

Steve Chang, Neuroscience :

“When considering PhD applicants for my lab, I look for the following characteristics.

(For Research)

I put emphasis on looking for candidates who show **strong interest in thinking about research topics at multiple levels of analysis** (e.g., behavior, brain areas, circuits, and neurons) regardless of one’s research focus at one of these levels. Second, I look for candidates who are **quantitatively strong and experienced** (or who are very interested in strengthening his/her quantitative skills in grad school). Finally, I value candidates who not only **think deeply about details**, but can also **view and think about big-picture aspects** of research.

(More Generally)

I also look for evidence of **demonstrated motivation** given that PhD research requires persistent motivation to successfully complete. I also try my best to evaluate the personal fit of the candidate for the lab – I particularly value candidates who are **capable of intellectually contributing his/her expertise to other projects** in the lab and who can **thrive in collaborative opportunities**.”

Molly Crockett, Social/Neuroscience:

“I consider the relationship between advisor and grad student to be a lifelong one. So the first thing I look for in applicants is a synergy of research interests - will we be able to generate new ideas together? The best way to show this in a grad school application is to read some papers from the prospective lab and discuss how you would expand on that work. Second, research experience is essential, ideally in a lab that uses similar methods or approaches to the lab you want to work in. Although this is not a hard-and-fast rule, I think it is more valuable to spend a longer period of time working in a single lab (1-2 years) rather than several short visits to multiple labs (e.g. 4 different labs over 2 years). The reason for this is that the research process is slow, and sustained commitment to a single lab means you will have more time to build a skill set and are more likely to have some research product to show for your time spent in the lab, whether that be a thesis, poster or co-authorship on an academic paper. Your lab advisor will also have more time to get to know you and thus can provide you with a stronger reference letter. I take references very seriously when considering applications as they can provide detailed information about

what it is like to work with the student. Finally, you cannot go wrong with investing time in learning how to program. There are many great resources online for this. Given how heavily our work relies on computational methods, if you already have fluency in R and/or Python this will make you a much stronger applicant.”

Tyrone Cannon, Clinical/Neuroscience:

“In general, I am looking for applicants who have shown independent research promise and a commitment to an area of inquiry that overlaps with my research interests/expertise. This is often demonstrated by way of a senior thesis project (on any topic, but with the theoretical motivation, data analysis, and interpretation largely student-driven) and a post-baccalaureate experience in a lab doing work of relevance to the major research themes of my lab’s work.”

Dylan Gee, Clinical/Developmental:

“For clinical psychology Ph.D. programs, it is typical to have some undergraduate research experience (often a senior thesis, but that is not necessary; having worked in a laboratory is also considered very valuable experience), and then to have 1-2 years of post-baccalaureate research experience (i.e., as a full-time research assistant). 2 years of a full-time research experience is more typical so that you have a year of that experience by the time you are applying to grad school, which gives you a more solid grounding in the lab, your new advisor will be able to write you a stronger letter, etc. However, some applicants might only take a year between undergrad and grad school, and some (but rarely) enter grad school right after undergraduate. For developmental programs, it is similar, except that the 1-2 years of post-bacc research experience may not be as essential (but still is a plus). For research experience, in general it's great if you can gain experience in a lab that has something in common with the labs you want to work in during graduate school. It certainly does not need to be in the exact same area of the field, but as one example, if you are applying to neuroimaging labs in clinical psych programs, it is optimal to have worked in a lab that uses neuroimaging before so that you have some exposure. Or if you're interested in early-life stress in children and how it increases risk for anxiety disorders, for example, it's great if your experiences have in some way linked with that - e.g., working in a lab that studies stress, or conducts research with anxious patients or with children.”