

Frequently Asked Questions: Applying to join the MILES Lab



MILES
Lab

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<http://www.kristyarobinson.com/miles-lab.html>

Adapted from a [similar document](#) by Dr. Jessica Schleider, Stony Brook University

Why did you make this document?

The graduate school application process is an uneven playing field. Applicants without access to strong mentorship in the graduate school preparation process, or without professional connections, often lack access to the “hidden curriculum” information that can be important for the success of graduate school applications. This document is an attempt to provide some of that hidden curriculum here. By sharing this FAQ document, I hope to help “level the playing field” across applicants to the lab.

All responses in this document reflect my personal opinions. They may not reflect those of McGill University or other faculty in my department and program.

Will you be accepting a new PhD or MA student to begin in Fall 2026?

Perhaps! I will consider strong candidates for MA or PhD studies who are a good fit (see what this means below) for the lab. I do have a particularly large lab at the moment and limited funding, so I will be extremely selective and may end up making no offers of admission. Please note I am also on sabbatical for 2025-26 so have very limited bandwidth for responding to emails (please see **Should I email you to express my interest in applying to your lab?** below). Please note, also, that I supervise students only in the Learning Sciences program.

***Note for prospective MEd students:** MEd students do not typically have supervisors unless they are doing a special project. Learning Sciences does not have an MEd Special Project

concentration. If you are interested in Learning Sciences/Ed Psych and would like to do research for your special project, I encourage you to consider the Learning Sciences MA program instead. If you are not doing the special project or if you are not interested in doing research for your special project, this FAQ does not apply to you.

How do I know if I am a good fit for MILES Lab?

When reviewing prospective students' applications, I am most interested in the goodness of fit between (1) their interests, experiences, and goals, and (2) my lab's mission, my research focus, and my own strengths (and lesser strengths!) as a mentor.

Overall, applicants who are "good fits" tend to...

- Demonstrate commitment to our [lab mission](#). Commitment to this mission may be demonstrated through your past experiences (both research and applied) and your statement.
- Want to pursue a career in motivation research or educational research more broadly.
- Have accrued independent research experience (e.g., undergraduate or master's thesis, leading a research project, and/or first-authored posters, talks, papers, etc.).
- Be very conscientious, detail-oriented, good at problem-solving, and highly driven to (a) build their skills fast and (b) do both independent work and team-based work.
- Have a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion in research and in lab cultures.

Applicants with the following interests may be an especially good fit to our lab:

- How students' confidence and value for the material change over time in educational settings, especially secondary and postsecondary STEM settings.
- Effects of instructional strategies and interventions on motivation.
- Longitudinal and person-oriented methods for studying motivation.
- Measurement of motivation and motivational climate via surveys, direct observations, LLMs, or other methods.
- Antiracist and/or culturally responsive and sustaining approaches to research and to conceptualizing motivational support.

I'm especially interested in applicants with experiences in some or all of the following areas (however, none of these are required of applicants):

- Collecting and/or analyzing large-scale survey research
- Collecting and/or analyzing experience sampling/ecological momentary assessment data
- Lab-based and/or field-based educational intervention research
- Statistical analysis in R, SPSS, and/or Mplus
- Qualitative analysis of video and/or interview data
- Critical theory, antiracism, antiracist research, and/or culturally responsive and sustaining teaching and research approaches.

As a mentor, I am best prepared to support students who are interested in careers that involve applied, theoretical, and/or intervention research. This includes a wide variety of career paths,

including academic faculty positions, non-academic research positions in government or industry, or careers in applied research and policy.

Is it advantageous to list multiple potential mentors (or just one) on my application?

I will closely review all applications on which I am listed as a potential mentor. Listing multiple potential mentors may be appropriate if your interests and goals clearly bridge two faculty members' research programs (as described in your statement) and in rare cases, co-mentorship by two faculty members is possible. Applicants whose interests clearly and primarily match MILES Lab do not gain an advantage by listing other faculty members on their application. In fact, listing potential mentors whose work does not clearly align with your interests, who are not faculty members for the program you're applying to, or who are listed on the website as NOT accepting students for the upcoming year suggests you haven't read our materials carefully.

What is your mentorship style/what expectations do you have for graduate students?

The students who are most successful under my supervision are those who are willing to jump in and learn on the job. Typically in my lab you will learn important lab tasks by first observing an experienced student, then trying it under the close supervision of another student (or me), then doing the task independently to be checked afterward. But for some tasks, especially new ones that we don't have systems for, you may be assigned to figure it out through your own research, creativity, and asking around!

I work well with students who take initiative in lab work and their own work, who are willing and generous collaborators, who continually seek and respond well to feedback, who are eager to learn and grow, and who are conscientious about task lists, organization, and deadlines. I rely heavily on students to move our projects forward, and in the process students gain important research experiences, professional development, and authorship opportunities. I am very actively doing research, I am invested in my students' success, and my thus far relatively small lab group means you'll get personalized and energetic support from me.

Should I email you to express my interest in applying to your lab?

Your decision to email me (or not), by itself, will have **no impact** on your odds of receiving an interview invitation or an offer of admission. However, emails that suggest to me that you are not a good fit (per the criteria in this document) or that you have not carefully read the materials provided online by me and the Learning Sciences program (see links further down in this paragraph) **can actually hurt your chances** rather than helping. Sending multiple emails because you haven't heard back from me is also not a good idea.

Whether or not you contact me in advance, prospective students are strongly encouraged to review online materials [for my lab](#) and for the [Learning Sciences programs](#), which are designed to answer many common questions about program requirements, our research directions, my

mentorship approach, and our lab culture and values. If you have specific questions that are not addressed on these pages, please get in touch and I will do my best to address them.

Also please do see the note about funding below—you may need to contact me before applications are due if you are considering applying for funding (highly encouraged)! If you do email me about this, please make it very clear in the subject line and in the email itself that this is why you're reaching out (e.g., "Prospective PhD student requests support applying for SSHRC")..

What type of information do you look for in application materials?

I look for evidence that you have some combination of **experiences, abilities, commitment, and/or promise in the areas listed above** (in the "good fits" section). **Strong, clear writing** in accordance with typical academic norms is extremely important. Evidence that you've submitted that writing to conferences and journals, or that you're planning to do so, is something I look for. Published peer-reviewed journal articles are excellent evidence, as are peer-reviewed national or international conference presentations. We get very strong applications at McGill—some of our applicants already have peer-reviewed publications! This means that applicants who have not yet presented at a conference don't typically get admitted to our PhD program, although there are of course exceptions to this rule (e.g., very strong profile in other areas).

Prior coursework in motivation, statistics, qualitative methods, and/or educational psychology is also a plus. It is great when applicants have **prior research experience**, particularly when applicants have worked with researchers who do work that overlaps (methodologically and/or substantively) with mine.

And lastly, I look for **demonstrated willingness and clear, specific plans for applying for [external funding](#)**. SSHRC and FRQSC are both important to consider as funding mechanisms for your studies. Please note that several funding mechanisms that are often awarded to students in the McGill LS program require that you apply for them months before you apply for our program (e.g., October). You are highly encouraged to consider applying for these funding mechanisms, and to reach out to me in advance to (a) obtain my support for your application and (b) strategize your application approach.

What should I include in my statement?

I find it helpful when applicants include the following in their personal statements:

1. A clear statement of your general research interests and how they relate to our lab's mission and work.
2. A clear statement of why you are interested in our lab, in particular, versus other labs that study similar topics.
3. A statement about your career goals (even if they are approximate/might change, it is helpful to see your thinking!)

4. Discussions of your independent research experience(s) and what you learned from them. In these discussions, I suggest emphasizing (1) the skills you developed from working on each project (e.g., data collection in Qualtrics; coding/running analyses and which kind of analyses; searching and reviewing literature through a particular lens; interviewing students/teachers; writing certain sections of a paper; submitting/presenting a poster; designing experiments), and (2) what your “takeaways” were from the project—e.g., new research ideas or questions your work inspired.

Also, here are [real examples](#) of statements written for psychology graduate programs, and some helpful [resources](#) and a [template](#).

I am worried that my grades or GRE scores are low. Will this disqualify my application?

I am aware that many factors can influence one’s grades and test scores. If you believe your grades, test scores, etc. do not reflect your potential as a future researcher, please (1) ask one of your recommenders to share more about your circumstances to help me holistically assess your achievements, and/or (2) provide this information in your statement.

Can I meet with you to discuss my application before I apply?

Due to time limits and equity concerns, I don’t typically* meet with prospective students until I’ve reviewed applications and only if they’ve been selected for an interview. Indeed, **emailing me without knowing this shows you haven’t read these materials**, which are clearly linked on my McGill website and my personal website, so it can work against you rather than for you. However, if you are considering applying for [external funding](#) to work with me and you need my approval or support before graduate applications are due, please let me know as soon as possible and well in advance of the funding application due date.

*If you have limited resources for application preparation and fees and need to get an early indicator of whether or not I think you’re a good fit so that you can narrow the number of schools and programs you apply to, email me to let me know that’s your situation, including your CV and bullet points about why you’re applying, and I’ll give you a general sense of whether or not I think you should apply.

Can I work in your lab to see what it’s like and gain experience?

If you are a current student at McGill, you can apply to work in my lab on a volunteer, credit-based, or hourly basis: <https://forms.office.com/r/mLVTYBvU4p>. I prefer to pay students for work and aim to level the playing field as much as possible by posting positions rather than creating positions in response to the students who know the hidden curriculum about how to reach out in search of research opportunities. However, we do occasionally have need for volunteers and I’d prefer to know about you rather than not knowing. :) **Please note: students interested in pursuing clinical or counselling psychology likely will not get the experience they need in my lab, as my work is not relevant for these fields, and I prefer to**

employ students interested in educational psychology or learning sciences. However, several undergraduates in my lab have successfully gone onto clinical/counselling-related graduate studies, and have been wonderful assets to the lab before that, so this will not rule you out.

What should I expect to do for my thesis?

Your thesis will focus on an area where your interest and expertise (that you develop before and during graduate school) overlap with the current and future work of the lab. For your thesis, you may be assigned to take ownership over a portion of an ongoing project. Alternately, you might carve out an independent study that adds to or complements our ongoing lab projects.

What about funding?

Our department's graduate programs do not guarantee funding to graduate students. Funding comes from departmental merit-based scholarships (often provided for first-year PhD students and occasionally for first-year MA students), supervisors' grants, and external national and provincial awards (e.g., SSHRC, FRQSC, Vanier). Graduate students are required to apply for all funding opportunities for which they are eligible. As such, **applicants are strongly encouraged to apply for Tri-Council and FRQ fellowships. This requires submitting fellowship applications well in advance of the Program application deadline.** See <https://www.mcgill.ca/edu-ecp/students/finances/external-funding>

Our program and department has an excellent track record of external funding for students, and we provide a lot of support to students writing applications for these awards. And because we're located in Quebec, [tuition fees](#) are extremely low compared to pretty much anywhere else in North America.

In addition, I have continuously held grants that have funded my graduate students since I arrived at McGill. I can't guarantee I'll always have funds, but I apply for new grants every year, I have a great track record so far, and the vast majority of those grants go toward student support.

Important: Please do take note of the different [tuition and fees](#) for Quebec students, non-Quebec Canadian students, and international students. Please also note these reflect fees per semester (not year).

Wow, after reading this I don't know if I'll be a competitive applicant just yet. What can I do to improve my application?

I have a few recommendations, roughly in order of how helpful or impactful they'll be for the attractiveness of your application:

1. Get some experience doing research with someone who does work that's related to the kind of research you want to do. This is typically easiest to do when you're still a student.

But even if you're not a current student, you can email professors who are doing work that looks interesting to you and/or that you think will help you gain the skills you want to have. Ask if you can attend lab meetings, conduct literature reviews, organize documents or files—whatever you think you might be able to contribute. Volunteer if you can't secure a paid position. That's admittedly quite hard to do if you're balancing lots of other responsibilities, but a little goes a long way here—even 3-5 hours a week for a semester can help you quite a bit!

2. Expand your methodological toolbelt. Do you have statistics anxiety? Take an intro stats course—there are lots of free ones online. Read or watch fun statistics resources that present info in accessible ways (try Crash Course Statistics on YouTube, or the book *Naked Statistics*). Do you have a great background in basic statistics? Awesome! Check out free or paid statistics workshops and courses (like from Curran and Bauer, Statistics Canada, Statistical Horizons, CPA, etc.) on specific methods that you know will be helpful in labs where you want to work. Challenge yourself to learn some data analysis skills in R—there are TONS of free resources online. For people who want to work in my lab, exposure to structural equation modeling, mixture modeling, and multilevel modeling is excellent. Same recommendations go for qualitative methods, which are increasingly in demand in educational psychology (including my lab).
3. Work on your academic writing. One relatively easy way to do this is to read articles from top journals (in ed psych, that's *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, and *Educational Psychologist*) and pay close attention to the structures and writing norms. Other ideas include: taking university courses on academic writing (like McGill's Graphos courses), forming a writing group with others who are preparing for grad school or who are already in grad school, reading books on academic writing (like *How to Write a Lot* or *Air and Light and Time and Space*). And of course the best way to get better at writing is to write, get feedback, and revise. If there's anything from a course or from your prior research experiences that you could submit to a conference or journal, that's a great place to start working on your writing.
4. Relatedly: read, read, read. Recent issues of top journals in the field (e.g., *Educational Psychologist*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*) are always a good bet—they'll give you a snapshot of a wide variety of topics. If you have a rough idea of what you'd like to study, it's a good idea to start narrowing your focus and getting a handle on the most important literature to read on that topic. For this endeavor, handbook chapters will be your best friend, followed by the most relevant articles that are cited in those handbook chapters, and next the most relevant articles that have been published since that handbook chapter and that cite the chapter and/or the articles in the reference section of the handbook chapter. :)
5. Lastly: network! You probably already know it's common to reach out to professors you're interested in working with. But you should also consider reaching out directly to their current and former graduate students. They might not respond and they might say no, but you might luck out and get great advice, a detailed idea of what life is like in the lab, and even a future labmate/academic sibling! One thing that might help get your foot in the door: offer to help a current graduate student with whatever they're working on now.

Are you an undergraduate or master's student at McGill interested in gaining research experience? After reviewing this document, please fill out the following form:

<https://forms.office.com/r/mLVTYBvU4p>