

# Advice from JMU Psychology Alumni

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**H**ave you been wondering about what you really need to do in college to prepare yourself for post-graduate study? Maybe you are just trying to decide whether Grad school is really for you. Well, you're not alone in having these sorts of questions. We have tried to get some answers. We asked Alumni Peer Advisors for their advice. We asked them what they would tell undergraduate Psychology Majors, knowing what they now know about the "real world" after experiencing graduate studies. Some of their answers might surprise you. The students we interviewed included Jessica Vogt, a second year graduate student in JMU's Counseling program; Ryanne Cannady, now a first year graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Jill Sundheim, currently living in Virginia Beach working for the Virginia Preschool Initiative grant which provides free preschool for four-year olds in at-risk situations; and Amanda Sawetz-Glasener, who is taking some time off after graduation to travel.

## What classes should students take?

An overwhelming majority of our panel members agreed that Field Placement was their most valuable and applicable academic experience. Jess Vogt, stated, "Field Placement is by far one of the most important classes that I took as an undergraduate. It helped me to solidify what it was that I wanted to do and gave me hands-on experience." Even if you are not sure exactly what field you would like to study or work, Field Placement offers a great opportunity to try several different things. Hey, even learning what you don't like leaves you better off than when you started.

Overall, what our psychology veterans recommended most was trying different electives. One student stated, "I found electives to be the most useful and interesting...because I chose the ones that interested me the most...I felt like I learned more." You have many different options that could open doors of interest you may never have expected. Psychology electives mentioned included Psychology of Women and Gender, Psychology of Learning and Death and Dying.

## Now that you are done with your Bachelor's Degree, is there anything you wish you had done differently?

The most common answer to this question was taking a foreign language. Ryanne Cannady admitted, "I wish I had taken some foreign language classes, simply because in the human service field, it is almost required to be bi-lingual...it may give you that edge over other applicants in the work force." Several students mentioned it would have benefited them greatly if they knew how to speak Spanish.

Another suggestion was made by graduate Jill Sundheim who stated "Now that I am done with my undergraduate work, I wish that I took more time to just talk with my professors about my academic life and their own career paths. It took me a while to find what it was that I

wanted to do with my education, and talking to professors about possible paths can help you gain perspective from someone who knows you and who knows your academic/professional strengths and weaknesses. Getting a professor's point of view can help more than a friend or relatives since they know the area of study, they've seen your work, and know your personality. Since they know both the academic and the personal side of you well, professors can give you an outsiders opinion and help to open your eyes to possibilities you didn't see coming!"

### **For those of you now in graduate school, how is life different from college? What is it like?**

Jess Vogt said, "the lifestyle is much different...I think part of the reason it is so different is that it is concentrated in whatever your field is that you enjoy. There is no Gen-ed to sit through...I actually love every class that I take. It's great to be surrounded by people who all have the same interests as you." Ryanne admits, "I'm not going to lie to anyone and say that it isn't overwhelming when you first start grad school...there is not as much busy work...everything you're doing ties into whatever program you're in. Mostly, the point is for you to really learn the skills and concepts through practice and hands-on experience." The general opinion was that graduate school was a much more focused and intense study experience.

### **What would you suggest for students who aren't sure what they want to do after JMU?**

The group reacted that it's all right to be uncertain about what you want to do. They wanted us to convey that if you are in this situation, you aren't the only one! Amanda Sawetz-Glasener is taking some time off after graduation. She says "I decided to take this year to travel. I felt that my brain needed a break from academics, and I also wanted to be sure I went back to school for something I was definitely interested in. As a psychology student, one has many options to choose from for further study, and it can be hard to decipher between them all, and decide what one wants to focus on." It's okay not to know exactly what you want to do. Try different things and don't be afraid to talk to the people who have already been through it: your faculty!"

The best way to learn what's best for you is to get involved! For starters, get to know your professors! Your professors "have been there and done that." Don't be afraid to ask for advice. Your professors are clearly doing all right for themselves, and might just be a good source of information. Jill Sundheim suggests "Leave college with friendships and mentors that you can turn to for years to come-believe me, you'll want to!

Also, be sure to focus your time. Employers are most interested in a candidate who fully dedicates and involves themselves in a select few organizations than those who scatter their involvement in activities that might "look good." Don't waste your time; pick something you are passionate about. But overall, ask questions! You are surrounded by answers to nearly all your questions.