary advisor isn’t as knowledgeable in that area as someone else, you might be able
to collaborate with another professor who does specialize in this area and who can provide you with valuable guidance that will enrich your main program of research with your advisor. Exposure to different perspectives or approaches can also benefit you. Furthermore, if something happens, and your primary advisor leaves, or you choose to leave that advisor’s laboratory, having a strong relationship with a different faculty member might help, perhaps even giving you an alternative nest in which to land. Keep in mind, however, that you will be very busy during graduate school, and you don’t want to spread yourself too thin across multiple research labs or projects. You will also want to be sure to keep an open line of communication between you, your primary advisor, and any other professors you collaborate with so that everyone is aware of what you’re working on and with whom.

Another way to evaluate the overall environment of the program is to find out if the graduate students’ relationships within and outside of school are competitive or collaborative (Choukas-Bradley, 2011). If you prefer a collaborative environment, then you should think twice before joining a research laboratory that fosters highly competitive relationships. Alternatively, if competition motivates you, then a competitive environment might be good for you. But be careful, we mean healthy competitive relationships. Remember that you’re going to be working on research projects either jointly with other students, or on projects that are related, for many years. If you aren’t willing to put your competitive spirit aside when it’s necessary for collaboration, your work and the work of fellow graduate students might suffer.

You can also determine the atmosphere of the program and your advisor’s research laboratory by considering how graduate students seem to get along with each other. Do they enjoy each other’s company or do they seem to have rivalries and feuds? For that matter, you should consider whether the faculty members get along, because bad relationships between faculty can sometimes (but not always) spill over into graduate student relationships. When you consider this, be sure not to base your judgment on what you hear from one or two people. Instead, go by what you hear (and don’t hear) from most faculty and students. You don’t want to judge an entire program by one or two disgruntled students (or faculty).

Assessing the Financial Package

You should also evaluate the resources for research and financial packages that are offered by different programs. Most high-quality graduate programs in psychology, especially research-oriented programs, are quite different than professional schools (e.g., business, law, medicine). Instead of charging you tuition, many psychology programs pay you to attend by covering your tuition and offering you a teaching or research assistantship. Consider exactly what will be included in your financial package—what level of tuition remission will you receive? Will it cover the various student fees charged by the university (activity, transportation, health insurance)? What health insurance options are offered? If you’re offered teaching or research assistantships, how many hours per week will you be working and what will the stipend be? If the assistance is a fellowship, is service expected in return (it shouldn’t be—a fellowship should free you from other work so you can focus on your research and classes)? How many years are you guaranteed funding or assistance? Will your advisor’s work be funded by grants that might support your stipend and research? Does the department have funds for student research? Are there opportunities to apply for fellowships? As you review all of these financial components and compare among schools, also consider the cost of living in that area of the country and how the financial package approaches this cost (Klement, 2011).
You also want to find out if circumstances might necessitate you picking up the cost of your research. The school you are considering should offer you access to the facilities and equipment you will need to conduct your research. Depending on what you want to study, your needs might include participant time on an MRI machine, funds to pay participants, etc. (Norcross & Hogan, n.d.). Will your advisor cover these expenses? Does the department or college offer student research grants? Are your advisor’s graduate advisees successful in winning external grants?

Once you’ve determined the true financial benefits and costs of the schools you are considering, how should you weigh that information in your decision? On the one hand, the level of financial assistance through tuition remission and a stipend isn’t likely to differ too much among quality programs, and in the long run, small differences in your financial package won’t matter much and shouldn’t affect your decision unless all other things are equal. (That is, if your primary concern is how much money you will make while in graduate school, you’re in the wrong field!) But large differences among programs should influence your decision. For example, if one of your choices offers you no stipend or tuition remission, and another reasonable choice does, this could mean the difference between a clear financial start after graduation versus many years of crushing debt.

Quality of Life

Finally, think about personal factors that are important to you. How do you define quality of life, and will you find elements that sustain quality of life in this program? After all, if you’re really unhappy, you might not perform well. Is there proximity to your family (or lack thereof!) that will make you happy? Can you find a balance here of both personal and professional factors? Does this university provide what you need in terms of its support for the diversity of the students and faculty in terms of racial, ethnic, LGBTQ, disability, religion, and other considerations? Does this physical area of the country offer a place to escape that you enjoy? Even as we raise that issue, however, we also offer a strong caution: Although it might be tempting to choose a school because it is located within the comfort zone of your family and friends, or simply because you are familiar with or want to live in that particular physical area, think hard before making it the determining factor. Five (or six) years is actually a short amount of time in the long run, and those key years will lay the foundation for the entire rest of your professional life. You want to attend the graduate program that will give you the best possible training, that will launch you to the best possible job and the best chances of life-long success. Realistically, you can live anywhere for five years (case in point, the second author obtained her doctoral degree from the State University of New York at BUFFALO) If you’re working as hard as you should be to be successful in graduate school, you won’t have much time to think about your surroundings outside of the psychology department building anyway.

How to Gather the Information

All of the information mentioned above will be very useful to you, but you need to know how to gather it in order to be able to utilize it. To begin with, you can review a program or professor’s website for many of the more general questions. A website can tell you only so much, however. You should speak directly with your potential advisor in-depth (preferably in person, but at least via a program such as Skype) to assess the socioemotional fit between the
two of you as well as the match between each of your research interests. Your advisor can also inform you of the training opportunities available within the department.

Speaking with current and former graduate students who worked with your potential advisor will also provide you with invaluable information. These individuals are arguably one of your best resources because they have first-hand knowledge of your potential advisor, the program, and the school. Furthermore, they probably don’t have anything to gain or lose by you joining the program, so they should be an honest source of information. You can refer to Oudekerk and Bottoms (2007) for useful questions to ask graduate students, your potential advisor, and other faculty members.

It will also be extremely helpful for you to visit the schools you are considering if you haven’t already done so for an interview. This visit will allow you to evaluate the overall environment of the school, the program, and the research laboratory. You will also be able to examine the quality of life at the institution and any of the personal factors that might be important to you (Klement, 2011).

**Conclusion**

After you’ve gathered all the data and considered all the factors we’ve discussed, and discussed it all with close friends and mentors, you really just need to sit back and think about what your gut is telling you: Where will you feel most at home and happy? You’ll probably know the answer. We should also underscore this important point: Your gut might be telling you that you’re not ready for graduate school at all. Sometimes it’s difficult to really understand what graduate school is like until you interview at a program. If it isn’t what you expected, if going to any program just doesn’t feel right, then you shouldn’t accept any offer. Instead, think about what alternative careers would make you happy. If you still think psychology might be for you, gather more information by volunteering at a mental health clinic or seeking more research experience. Either way—whether you’re feeling, “this program is it, this is where I belong” or, alternatively, “this just doesn’t feel like it should”—listen to what your gut feeling is telling you, and make the decision you believe is really in your best interests, not what someone else might want or what you think you “ought” to do. Some of the saddest moments in the second author’s professional life have been seeing students drop out of a program because they learned too late that graduate school wasn’t for them. But the happiest moments have been watching the successes of her students! So, make sure you want this before you accept any offer, then start reaping the benefits of excellent training. (One important footnote of caution to this paragraph: We aren’t encouraging you to rethink graduate school because of irrational self-doubts about your abilities. If you have a great record, the confidence of faculty who know you well, and a good program wants you, then believe in yourself and go. Google “imposter syndrome” for more on this point.)

In conclusion, we hope you found this article helpful! Good luck as you narrow down your choices. You have accomplished much to get this far, and a wonderful career awaits you in the field of psychology!

**Kelly C. Burke** writes this article having just been through this process herself. She obtained her bachelor’s degree from the University of Kansas, where she conducted research on in-group/out-group identification and entitlement. She will be a graduate student in the Social Psychology
Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago in Fall 2016. She will study research in the field of psychology and law with her new advisor, Professor Bottoms.

**Bette L. Bottoms, PhD,** has been on the other side of the fence for 24 years. A professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, she enjoys her work with graduate and undergraduate students on issues such as jury decision making in cases involving child and juvenile offenders. She has published widely within her field and won a dozen teaching and mentoring awards including awards from the national American Psychology/Law Society and the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. She obtained her BA from Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, her MA from the University of Denver, and her PhD from the State University of New York at Buffalo.
Footnotes

1 For advice on getting into graduate school, see articles by the second author and her former students on writing an effective personal statement (Bottoms & Carris, 2017, also this volume) and on successfully interviewing at a graduate program (Oudekerk & Bottoms, 2017, also this volume).
References


