

Q: How do you get into a PhD program in Psychology, like the one at UCSD?

A: Admissions decisions are based primarily on your research experience and interests, your reference letters, and past academic performance (though the latter is the more minor consideration — a PhD is not about taking classes, but about doing research). Having an idea of the sort of research you are interested in is important so that we can assess whether your interests are aligned with what we do. Decisions in the UCSD Psychology Department are made by a combination of the individual professors and by an admissions committee — so keep in mind that you need to highlight which specific professor(s) you would want to work with, both in your statements and in the part of the application that explicitly asks about that. Regardless of how well you fit our lab and/or program, spots in graduate programs are very limited, and there's often a good bit of randomness in the process—it's a great idea to apply to many schools! If the application fees for different schools are prohibitive, you can request a waiver at most schools (UCSD here:

<https://grad.ucsd.edu/admissions/requirements/application-fee-and-fee-waiver/index.html>).

There are usually forms on the admissions website, but if not, you can email the school for more info. Getting a waiver will not affect your admission process at all — I'd love if it was free for everybody, but unfortunately our department doesn't control this. Unfortunately, waivers are federally funded and so not available for international students :(

Q: If I were to be accepted, how will I be funded for my studies?

A: At UCSD, your tuition, fees, and health insurance will be covered, and you will receive a stipend (full info on department website here:

<https://psychology.ucsd.edu/graduate-program/current-students/financial-information/overview.html>, links on the left side, i.e. 'student health insurance'). This applies equally to US-based and international students. The department support listed on the website is a *9-month stipend*, and our lab has always made a strong effort to provide significant additional summer funding (dependent on current grant funding, but generally the same as your standard funding level for those extra 3 months — though of course nothing is guaranteed). If students prefer, or if the lab does not have the funding, there are also opportunities to be funded through TAs during the summer, and after you advance to candidacy (in your ~4th year, with your dissertation proposal), you can also teach your own classes in the summer (as full instructor) if you have ambitions about teaching as part of your future career path. Of course, there are also many fellowships that can potentially supplement this income, some general (e.g., for US citizens, the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship) and some specific to our university or department (which we will nominate you for, but are not relevant until after you are admitted).

Q: Should I email the professor I am interested in working with before applying?

A: In Psychology, where individual professors tend to be very involved in admissions to their own labs, it is generally useful to email the professor you want to work with in advance, unless

that professor explicitly indicates they do not want you to on their website. I generally like getting such emails, especially in the fall when I have started thinking about admissions, as long as they detail your past experiences and what you see as your fit to the lab. That way, we can learn a bit more about your specific interest in our lab, as well as keep an eye out for your application once the time comes to decide on admissions. We can also let you know if we are definitely not taking any new PhD students, which happens and is useful information for you — that way you can reconsider the universities you are applying to, or at least list other faculty as your preferred advisors. (The UCSD Psych Faculty list website is usually up to date by September or so with which faculty are taking students; before that it may not be right).

I get a lot of emails, and many are clearly ChatGPT-generated, without much specific connection to my work. It's much more helpful if you make sure to write a little bit about your research background and interests in your email (Here are some tips: <https://lucklab.ucdavis.edu/blog/2018/9/17/emailing-faculty>). In general, I — and I suspect most professors except for those who have just started and are recruiting their first PhD student(s) — do not have time for individual phone calls or video chats before applications are submitted, but we're happy to let you know if we are accepting students and if you seem like a potential fit in terms of research interest. Note that while we try hard to respond to such emails, many professors may not be as responsive — and not getting a response to such an email definitely doesn't mean you won't be admitted to the program, so if you remain interested you should apply even to places where you did not get responses. (I respond to every one of those emails that I get, so if you don't get a response from me within 2 weeks, definitely send a reminder).

Q: Can I contact graduate students as well?

Once you are offered a phone interview or invited for an in-person interview, then contacting graduate students can be a great way to learn more about the program, the advisor's mentoring style, and the lab culture. However, please be aware that graduate students cannot directly influence admissions decisions.

Q: Is there anything I should do in the semester before applying?

One thing that US citizen students tend to not know is that they can apply for the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship (NSF GRFP) before even applying to graduate school (e.g., in the same Fall semester they apply to PhD programs). If you can manage it, this is a great idea, because the NSF GRFP allows you to apply before you start graduate school and again once after you start — and these are treated totally independently. So if you don't apply before graduate school, you simply lose one of your two chances (and no matter what your chances when applying, they are >0%!). Importantly, what you propose doing in this fellowship and who you propose doing it with is NOT BINDING. You can propose doing something with your current lab, even if you have no intention of staying there for your PhD, for example — it is more like a class project “proposal” than an actual commitment to doing that

specific project. You can use it as a good chance to think through your research interests, which you'll need to do for your PhD materials in any case.

Q: How can I reduce the cost of applications?

As noted above, application fee waivers can be very helpful in reducing costs of grad applications! (if you are eligible; international students are sadly not eligible). Another cost is GRE testing/sending scores, and many schools have recently started either waiving GRE requirements or making them optional. Contrary to undergraduate admissions/grad programs in other fields, GRE scores matter much less than you might think, though can be helpful to show quantitative expertise if that is not represented in your classwork. If you're on the fence about taking/sending your GRE scores but have started emailing with a PI, you may be able to ask for their input, as they'll have the best idea of what they (or their department's admissions committee) are looking for.

Here at UCSD, different faculty tend to weigh them different amounts. The Brady lab considers GREs as a potential boost when available — particularly if they are the most clear evidence of your quantitative skills, which is something we value in our lab — but definitely they are secondary to research experience and other aspects of the application. Although this information may not be published on websites beforehand, interview costs are partially/fully subsidized, and the admissions coordinator would have more information if you're offered an interview.

- Link to UCSD application fee waiver:
<https://grad.ucsd.edu/admissions/requirements/application-fee-and-fee-waiver/index.html>
- Educational Testing Service. (n.d.). GRE fee reduction program.
https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/fees/reductions
- Educational Testing Service. (n.d.). GRE General Test at home.
https://www.ets.org/s/cv/gre/at-home/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=search-us&utm_keyword=GRE-at-home&utm_content=GRE-at-Home&utm_campaign=AtHomeGRE20
- Educational Testing Service. (n.d.). Prepare for the GRE General Test.
https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare

Q: If I want to work in the Brady lab, what kind of skills would be most valuable?

The primary thing we look for in applicants is relevant research experience. Before we commit to providing our guidance, energy and time to help you for the next 5-6 years of full time research on a topic, it is very important — both for us and you — to know that you really want to do this work! There is no way to know if you actually enjoy research & have the self-motivation to continue with it without actually doing it, so this is the main thing you need to do before applying — get as much relevant research experience as possible. However, in addition to research

experience, there are other skills that turn out to be pretty important in our field for success in graduate school.

In our particular lab, this is largely statistical and technical knowledge, especially programming. You can never know too much statistics, and you can definitely never be too prepared for the graduate-level statistics classes you'll need to take as a PhD student. And in our field, implementing experiments and analyzing data also requires some significant knowledge of programming — we tend to use a mixture of R, Python, Javascript, Matlab, and other languages. Of course, nobody knows everything before they start, and graduate school is a great time to learn such things as well, but having at least some background in statistics and programming tends to give you a big head start in PhD programs. You could learn some of this by taking classes, or learn for free using something like CodeAcademy, Coursera, or EdX.

Q: If I don't get into a graduate program I like, can I apply again to the same programs the next year?

Yes! For sure. We definitely are happy to see applications from people who applied in previous years and in no way hold this against you. Most likely, it is a positive — if you've improved your application in the subsequent year, it shows determination and perseverance.

Q: Where can I get more information about the application process or life as a graduate student?

RESOURCES FOR APPLICANTS

- Our department's undergraduate website has some great resources for applying to graduate school:
<https://psychology.ucsd.edu/undergraduate-program/undergraduate-resources/graduate-career-resources/applying-grad-school/index.html>
- American Psychological Association. (n.d.). Graduate study in psychology.
<https://gradstudy.apa.org/>
- Psychology Grad School Wiki for Prospective Psych Grad Students. (n.d.). 2021 psychology grad school positions. <http://psychgradsearch.wikidot.com>
- A great collection of resources for Cognitive Neuroscience in general:
<https://meta-meta-resources.org>
- Advice for applying to Psych. PhDs: <http://www.katenuss.com/advice/>
<https://psychology.fas.harvard.edu/faq/how-can-i-maximize-my-chances-being-admitted>
- Advice about PhDs:
<http://www.cns.nyu.edu/events/growingupinscience/What%20I%20wish%20I%20had%20known%20about%20doing%20a%20PhD%20-%20Q%20and%20A.pdf>

SOME HELPFUL BOOKS

- *A Field Guide To Graduate School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum* by Jessica McCrory Calarco

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691201092/a-field-guide-to-grad-school>

- *So You Want to be a Neuroscientist?* by Ashley Juavinett (a faculty member in the UCSD Neurosciences Program!)

<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/so-you-want-to-be-a-neuroscientist/9780231190893>