PROSPECTIVE GRADUATE STUDENT GUIDELINES

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Finding a Faculty Advisor

What Role Do Faculty Play in Graduate Admissions
In our program individual faculty play a huge role in determining which students are accepted into the PhD program. Students are essentially accepted into the lab of a specific faculty member, and the faculty are looking for students who have the knowledge, skills, and interests to succeed in their labs. Always check the lab website for information regarding the program of research. Sometimes labs will also have information regarding whether they are accepting students and policies regarding contact prior to reviewing applications. In the event that websites do not have the information you are looking for, you may wish to consider emailing faculty directly.

What if I’m Interested in Applying for Admission in Fall 2020?
If you are applying to our programs in Psychology or Cognitive Sciences, you should be aware that the following faculty will not be accepting students for Fall 2020:

Richard Chechile
Robert Cook
Ariel Goldberg
Raymond Nickerson
Aniruddh Patel
Alexander H. Queen
Linda Tickle-Degnen

If you are interested in the research conducted by these faculty, we encourage you to review the research by others in the department as many of us collaborate and have overlapping interests.

If you are interested in Clinical training, please be advised that we do not have a Clinical Psychology program, although we do have several faculty members who do clinically relevant research. If you are interested in School Psychology please take a look at this program at Tufts: https://ase.tufts.edu/education/programs/SchoolPsychology/.

Why Should I E-mail Faculty?
There are several reason to do this.

First: You can find out whether they are actually planning to take new students. You don’t want to spend money and time applying to a given program only to find out that the one faculty member of interest isn’t taking students this year (or is about to move to another university, take a job in industry, etc.). Information about this may be on the program’s website or the
faculty member’s website, but websites are sometimes out of date, so it’s worth double-checking with an email.

Second: This email will get you “on the radar” of the faculty. Most PhD programs get hundreds of applicants, and faculty are much more likely to take a close look at your application if you’ve contacted them in advance.

Third: You also might get other useful information. For example, a professor might write back saying something like “I’m not taking any new students, but we’ve just hired a new faculty member in the same area, and you might consider working with her.” Or, the professor might say something like “When you apply, make sure that you check the XXX box, which will make you eligible for a fellowship that is specifically for people from your background.” Or, if the professor accepts students through multiple programs (e.g., Psychology and Cognitive Science), you might get information about which one to apply to or whether to apply to both programs.

Fourth: You might learn the most current direction of a professor’s research. While professors usually have multiple interests, they might have a current priority area.

What Should My E-mail Look Like?

We recommend a subject heading such as “Inquiry from potential graduate applicant.” For the main body of the email, your goals are to (a) introduce yourself, (b) inquire about whether they are taking students, (c) make it clear why you are interested in that particular faculty member, and (d) get any advice they might offer. Here’s an example:

Dear Dr. XXX,

I’m in my final year as a Psychology/Cognitive Science major at XXXX, where I have been working in the lab of Dr. XXX XXX. My research has focused on episodic memory distortion and I’ve used psychophysical and behavioral methods (see attached CV). I’m planning to apply to PhD programs this Fall, and I’m very interested in the possibility of working in your lab at Tufts. I read your recent paper on XXX, and I found your approach to be very exciting.

I was hoping you might tell me whether you are planning to take new students in your lab in Fall 2020. I’d also be interested in any other information or advice you have.

[Possibly add a few more lines here about your background and interests.]

Sincerely,

XXX XXXX
Should I Discuss My Identity?
If you’re a member of an underrepresented/disadvantaged group, you can make this clear in your email or CV if you are comfortable doing so. We recognize that this can sometimes be a sensitive issue, but there are often special funding opportunities for students with particular underrepresented identities, and most faculty are especially eager to recruit students from underrepresented/disadvantaged groups. Usually, this information can be provided indirectly (e.g., by listing scholarships you’ve received or programs that you’ve participated in, such as the McNair Scholars), but it can be helpful if you make this information explicit to your prospective faculty mentor and program.

Who Can I Ask for Advice?
No matter what your situation, we recommend having your faculty mentor(s) take a look at a draft of the email and your CV before you send them. Grad students and postdocs can also be helpful, but they may not really know what is appropriate given that they haven’t been on the receiving end of these emails.

Most importantly, don’t be afraid to send the email. The worst thing that will happen is that you don’t get a reply. The best thing that can happen is that the e-mail leads to a conversation that helps you get accepted into the program of your dreams.

What Response Should I Expect?
You may get a brief response that says something like “Yes, I’m taking students, and I encourage you to apply” or “I’m always looking for qualified students.” This indicates that the faculty member will likely look at applications, and you don’t need to follow-up.

If you’re lucky, you may get a more detailed response that will lead to a series of email exchanges and perhaps an invitation to chat (usually on Skype or something similar). This will be more likely if you say something about what you’ve done and why you are interested in this lab.

You may get a response like “I’m not taking new students this year” or “I probably won’t take new students this year”. Or you might get something like “Given your background and interests, I don’t think you’d be a good fit for my lab.” In these cases, it is probably not worth putting your resources into applying if you have that specific advisor in mind.

Finally, you simply may not get a reply. In that case, no information is no information. There are many reasons why faculty may not respond, and it is not worth trying to figure out why this might be. If you don’t get a response and you really want to work with the person, you may still want to apply.

You really don’t have much to lose by emailing faculty, and you have a lot to gain.
**Writing a Research Statement**

**What is a Research Statement?**
A research statement is a short document that provides a brief history of your past research experience, the current state of your research, and the future work you intend to complete.

The research statement is a common component of a potential student’s application for post-undergraduate study. The research statement is often the primary way for departments and faculty to determine if a student’s interests and past experience make them a good fit for their program/institution.

Although many programs ask for ‘personal statements,’ these are not really meant to be biographies or life stories. What we, at Tufts Psychology, hope to find out is how well your abilities, interests, experiences and goals would fit within our program.

**How Do I Even Start Writing One?**
Before you begin your statement, read as much as possible about our program so you can tailor your statement and convince the admissions committee that you will be a good fit.

Prepare an outline of the topics you want to cover (e.g., professional objectives and personal background) and list supporting material under each main topic. Write a rough draft in which you transform your outline into prose. Set it aside and read it a week later. If it still sounds good, go to the next stage. If not, rewrite it until it sounds right.

Do not feel bad if you do not have a great deal of experience in psychology to write about; no one who is about to graduate from college does. Do explain your relevant experiences (e.g., internships or research projects), but do not try to turn them into events of cosmic proportion. Be honest, sincere, and objective.

**What Information Should It Include?**
Your research statement should describe your previous experience, how that experience will facilitate your graduate education in our department, and why you are choosing to pursue graduate education in our department. Your goal should be to demonstrate how well you will fit in our program and in a specific laboratory.

Make sure to link your research interests to the expertise and research programs of faculty here. Identify at least one faculty member with whom you would like to work. Make sure that person is accepting graduate students when you apply. Read some of their papers and describe
how you think the research could be extended in one or more novel directions. Again, specificity is a good idea.

Make sure to describe your relevant experience (e.g., honors thesis, research assistantship) in specific detail. If you have worked on a research project, discuss that project in detail. Your research statement should describe what you did on the project and how your role impacted your understanding of the research question.

Describe the concrete skills you have acquired prior to graduate school and the skills you hope to acquire.

Articulate why you want to pursue a graduate degree at our institution and with specific faculty in our department.

Make sure to clearly state your core research interests and explain why you think they are scientifically and/or practically important. Again, be specific.

What Should It Look Like?
Your final statement should be succinct. You should be sure to thoroughly read and follow the length and content requirements for each individual application. Finally, stick to the points requested by each program, and avoid lengthy personal or philosophical discussions.

How Do I Know if It is Ready?
Ask for feedback from at least one professor, preferably in the area you are interested in. Feedback from friends and family may also be useful. Many colleges and universities also have writing centers that are able to provide general feedback.

Of course, read and proofread the document multiple times. It is not always easy to be a thoughtful editor of your own work, so don’t be afraid to ask for help!