

**Advice From Retired School Psychology Faculty  
To Graduate Students**

*“Whatever you do, be sure to...”*

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## BACKGROUND

Data for the current project were derived from *Advice From Retired School Psychology Faculty to Graduate Students, Beginning School Psychologists, and Faculty: "Whatever you do, be sure to..."* (Prus & Swerdlik, 2022).

In the original project, the authors compiled an initial list of notable, retired school psychology faculty and contact information from among known colleagues, who in turn recommended and provided contact information for others.

From that list we sent 43 invitations to participate, received 37 responses, and ultimately had 31 contributors (a 72% response rate). Initial requests and follow-up reminders occurred via email.

Contributors included a virtual who's who of retired school psychology faculty, including former presidents of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), former board members of the Trainers of School Psychologists (TSP), NASP Lifetime Achievement Award winners, and leaders and award winners of the Council of Directors of School Psychology Programs (CDSPP), Division 16 of the American Psychological Association (APA), and other organizations. Some authors initiated or contributed to major policies or initiatives at the state, regional, and/or national levels. Collectively, they authored countless grants, professional articles, book chapters and books, psychoeducational tests, and other professional materials for graduate students, practitioners, faculty, administrators, and policy makers.

Each participant was asked to provide a brief biography, along with up to five responses to each of the following questions:

- What is the best advice you can give to a graduate student starting out in school psychology?
- What is the best advice you can give to a new school psychology faculty member?
- What is the best advice you can give to a new school psychology graduate program director?
- What is the best advice you can give to a beginning school psychologist?
- What is the best advice you can give to a retiring school psychologist or school psychology faculty member?

The present project consisted of a qualitative analysis of the *advice for graduate students*. We reviewed each response and created themes by which responses could be categorized. Once final themes were determined, we completed a final classification of responses. Those themes and responses are listed below.

### References

Prus, J. & Swerdlik M. (Eds.). (2022). *Advice From Retired School Psychology Faculty to Graduate Students, Beginning School Psychologists, and Faculty: "Whatever you do, be sure to..."*

National Association of School Psychologists. Retrieved from:

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/graduate-educators>

## CONTRIBUTORS

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## THEMES

(N=Number of responses within the theme.)

### **Collaborate With Your Fellow Students/Develop a Support System (N=14)**

- Create strong collegial/peer collaborations and friendship—you will need a peer support system.
- At the start of your program, it is hard to image that some people in your program will become lifelong friends. It has been more than 40 years since I graduated and I continue to communicate with fellow students I met in graduate school. Some of them are close personal friends. We meet at conferences and go out for a meal and catch up. In your first year, you should use classes and social gatherings to make new friends. **Avoid the temptation to associate only with those who look like you.** Consider yourself successful if you see diversity when you look at your group of friends. Make plans to meet other students and explore the assets of the community outside of the university.
- Find your support system. You will likely have academic and emotional challenges along the way. The members of your cohort and advanced students in the program can help you navigate these challenges, as can family and friends. Don't forget program faculty as part of your support system.
- Use your colleagues as a support group; you will get each other through.
- Collaborate with fellow students and spend time getting to know your cohort.
- Collaborate; don't compete with your fellow graduate students. The more that your cohort of students works together, the more rewarding and successful your experience will be.
- Work diligently to develop sound relationships with colleagues and administrators.
- Get to know the people in your cohort. They may become your best friends over your career because most of your family may never understand what you do. Most will think you are a guidance counselor!
- Value your cohort members. You will find you are creating lifelong friendships and you will keep in touch with your cohort members as you move through life stages.
- Collaborate to graduate. You are in a group. Help each other. Form study groups. Support each other emotionally. Don't cheat, but support each other as you go through these next few years. You will also learn vital teamwork skills along the way!
- Create a private, online group for quick communication and discussion among students in your cohort.
- Find time to socialize with your cohort.
- Get to know your classmates. You will need each other more than you can imagine.
- Support and get to know your fellow students/cohort. They will be your colleagues when you graduate!

### **Identify and Make Use of Mentors/Get to Know Faculty (N=12)**

- Identify mentors who can provide support and guidance and who will serve as strong role models very early in your program.
- Seek mentorship from others in the profession and engage in activities with them to foster

your development (e.g., your professors, advanced graduate students, school psychologists working in nearby schools). When seeking mentorship, do not limit yourself to only those in your graduate program. Technology allows you to discover and benefit from mentors across the country and world.

- Seek practical advice from advanced students. They will feel respected, and you will learn something.
- Get to know your faculty and visit with them when questions arise.
- Contact faculty (using email if the matter is not urgent). Know faculty office hours, open door policies, and other available hours and try to schedule appointments accordingly. When you meet with faculty individually, take notes because you won't remember everything.
- Seek out and listen to your advisor before you register for classes!
- Get to know your faculty. You are no longer an undergrad. You are a professional in the making. Faculty are more like older peers than what you experienced before.
- Have regular advising sessions to be sure you are on the right track to program completion. Develop a degree plan from the start.
- Find someone you can count on to help you, guide you, and support you.
- Build strong relationships with your faculty/mentors and fellow graduate students. Understand your professors have a vested interest in facilitating your success. The relationships you establish will be ones you will value both professionally and personally throughout your life and career.
- Consider your faculty members to be mentors and resources. Seek them out!
- Find supervisors, mentors, advisors, and faculty that you respect, and be willing and open to learn from them.

### **Practice Self Care (N=10)**

- Enjoy your life while in graduate school.
- Achieving a successful school–life balance is a major challenge. The demands in graduate classes greatly exceed those in undergraduate classes. On top of thousands of pages of reading, you will also have field experiences and work with children, teachers, and parents. While at practicum settings you will be expected to conduct yourself as a professional to help solve difficult problems. With such high demands from the program, it is easy to lose the equilibrium between schoolwork and healthy personal habits. In order to have time complete classwork and practicum responsibilities, I have heard students say they had to give up sleep and activities such as walking, hiking, running, cycling, yoga, Pilates, or dancing. My advice is to keep the healthy habits that help charge your batteries. If you find yourself starting to struggle, meet with your advisor or the faculty member with whom you feel you have the best connection.
- Make time for yourself.
- Relax. Your program chose you because the faculty members believe you will be successful.
- Remember to find time for yourself! All work and no play will make you a very dull person. Enjoy your breaks. Hang out with friends and family. Get some exercise, take up yoga or catch up on those movies or television programs you missed.
- Practice self-care—graduate school is hard and can be emotionally and mentally

- exhausting.
- Make ongoing self-care a priority!
  - Stay connected to your family and friends. Graduate school will be intense and immersive. It can be overwhelming. It is important to remember that at the end of it all, you will want to share your accomplishments with people you love—so don't neglect them (too much!) along the way.
  - Be your authentic self. Don't sacrifice yourself, no matter what.
  - You are the future. Take care of yourself.

### **Focus on Child Advocacy/Diversity/Social Justice (N=9)**

- Always consider advocacy, equity, and social justice as among your most important roles or functions.
- Always remember that in the end, it is about the children.
- Ask questions, even if it means taking a risk, especially as we work to be antiracist. Actions speak louder than words.
- First and foremost, understand the ultimate function of a school psychologist is child advocacy.
- Understand that learning to work collaboratively with others is critically important, but realize there will be times in your career where your expertise and decision-making must prevail and your advocacy for a child will put you at odds with others (including your employer).
- Always understand the professional decisions you make will have a life-long impact on the children and families you serve.
- Recognize you are entering a profession in which you can touch the future, impacting the lives of many children and families.
- Be open to working with all kinds of children. The variability among public school children is huge.
- Understand that your role as a child advocate will take many forms, requiring you be highly skilled in a broad range of professional competencies. Maximize your opportunity to develop your applied and research skills while in training.

### **Establish a Professional Identity/Connect With The Profession (N=9)**

- Establish and foster your identity with the profession as soon as you begin your graduate program. One example is to obtain a student membership in professional school psychology associations (e.g., NASP, APA, state association ... whatever you can afford).
- Join your local and national professional associations. They will be excellent sources of continuing support, advocacy, and information in the field.
- Join local, state, regional, and national professional associations. Read the journals and newsletters that find their way to your inbox. Attend professional meetings while you are still a student.
- Join your state association and national organizations if affordable.
- Join NASP as a student member. The benefits that you'll receive at a discounted student rate (e.g., subscription to the *Communiqé* and *School Psychology Review*, discounted

liability insurance rates for internship, professional development opportunities, career center) are well worth it and will help introduce you to the national school psychology community. If you are in a doctoral program, consider joining APA as well.

- Jump into local, state, and national professional associations, including attending as many professional conferences as you can. This will broaden your perceptions of our field and just might lead to contacts that will be important later in your career moving forward.
- Engage with the professional organizations in the field at state and national levels.
- Maintain membership in professional organizations at the state and national levels.
- Be aware that you stand on the shoulders of others that came before you. Honor them.

### **Identify and Pursue Career Goals and Interests (N=8)**

- Select a program that clearly aligns with your goals and career objectives.
- Determine your professional interests, and steadfastly pursue them throughout your career; don't chase fads.
- Find ways to cultivate that aspect of school psychology that stirs your passion. Some students enter with an all-consuming passion for serving individuals on the autism spectrum. Others are driven by a strong desire to address the critical need for social justice in schools. Some students enter with broadly defined goals. My advice to this latter group is to seek diverse experiences while in the program and your passion will find you. Once your passion finds you, seek students and faculty who share your passion. Do not limit yourself to people in your program or department.
- Identify a specific area of practice you are passionate about.
- Clearly state your *why*—that is, *why* you do what you passionately do.
- If you are planning to conduct any research, select an area of investigation that you are passionate about. This is so very important.
- Keep an open mind with regard to specialties... Although you may initially have certain leanings, you will learn a great deal over the years and may very well change your mind as you gain additional experiences, practicum activities, and coursework.
- Find a part of school psychology that you really love and pursue it with passion.

### **Take Responsibility for Your Own Learning and Professional Development (N=8)**

- Be audacious; don't wait for some future event to occur before you take risks.
- Take advantage of every professional opportunity offered, no matter how small.
- Remember that you are responsible for your own development as a graduate student. Do not leave it up to professors to tell you what to do. So much of your professional growth needs to happen outside a graduate school classroom, and much of your growth requires you to be active and strategic—to seek, discover, and engage in activities on your own.
- Be prepared to work very hard, get along with fellow students and faculty, and learn to apply your new skills. These will be long, short years in your professional development.
- Be intellectually curious and ask questions. Don't just do the bare minimum.
- Motivation and curiosity are excellent qualities often reflected in class participation. Think about how and when to ask questions or raise issues in class.
- Be humble about how much you think school psychologists know about the complex interactions of schools, teachers, children, families, and society. You will be learning a

lot about what we think we know at this point, but school psychology, psychology, and education are relatively young fields. What we think we know will change over time. Information and practices you will learn in grad school will be revised over your career. So be careful to remember that we do the best we can with the information we have at the time. Stay up to date with best practices. Over time, you must, because best practices will change.

- Never stop learning and challenging yourself to grow professionally, personally, and spiritually. Don't ever accept the idea that you are a finished product at the time of your completion of internship or at graduation, or even when you get certified or licensed.

### **Recognize That Becoming a School Psychologist Entails Much More Than Classroom Learning/Seek Learning Opportunities (N=7)**

- Don't be limited in your academic and clinical work to the minimum requirements of the program. Universities are fabulous cornucopias of opportunity. You'll never have opportunities at these prices for such growth. If the program is assessment heavy, figure out ways to get more counseling/therapy training.
- Recognize that success as a graduate student and as a school psychologist is dependent on more than mastery of academic material.
- Keep up with professional resources (journals, newsletters, websites, Listservs, social media, books, etc.). Learn all you can about the profession, beyond required course readings, and keep reading and learning. If you cannot afford some key resources, add them to your lists for birthday and holiday gifts, so that others can buy them for you.
- Concentrate on learning rather than grades. When you think about classes, the wrong question is, "What's my grade?" The right question is, "Am I learning the skills that will make me a successful school psychologist?" Learning is a lifelong activity where you're rarely graded, but competence is highly valued.
- School psychology practice is comprised of both technical and relational expertise. You will be learning lots about the technical aspects of practice—like administering and interpreting tests and conducting FBAs to inform BIPs—but the relational aspects are every bit as (and often more) important.
- Stay engaged and make yourself master both the knowledge and the skills of effective school psychologists.
- As soon as you can afford to do so, attend professional school psychology conferences (especially NASP and APA, if you can). NASP, APA, and state associations often have grants or reduced fees for graduate students.

### **Have Fun/Enjoy the Experience (N=7)**

- Have fun and look forward to getting up every day to create the vision of your future.
- Enjoy graduate school. Learning is fun!
- Have fun. You will meet new people with a common interest (i.e., helping children and adolescents be successful in school) who will share a common training experience. That's a formula for developing friendships. The missing ingredient is activities outside the classroom. Be open to opportunities on campus and in the community to develop memories that will last a lifetime.



- Acknowledge and **enjoy** the important work that you do.
- Enjoy the journey, taking time to smell the roses. As you look back, this may well be some of the best years of your life.
- Maintain a positive attitude, knowing in advance that there will be really difficult days!
- Above all, enjoy yourself and make the most of your experience.

### **If Your Program Requires a Thesis, Dissertation, or Other Research Project, Seek Opportunities to Acquire Research Knowledge and Skills (N=6)**

- If your program requires a thesis, dissertation, or similar research project, identify areas of research interest and create or seek a graduate student research agenda you can implement in your time in the program.
- Be hungry for opportunities for research with others. You may not feel totally confident in your research abilities but you will learn—and who knows, you may find yourself considering an academic job one day.
- Remember that the best thesis or dissertation is one that is done.
- Become excruciatingly familiar with everything that's been published on your topic of interest before venturing forth with a research idea and research plan of your own! You should always have a deep appreciation for everything written on the topic—including familiarity with all the prior research on the topic—before thinking about proposing your own research idea.
- Take an active role in research if there is even the slightest chance that you might go into higher education some day.

### **Go Beyond the Minimum (N=5)**

- Get involved in the leadership activities of the program.
- Be open to new experiences.
- Take on new challenges.
- Be flexible.
- Take advantage of the opportunities for learning that are all around you.

### **Recognize That Graduate School Is Very Different Than Undergraduate Studies (N=5)**

- Your transition to being a professional begins on Day 1. Foster your own sense of intellectual curiosity to the extent that you can go beyond what seems to be a set of givens and think about hypothesis testing as a way of life.
- Remember that you aren't an undergraduate any longer.
- Graduate school is qualitatively and quantitatively different. It is not just an extension of college. There is as big a difference between college and graduate school as there was between high school and college.
- Treat the transition from undergraduate studies to graduate school much like going from college sports to the pros. In fact, in seeking to become a school psychologist you are attempting to go pro!
- Stop thinking like an undergraduate! You were likely an excellent undergraduate student, but graduate work isn't school; it's a job, even if unpaid. Your professors aren't your

teachers, they are your supervisors or, perhaps, even your mentors.

### **Don't Be Afraid To Ask Questions or Admit That You Are Struggling (N=5)**

- Ask for help. Don't be afraid to look stupid.
- If you find yourself starting to struggle, meet with your advisor or the faculty member with whom you feel you have the best connection.
- Whatever do you, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." I know it's scary, but it can be very liberating at the same time. You are not the only one sitting in the room who does not know everything about school psychology. Be open to all that you will learn from everyone you meet, including the children you work with over your career.
- Making mistakes is part of learning. Be prepared to make mistakes. Learn from them, grow from them, but don't dwell on them and don't blame your professors.
- Recognize that faculty understand that unexpected events that impact your performance in your graduate program can occur in your life and the lives of your loved ones (death, sickness, divorce, etc.). If you are struggling, don't hesitate to let trusted faculty know. You will no doubt find them understanding and able to help problem solve.

### **Practice Time Management (N=4)**

- Take it one step at a time. Successful completion of the degree is simply built on successful completion of each assignment, course, and semester.
- Use time management skills to organize academic and practicum requirements.
- Learn to manage your time well. You are about to enter a 3–6-year time period when you will learn more and work harder than you could have ever imagined. You will have to learn to manage your time well—so get and use a planner, set schedules, and stick to both!
- Get organized. Have a way to keep track of where you're supposed to be and when things are due. Develop a filing system for all the information you will accumulate so you can access it when you want to use it.

### **Obtain Information About Your Program, the Profession, and Potential Practica and Internship Sites as Soon as Possible (N=4)**

- Familiarize yourself with program and university policies. Read the program handbook!
- Get on-the-job information very soon so you can be sure of what the field is about and your decision to pursue this field.
- Look for, and volunteer for, as many different practicum and clinical experiences as you have time to fit into your busy semester.
- Spend time with a school psychology student so you can understand the amount of time you will need to devote to your studies.

### **Act with Integrity and Respect (N=4)**

- Develop professional integrity and character—never compromise either.
- Always be respectful of others.

- Honor your commitments. If you make a commitment to a project, follow through.
- Be very careful about using social media. Don't speak disparagingly about your program, colleagues, faculty, field sites, or especially clients. Keep in mind that when you apply for jobs, your social media posts can come back to haunt you!

### **Emphasize Scientifically-Based Practice (N=3)**

- Separate the scientific from the emotional. Both are important, but science should be the dominant factor.
- Learn enough to think you are correct, and then learn more so that you realize you were wrong.
- Learn enough to be able to separate science from nonsense.

### **Be Persistent/Avoid Procrastination (N=3)**

- Procrastination is not your friend in graduate school. Keep up with your assigned readings and assignment deadlines.
- Don't make perfection the enemy of the good (old adage).
- Be persistent in your work.
- Finish your program in as timely a fashion as possible.

### **Seek Out, and Take Advantage of Practica and Internship Opportunities (N=3)**

- Explore practicum possibilities with different populations, including those serving more severely disabled people than typically are available in school settings.
- You always have things to learn in your practicum and internship placements—sometimes those are things you want to make sure you do in your own practice, and sometimes they are things you never want to do—but there are always things to learn, even if you do not like something about your placement!
- Seek out the best practicum and internship experiences.

### **Be Open to Feedback (N=2)**

- Learn to accept critical feedback graciously, and use that feedback to improve your performance.
- Appreciate that becoming fully competent as a psychologist requires a ton of closely supervised experience. Don't be shy about asking for feedback so that you can learn and hone new skills.

### **Get to Know Department Staff (N=2)**

- Get to know the department secretary as a fellow human being. They are often the sources of historical program wisdom and procedural knowledge, and may one day be a friendly ear when you need one.
- Respect and thank/appreciate the office staff and advisors; they can help you work through most any situation with regards to registration, program benchmarks, payroll and

funding, lost dogs, etc.

### **Become a Proficient Writer/Become Proficient in APA Style (N=2)**

- If you are not already, become skilled in APA style quickly: It will start you out already on first base.
- Become a proficient writer; the person who writes controls the narrative.

### **Practice Your Listening and Speaking (N=2)**

- Demonstrate (and work to improve) your skills as a good listener and collaborative problem solver.
- Practice speaking in front of groups by actively participating in class.

### **Miscellaneous (N=4)**

- Seek financial aid wherever it exists and don't be too afraid to use loans for survival but not for things you just want.
- Be aware that you will grow personally as well as professionally; this may impact your personal relationships if your partner/family does not also find a way to grow with you. You will come out a different person than you were going in—make it a positive change!
- Pay attention to what you are taught about education law. School psychology is a highly regulated profession.
- Develop a good answer for “How is a school psychologist different from a guidance counselor?”