

EXPERIENCES OF APPLICANTS TO COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAMS:
APPLICANTS' USE OF TRAINING PROGRAM WEB PAGES

by

Graham Alexander Hunter

(Under the Direction of Alan E. Stewart)

ABSTRACT

Research examining applicants' experiences using professional psychology training program web sites is scarce at best. This study used an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, grounded theory methodology, and interpretive and constant comparison analysis to develop a model of the process applicants undergo when applying to Counseling Psychology programs through the use of program web pages. Derived from applicants' experiences, the model suggests that applicants in this study used the Internet as a primary means for researching programs, deciding on the programs where they would apply, and obtaining application instructions; yet, applicants based their final decision about which program to attend on their interview experiences. This model has important implications for how training programs design their web sites and recruit students.

INDEX WORDS: Applicant, Recruitment, Professional Psychology, Counseling Psychology, Web Design, Grounded Theory, Training Program

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

In the past decade there have been significant changes in the capabilities, speed, and capacity of information technology. At the same time the size and cost of these technologies have decreased and they have become integrated into daily life and work. The prevailing trends indicate that Internet, email, cell phone use have and will become increasingly ubiquitous across all age, cultural, and economic groups (Fox & Vitak, 2008). Furthermore, the Internet and email have revolutionized the way that many people work within academia (Madden & Jones, 2008). Periodically, members of the academy have considered how changes in information technology will continue to change the way universities function (Wulf, 1995), and likewise within the field of psychology authors have considered how these technologies have and will affect clinical practice (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998; Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005; Prochaska & Norcross, 2003), and graduate education and training (Belar, 1998).

It seems that within this discussion the impact of information technology on the recruitment of students to graduate programs in psychology has been largely overlooked. The process of recruiting and applying to professional psychology programs has changed with advances in technology, and it is likely that program web sites have replaced traditional paper application packets (Bidell, Ragen, Broach, & Carrillo, 2007). There exists a body of knowledge on the use of print materials to attract applicants (Williamson, Lepak, & King; 2003), a body of literature on use of the Internet in recruiting practices in the business world (Lievens & Harris,

2003), and some research specific to diversity and traditional recruiting practices in graduate programs in psychology (Bernal, Barron & Leary, 1983; Bidell et al., 2002; Munoz-Dunbar & Stanton, 1999; Ponterotto, Burkard, Yoshida, Cancelli, 1995; Yoshida, Cancelli, Sowinski, & Bernhardt, 1989). Until recently (Bidell et al., 2007) there were no published studies examining how the Internet has changed the recruiting practices of psychology programs. Historically, directors of training and others who are responsible for recruiting students to programs likely made themselves familiar with available information on traditional recruiting methods. However, with the development of the Internet, current recruiting practices only vaguely resemble traditional ones and potential for a technological “generation gap” exists.

Professional psychology programs have evolved to some extent with this transition. For example, all APA accredited Counseling Psychology programs have developed some presence on the Internet, but there is wide variability in their web pages. Some program web sites consist of single page, black and white documents with few links, while other programs have more elaborate multiple page web sites with many links, pictures, and attention to formatting and navigation (Hunter, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart, 2009).

In sum, the Internet has changed the process of applying to professional psychology programs and programs have made some preliminary adaptations in response to the Internet, but often without the guidance of research or theory. This is problematic; without research on how the Internet influences the behaviors of applicants, directors of training cannot make informed decisions about how to best use the existing Internet technology for recruitment. Moreover, it is counter to the scientist practitioner ideal. Therefore, there is need for a theoretical model of how applicants use professional psychology web pages during the application process and how they use these pages to make decisions.

Significance of the Study

This study is a first in the area of recruitment and training in professional psychology. Publications (APA, 2007; 2009c) and web sites (<http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/gradschl.html>) have suggest steps, outlines, or timelines of the application process, yet these are neither empirical nor evidence based. Such efforts often fail to capture the applicants experience or the impact of technology on the process. Moreover, until recently there were no published studies on the web pages that are created by training programs in professional psychology. Bidell and colleagues (2007) recently examined professional psychology program web sites with the purpose of surveying for information related to minority populations. Hunter, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart's (2009) prior research surveyed the content of Counseling Psychology program web pages. No published study has systematically or holistically researched the use of these web pages. The proposed study would fill a need for theory to explain how applicants use the Web during their application process. By gathering information on the experience of applicants this research investigates the first step in the process by which individuals become part of the profession. By evaluating the process, individuals within the field can make informed decisions that may improve the recruitment and selection of the field's future practitioners.

There are also a number of secondary benefits of this study. The study gave voice to applicants, who are not often given such voice, in the education and training literature or in the process related to organizing recruitment. Publication of this study would create a dialog and increase awareness about the use of the Web during the process of applying to professional psychology programs.

Purpose of the Study

A gap exists between what is known about the interface of technology and recruitment of students (e.g., how potential applicants use web pages when searching for jobs), and what is known about best practices in traditional recruiting practices in professional psychology. Because there are no published studies which examine experiences of applicants in using the Internet to apply to professional psychology programs, grounded theory lends itself to examining this topic (Creswell, 2007). In collecting and analyzing in-depth interviews about students' application process, this researcher was able to create a theoretical model of how applicants use Counseling Psychology program web pages during the application process and how these pages help them make decisions. The primary purpose of this study was to develop a theoretical model of the role that Counseling Psychology program web pages play for applicants in the process of applying to Counseling Psychology programs. This model will allow directors of training to sharpen and direct their recruitment tools, and make web sites more effective tools as programs attempt to communicate with and attract potential applicants.

Theoretical Background

There is some extant theory on the use of the Internet in recruitment in general (Lievens & Harris, 2003) and only two known studies specific to web pages of psychology programs (Bidell et al., 2007; Hunter et al., 2009). This study was guided by research and theory from the field of business and marketing on the role that the Internet plays in recruitment and theories about effective web design. The study was also guided by a preliminary study conducted by this researcher, which surveyed the content of Counseling Psychology programs' web sites (Hunter et al., 2009).

The Internet as a Recruiting Tool

Web pages, as a method of attracting job applicants, have grown tremendously over the past decade and have become critical to attracting applicants. The Web is often the first method people use to gain in-depth information about an organization (Williamson et al., 2003). Web sites are salient in recruitment and can be a critical first step to attracting applicants.

There are a number of traditional ways that applicants can be drawn to a program, including personal relationships with faculty, alumni, and students and undergraduate master's level experiences. However, reliance on traditional recruitment methods can be problematic as social networks tend to refer friends, relatives, and trainees. Reliance on traditional recruitment channels can perpetuate discriminatory recruitment (Pruitt & Isaac, 1985). In contrast, the Internet has the potential to be the most in-depth, accessible, and far reaching method of recruitment.

Research in the field of Industrial-Organizational Psychology indicates that recruitment practices have a direct effect on the size and quality of an organization's initial pool of applicants. As organizations must choose their members from their applicant pool, recruitment practices eventually affect the quality of those who form the organization. It is evident that organizations that have large applicant groups have better choice in filling their available positions, thus, obtaining a large number of applicants is an early goal of many organizations' recruitment efforts (Braddy, Thompson, Wuensch, Grossnickle, 2003; Cober, Brown, Levy, Cober, & Keeping, 2003; Williamson et al., 2003). To obtain a large pool of qualified applicants, it is important to maintain an attractive recruitment image and have an awareness of what is attractive to applicants (Braddy et al., 2003). Thus, it is likely that an academic program's web site is a critical initial step to gaining quality applicants and maintaining the quality of those who

form the program's student body. Additionally, the Internet offers a cost effective and efficient recruiting and application process (Biddel et al, 2007; Braddy et al., 2003) by eliminating time and costs associated with printing and mailing. Also, if properly updated, a web site can be far more time sensitive than printed materials.

The Importance of Web Design

The design of a web site is important to influencing a potential applicant's decision-making process (Cober et al., 2003; Cober, Brown, Keeping, & Levy, 2004; Williamson et al., 2003). In one study 26% of students chose not to apply based solely on an organization's poorly designed web site (Williamson et al., 2003). A number of Web design factors, which can be used to promote an organization's recruitment image, are discussed in the literature. Cober, Brown & Levy (2004) describe three areas in which web sites could be described: form, content, and function; these areas are used to describe a site's aesthetics, information, and usability, respectively. The manner in which color, text formatting, pictures, video, et cetera are used can have a major effect on the attractiveness of a web site. The use of photographs, presented in an ordered and relevant manner, is recommended to improve an organizations recruitment image (Braddy et al., 2003). Additionally, the inclusion of photos of personnel on an organization's web site has been linked to applicants being more attracted to an organization. In one study, applicants rated sites with photos of personnel as more personable and more informative than sites without such photographs (Thoms, Goodrich, Chinn, & Howard, 2004). Instead of traditional paragraph text, it is recommended that a web site's text should highlight the important information by 1) placing it near the top of the page, 2) using bullet points rather than paragraphs, and 3) using bold or italic letters for the most important items (Braddy et al., 2003). Research has demonstrated that web site content concerning financial compensation, benefits,

the culture of the organization, and opportunities for professional development are important to applicants' perceptions of organizational attraction. Additionally, simplicity is preferred in web design to increase user friendliness and ease user navigation (Nielsen, 2000). By attending to these factors in designing web pages, programs have the potential to improve their web site's ability to generate applications.

Description of Prior Study

Prior to researching applicants' experiences, this researcher conducted a survey of 66 APA accredited Counseling Psychology programs' web pages in an effort to learn about the content of such web pages (Hunter et al., 2009). The research questions addressed in the current study emerged during this survey. The methods, findings, and implications of this survey are described below.

Methods

A review of the APA's listing of accredited programs in Counseling Psychology revealed 72 programs (APA, *Accreditation: Accredited programs in counseling psychology*, 2006). Each program's corresponding web site was targeted for inclusion in the survey. Initially, these corresponding sites were located by using a university's name plus counseling psychology as search terms in common Internet search engines, such as google.com (this is a parallel to how prospective students might locate these pages). Subsequently, a web site (www.uky.edu/Education/EDP/psyprog.html), maintained by the University of Kentucky, that provides links to all of the APA accredited professional psychology programs' web sites was located (University of Kentucky, 2007), and this page was used to locate the programs' sites. Counseling Psychology programs which were inactive (Michigan State University, Ohio State University, University of Southern California, Stanford University, and Temple University),

unaccredited, or being phased out (University of Notre Dame) were not included in the survey. Thus, a total of 66 Counseling Psychology programs' web sites were surveyed.

The research team consisted of a faculty member, a doctoral student, and eight master's student research team members at a large Southeastern research university. The lead faculty and doctoral student met to generate a coding sheet that the team members could use to identify information and aspects of web sites. An initial coding sheet was designed by reviewing several Counseling Psychology program web sites and discussing the items with Counseling Psychology faculty interested in training and use of the web. The coding sheet used for this study was revised following a pilot survey conducted in May and June of 2006.

The coding sheet for this study included 42 checkbox items which were to be checked if the site included information about the following areas: program overview, curriculum, admissions, faculty information, student information, staff information, alumni information, training model, and other links and information. Additionally, the coding sheet asked coders to list other items on the site, the dates that the pages were last updated, and write one or two statements providing broad descriptions and their opinion of the site. This coding sheet is included in Appendix A.

This coding sheet also included five rating scales. These were provided so that coders could rate the sites on format (aesthetics), content (information), function (navigability), use of web technology, and overall usefulness of the site. Likert scales (0 to 6) were used to standardize these ratings. The Likert scales used anchor statements (e.g., 0 = Unattractive, 6 = Very Attractive) on either end of the scale. Coders were also asked to briefly describe items that affected each of their ratings.

A second coding sheet was designed to survey Counseling Psychology program web sites for the information requested by the APA committee on accreditation (COA) (APA, 2006, www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/rev_disclosure.html). The criteria detailed on the APA's web site was simply broken down into the individual items that programs were required to have on their sites by January 1st, 2007. It is noted that the COA required the reporting of the number and percentage of program alumni that have become licensed beginning January 2008 (this requirement was announced following the close of data collection). The coding sheet asked if any information was listed concerning the four major categories: time to program completion, program costs, internship acceptance rate, and student attrition rate. Each of these categories was further subdivided into the individual items requested by the APA. This coding sheet is included in Appendix B.

Student coders were recruited from among a group of counseling master's students who were interested in pursuing doctoral-level training in Counseling Psychology. It was hypothesized that these students would naturally be motivated to examine program web sites and that participation in the study would be mutually beneficial. Participation allowed these students to review program web sites in preparation for their own application while gaining research experience. Master's students were recruited to be research assistants by sending an email and asking them if they would like to join the research team and participate in data collection.

Prior to beginning coding the research team met for an orientation to the coding sheets, and the master's students selected approximately ten sites based on their interest and availability. Questions about the coding of sites were answered in online collaboration (i.e., emails) and meetings throughout the coding process. A key was developed to clarify and describe what could be counted for each item on the coding sheets. This key helped to standardize the survey process

across raters and to maintain inter-rater reliability. The key was discussed at the research team orientation.

To check the coding of the web sites, 17 of the 66 sites (approximately 25%) were randomly selected and coded again by the doctoral level researcher or a another member of the research team. The two coding sheets were then compared. This process yielded 88% percent agreement for selected items on the 42 item coding sheet. Ninety-six percent agreement was found for items on the COA coding sheet.

Results

Information commonly found on web sites is reported in seven broad categories: Broad Programmatic, Admissions, Faculty, Staff, Student, Alumni, and Other. Table 1 presents the overall summary of information found on Counseling Psychology program web sites.

Broad Programmatic Information

A program overview, which was defined as a page or paragraph (not a table) that described the program or an intentional effort to use broad strokes to introduce and describe the training provided by the program, was found on 97% of program web sites. Also, program web sites' frequently (85%) stated the program's model of training. For the purpose of this study, model of training was defined as information on the site that clearly stated at least one of the following: scientist-practitioner model, Boulder model, offers a PhD, scholar-practitioner model, Vail model, or offers the PsyD degree. Some (39%) sites provided viewers with descriptions of the individual classes that comprise the program. It is interesting that only 26% of program web sites provided a mission statement, as this seems to be a concise means of introducing and describing the goals of one's program. Coders commented that they preferred to view this

descriptive information in a form that they could scan such as bullet points or a few brief paragraphs.

Admissions Information

A current application deadline was found on ninety-two percent of sites. Coders commented that a few sites' deadlines listed the previous year or an incorrect year. Eighty percent of sites included a page or paragraph that explained the admissions process, requirements for admissions, and what coursework one must have completed prior to admission (e.g., a bachelor's or master's degree, prerequisite coursework). Programs used a number of methods for informing potential applicants about the program's GRE requirements. Thirty-two percent listed an average of current students' GRE scores. Twenty-four percent of sites provided a minimum qualifying GRE score, and twenty-four percent of sites said that the GRE was a requirement but did not provide any statistics. Only four-and-a-half percent of sites provided a range of acceptable GRE scores. Coders commented that they preferred a minimum GRE score or a range of acceptable GRE scores because this allowed them to better assess how their GRE score fit with the expectations of a program. Coders also commented that they appreciated when web sites organized all of the admissions information and application information in one place.

Faculty Information

Faculty names were provided by ninety-seven percent of sites, and eighty-eight percent of sites accompanied this information with more than one faculty member's email address. Eighty-three percent of sites provided a description of faculty research, while only forty-one percent posted or linked to faculty members' curriculum vitas. Surprisingly, only seventy-four percent of sites included a photograph of more than one faculty member. Many of these pages omitted a critical piece of information, as eighty percent of sites failed to provide a date when the main faculty

information page was last updated. Coders' comments emphasized the problematic nature of out-of-date faculty information; they expressed uncertainty of faculty members' employment status and research agendas when they were uncertain if faculty information was up-to-date.

Student, Staff, and Alumni Information

Student names were included on thirty percent of sites, and even fewer sites (13.6%) included any photos of students. Support staff members were named on thirty-four percent of sites, and their photos were shown on sixteen percent of sites. Program alumni were infrequently (16.7%) named on sites and rarely (3%) pictured. Comments made by coders could be summed up with the idiom 'a picture says a thousand words.' Coders preferred sites that included photographs of locations, faculty, personnel, and students. The use of any photographs was preferred to none, and group and activity photos were preferred to head shots. Pictures allowed coders to make brief assessments of the culture of the program, the representation of diverse groups, and contributed to feelings of excitement about a program.

Other Information

A statement of APA accreditation was commonly (92%) found on program web sites, but only nine percent of sites listed the date when they would need to reapply for APA accreditation. Many coders commented that one of their initial criteria for considering applying to a program was its accreditation status. Eighty-three percent of sites provided some general information about financial aid, assistantships, or fellowships, yet the cost of attendance was infrequently (18%) included. Coders stated their preference for information pertaining to the amount and type of financial aid, and they found it frustrating that many programs did not clearly state the cost of attendance and financial aid information. Some programs linked their site to APA affiliated web sites: APA (57%), Division 17 (Society of Counseling Psychology) (33%), and APAGS (12%).

Coders commented that it was surprising that more programs did not link to their associated professional organizations or the home page of their accrediting body. Also, they desired that APA provide links to accredited programs from its site. Some form of Affirmative Action statement was found on only twenty-four percent of sites. Very few (6%) sites made use of the Internet's capability to post and share videos. In general, coders commented that they were disappointed by Counseling Psychology programs' limited use of the Web's technological capabilities.

Table 1
Main Categories Typical of Counseling Psychology Web Sites

Category	Percentage of Sites with Category
Broad Programmatic Information	
Program Overview	97.0
Model of Training	84.8
General Curriculum Overview	74.2
Program Requirements/Curriculum	69.7
Descriptions of Individual Classes	39.4
Mission Statement	25.8
Does the Program List an Emphasis	19.7
Lists a Minor or Cognate	13.6
Admissions Information	
Dates for application	92.4
Admissions/Prerequisites Section	80.3
Link to Department Admissions Forms	63.6
Link to Graduate Admissions Forms	63.6
Can you apply online/online admissions?	53.0
Faculty contact for admissions	33.3
GRE Average	31.8
GRE Minimum	24.2
GRE Required, no stats	24.2
GRE Range	4.5
Faculty Information	
Faculty Names	97.0
Provides Faculty email Addresses	87.9
Descriptions of Faculty Research	83.3

Faculty Photos	74.2
Descriptions of what faculty members do	72.7
Faculty Curriculum Vitas	40.9
Date Faculty Page was last updated	19.7

Student Information

Student Names	30.3
Student Photos	13.6
Date Student Section was Last Updated	10.6

Staff Information

Staff Names	34.8
Staff Photos	16.7
Date Staff Section was last updated	10.6

Alumni Information

Alumni Names	16.7
Alumni Photos	3.0
Date Alumni Section was Last Updated	0.5

Other Specific Information

APA Accreditation Statement	92.4
Info on Financial Aid or Assistantships	83.3
Link to APA	57.6
Link to Div. 17	33.3
Link to Housing or Town	28.8
Affirmative Action Statement	24.2
Syllabi Online	18.2
Cost of Attendance	18.2
State Licensure Info	16.7
Link to APAGS	12.1
Date for Renewal of Accreditation	9.1
Uses Videos	6.1
Listserve	6.1
Newsletters	4.5
Info on Inclusion of Student Insurance	0.0

Information Required By Implementing Regulation C-20

Of the information required by the APA's Committee on Accreditation (COA) in Implementing Regulation C-20, general statements about financial aid and internship acceptance were found with regularity. Specific information on program costs, internship, and time students took to complete the program was found less frequently, and information on attrition was rarely found. Most sites contained only a small fraction of the information detailed by the COA, and 4.5% of sites contained none of the information. Additionally, it appeared that at least one program had already made an update to meet the committee's requirements, as their site had virtually all of the required information and statistics.

Time to completion. Twenty-four percent of sites contained some type of information on the amount of time in which students completed their programs. The authors found other more detailed information about time to completion on very few sites: mean number of years that students have taken to complete the program (7%), median number of years that students have taken to complete the program (4%), percentage of students completing the program in fewer than five years (1%), percentage of students completing the program in five years (1%), six years (3%), seven years (4%), more than seven years (3%).

Program costs. Some type of information related to program costs was found on program sites at a higher rate (86%) than time to completion, but this information was largely limited to information about financial aid (54%), assistantships (80%), and fellowships (47%). It was rare to find more detailed, information required by the COA regarding the category of program costs. When this information was available it consisted of cost per student of the first year cohort (4%), full time student tuition (9%), tuition per credit hour for part time students (9%), any fees

assessed to students beyond tuition costs (12%), information regarding current adjustments to tuition (4%), grants and loans (28%), tuition remission (29%).

Predoctoral internships. The researchers found some information about pre-doctoral internships on 50% of sites; yet this was largely limited to general statements such as, ‘most of our students obtain internships at APA accredited sites.’

Attrition. Any information on attrition was found very infrequently (7%). No site included the number of students who did not complete the program once on internship and few included the percentage (6%). Table 2 presents the overall summary of the main categories required by implementing regulation C-20 that were typical of Counseling Psychology web sites.

Table 2

Main Categories Required by the C-20 Typical of Counseling Psychology Web Sites

Category	Percentage of Sites with Category
Contained No Information Required by the C-20	4.5
Any Information on Time to Program Completion	24.2
Info on Mean Time to Program Completion	7.6
Info on Median Time to Program Completion	4.5
Info on Percent Completing in 7 years	4.5
Info on Percent Completing in 6 years	3.0
Info on Percent Completing in >7 years	3.0
Info on Percent Completing in <5 years	1.5
Info on Percent Completing in 5 years	1.5
Any Information on Program Costs	86.4
Info on Assistantships	80.3
Info on Financial Aid	54.5
Info on Fellowships	47.0
Info on Tuition Remission	28.8
Info on Grants and Loans	25.8
Info on Fees Assessed to Students Beyond Tuition Costs	12.1
Info on Full Time Tuition	9.1
Info on Tuition per Credit Hour for Part-Time Students	9.1
Info on Cost per Student	4.5
Info on Adjustments to Tuition	4.5
Any Information on the Rate Students Obtained Internships	50.0
Data on Students that Obtained APA/CPA Internships	18.2
Data on Students that Obtained Internships	13.6
Info on the Percentage of Students that Obtained Internships	12.1
Info on the Percentage of Students that Obtained APA/CPA Internships	10.6
Info on the Number of Students that Obtained Internships	7.6
Info on the Number of Students that Obtained APA/CPA Internships	6.1
Data on Students that Obtained APPIC Internships	4.5
Data on Students that Obtained Paid Internships	3.0
Info on the Number of Students that Obtained Paid Internships	3.0
Info on the Percentage of Students that Obtained Paid Internships	3.0
Info on the Percentage of Students that Obtained APPIC Internships	3.0
Info on the Number of Students that Obtained APPIC Internships	1.5
Data on Students that Obtained Two-Year Half-Time Internships	1.5
Info on the Number of Students that Obtained Two-Year Half-Time Internships	1.5
Info on the Percentage of Students that Obtained Two-Year Half-Time Internships	1.5
Any Information on Attrition	7.6
Info on the Percentage of Students that did not complete the program once matriculated	6.1
Info on the Number of Students that did not complete the program once matriculated	0.0

Date of Last Update

It was often difficult to tell when programs had last updated their web pages. For example, only 20% provided a date that the faculty page was last updated. Of the 13 sites that provided a date of last update on the faculty page, 11 were updated within the past six months, but two had not been updated in over a year. One had not been updated in almost four years. Types of out-of-date information found in our survey included listing faculty who were no longer on the program faculty (e.g., retired or employed elsewhere), outdated vitas, and information on current students that was not current.

Coders Comments and Impressions of the Web Sites

We requested that our coders rate their impressions of the usefulness of the web sites and how well they felt the web sites used technology. Providing information about faculty such as photos, and descriptions of their activities and research were features positively linked with high ratings of a web site's usefulness. Ratings indicated that providing faculty email addresses and having a link to APA were features correlated with high ratings of a web site's use of technology.

Several broad themes were gleaned from our coders' comments. In general, coders expressed frustration with web sites that were difficult to navigate. Coders pointed out how some programs relied on online versions of the student handbook, PDFs, and Word documents to provide the content of their web sites. Perhaps the most important theme is that coders commented that they formed a negative impression of programs that presented poorly on the web. In contrast, coders made comments that indicated they felt more positively about of programs that had an attractive and easy to navigate web site.

Research Questions

The author's prior research helped to provide an in-depth answer to the question, 'what is the content of Counseling Psychology programs web pages?' Yet, the prior research only surveyed for the presence of information and provided only a few indicators (i.e., ratings) that help to understand how people respond to the web pages and their content. Occasionally, during the prior research, research assistants would informally share their reaction to a web site. In explaining and discussing their reactions, it was evident that they had relatively strong feelings about certain programs' web pages and certain aspects of web pages. Further study would be need to learn how applicants use and respond to program web pages.

The current study aimed to capture the experience of applicants in a systematic manner by interviewing recent applicants. The research questions that guided the study include: What is the role of program web pages in the process of applying to Counseling Psychology programs? What are the major events in the process of applying? How do web pages influence the major events in this process? What challenges are encountered in the application process and how do applicants negotiate them? What are the outcomes of applicants' decision-making process?

Assumptions

As there is little theory in this area, no explicit hypotheses based on these questions are being tested in this study. This study is designed to create theory from which testable hypotheses may be formed. This author does have several assumptions which are imbedded in the project. These assumptions include: 1) Many programs under utilize their web pages. 2) Organization and usability of program web sites could be improved with relative ease. 3) Improvement to these web pages would substantially benefit applicants, programs, and the field of psychology.

Based on the author's experiences and comments made by peers, the author had some expectations about the themes that participants would discuss during interviews. These include: 1) frustration with difficult-to-navigate sites, 2) experience of frustration when using sites that make partial use of the available technology (e.g., being able to obtain forms online, but not able to submit them online), 3) applicants' opinions of a program improving after visiting a program's web site, 4) elimination of programs based on dissatisfaction with the program's web site, 5) pleasant experiences in using sites which address many of the applicant's concerns by providing in-depth information in a format that is easily read (e.g., bullet points), 6) varying themes related to aspects of web sites form, content, and function.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The researcher was a student in the same department as the participants; thus, participants may have been reluctant to share their true feelings and thoughts due to the existence of prior relationships and it was possible that participants responded in a socially desirable manner. As the participants were several months removed from completing the application process, their perspectives were altered by reconsolidation of their memories. Another limitation is that all of the participants were enrolled in two programs within one department at one university. As all of the participants had applied to the Counseling Psychology program at this university, this program's web site was disproportionately representative in the opinions of participants. Additionally, as with all qualitative data, it was assumed but not guaranteed that interviewees were open and honest with the author. As the entire study was designed, conducted, analyzed, and written by the author, with oversight from faculty members, the study was highly sensitive to attributes of the author including biases, expectations, and limitations.

Definitions and Terms

The Internet

The Internet refers to the network of computers and computer networks which spans the globe. The Internet consists of information and services, including email, instant messaging, online chat, and the interlinked web pages and other documents of the World Wide Web (Nielsen, 2000).

Web Site

Web site and web page are often used interchangeably, although specifically, a web site is a collection of web pages that is accessible via the Internet and are all linked to the same home page (Nielsen, 2000).

Web Page

A web page is a type of document that appears on the Internet often in HTML format and is maintained on a server. The document can be static or dynamic (Nielsen, 2000).

Format

Format refers to the aesthetics or attractiveness of a web site including: use of images, placement of graphics, and readability of text (i.e., bullet points and one topic per page are preferable to lengthy paragraphs and many topics on a single page; Cober, Brown & Levy, 2004).

Content

Content refers to the usefulness and thoroughness of the information provided in the text and images. The manner in which photos and images correspond or add to the text is also considered when evaluating content (i.e., if the text refers to students, there should be a near-by picture of students; Cober, Brown & Levy, 2004).

Function

Function refers to how easy it is to travel around the site and how long it takes to find the information being sought. This construct is also referred to as navigation, usability, or user friendliness. Function does not describe the presence or absence of information (Cober, Brown & Levy, 2004; Nielsen, 2000).

Coding Sheet

During the author's prior research, the term 'coding sheet' was used to refer to the document on which coders recorded their observations of program web sites. It could have easily been called 'observation form' or 'survey'.

Grounded Theory

This study utilizes grounded theory approach as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Grounded theory methods were originated by Glaser and Strauss in their 1967 study of death and dying. 'Grounded' refers to being derived from or closely tied to the data (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007). Researchers use grounded theory to develop theory from raw data (often in the form of interviews), rather than test existing hypotheses using statistical analyses. Grounded theory is best used to answer research questions about a group's experiences over time when current theory is inadequate or unavailable (Creswell et al., 2007).

Paradigm

Paradigms are sets of beliefs that guide our actions. A research paradigm describes one's views on the nature of reality, truth, or certainty (ontology), how reality is known or learned about (epistemology), how one's values or world view fits within research (axiology), and the methodological assumptions that arise based on one's ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Creswell, 2007; Morrow, 2007).

Constant Comparison

Constant comparison is a circular process of analysis that allows the researcher to develop theory that is closely tied to the data (Charmaz, 2006). In this process, data are collected, coded for themes, and these themes are analyzed for categories. Then some of these major categories are identified as being core (Creswell et al., 2007). This process culminates with the creation of new theories and models which can explain the experience of the participants (Creswell et al., 2007).

Saturation

A model is considered to be saturated when interviews provide no new data, categories, or themes. When saturation is reached, data collection ends (Creswell, 2007).

Open Coding

Open coding is the first stage of data analysis in the grounded theory paradigm. This stage involves reviewing the data for major categories of information. During open coding the researcher organizes the data as a list of categories and sub-categories (Creswell, 2007).

Axial Coding

The second stage in analysis is axial coding. In this stage, the researcher further organizes the data by selecting one open coding category on which to focus further analysis. This category is called the core phenomenon. The researcher then goes back to the data and creates categories around the core phenomenon. The categories can be displayed in a visual model with the products of axial coding shown around the core phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Selective Coding

Selective coding is the final stage of analysis. In this stage the researcher uses the axial model to develop hypotheses, visuals, narratives and/or propositions that explain the relationships between

the categories in the model. This product is reported toward the end of the study (Creswell, 2007).

Memoing

Memoing is a process of theory development, where the researcher writes down ideas throughout the stages of coding about the theory as it evolves in the mind of the researcher (Creswell, 2007).

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

Before the advent of the World Wide Web, Counseling Psychology doctoral training programs, like most other doctoral programs, communicated with potential students through printed material that was limited to only those who requested it. However, the Internet has changed the face of training programs through 24-hour availability and its' widespread use by contemporary students. At present, it is possible for a student to visit the web site of the American Psychological Association (APA) (APA, 2009, May 6) and find out the accreditation status of every training program in the U.S. and Canada, then search for and visit these programs in the virtual world. At many sites potential students, alumni, and other interested parties can learn many things about training programs, including admission requirements, philosophies of training, and information about the current faculty.

Yet, the question of how applicants use the web sites of APA accredited Counseling Psychology programs during the application process remained unanswered and the literature was absent of suggestions for practices and guidelines for program web sites. Interviews with students were conducted to provide in-depth information on how applicants use these web sites during their application.

The Role of the Internet in Recruitment

Literature from outside the field of Counseling Psychology testifies to the importance of the use of the Internet. Counseling Psychology literature has focused on issues regarding counseling over the Internet (Mallen et al., 2005), but the importance of a training program's

web site has received limited attention. Using web pages as a method of attracting job applicants has grown tremendously over the past decade. Web pages have become critical to attracting applicants, and are often the first method people use to gain in-depth information about an organization (Williamson et al., 2003). More than 90% of large organizations in the U.S. have web sites that have the primary function of communicating recruitment information. Additionally, there is evidence that for some organizations the Web accounts for more than 80% of all submitted resumes (Cober, Brown, Keeping, et al., 2004).

The Pew Internet and American Life surveys from 2006-2008 indicate that Internet use is common and continues to grow across demographics (Fox & Vitak, 2008). Furthermore, in a January 2005 survey, approximately 66 million people (45% of surveyed Internet users 18+ and older) said they utilized the Web to find information about a job, and approximately 64.5 million (44%) used the Web to get information about a college, university or other school that they or a family member might attend. The same survey found that 91% of college graduates, the group containing the demographic most likely to apply to graduate school, use the Internet on at least an occasional basis, and 58% of 18-29 year-olds were online the day prior to taking the survey (Pew Internet & American Life Project Tracking Surveys, 2005). Perhaps the statistic that is most telling is that in the spring of 2006 91% of people in the survey with a college degree used the Internet on at least an occasional basis (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006). Thus, the Internet offers applicants the opportunity to examine programs prior to making human contact. In addition, the Internet is highly utilized by the population most likely to apply to graduate school for locating information about potential employment and educational opportunities.

As the aforementioned statistics on Internet use demonstrate, web sites are salient in recruitment and, while not the only step, can be a critical first step to attracting applicants. These recruitment practices have a direct effect on the size and quality of an organization's initial pool of applicants. As organizations must choose their members from their applicant pool, recruitment practices eventually affect the quality of those who form the organization. It is evident that organizations that have a larger applicant group have better choice in filling their available positions, thus, obtaining a large number of applicants is an early goal of many organizations recruitment efforts (Braddy et al., 2003; Cober et al., 2003; Williamson et al., 2003). To obtain a large pool of qualified applicants it is important to maintain an attractive recruitment image and have an awareness of what is attractive to applicants (Braddy et al.). A programs web site is a critical initial step to gaining quality applicants and maintaining the quality of those who form the program's student body.

Over time, a large body of knowledge has been developed on the use of traditional recruitment methods, and those responsible for recruitment in Counseling Psychology programs have likely become familiar with this knowledge. Such traditional recruiting methods include, but are not limited to brochures, mailings, telephone contact, and face-to-face contact. However, as the Internet has likely become the primary means by which applicants access recruitment information (Biddel et al, 2007), traditional knowledge and practices of recruitment have become increasingly unproven and inconsistent. It is no longer necessary for applicants to obtain printed directory listings of programs, contact the program to request information or application materials, or have contact with students, faculty, or staff prior to submitting their application materials. Thus, many students do not contact a program until after submitting an application. As

a result, training directors may find themselves uncertain of the approximate number, quality, and demographics of applicants until most applications have arrived.

Additionally, the Internet offers a more cost effective and efficient recruiting and application process than traditional means (Braddy et al., 2003) by eliminating time and costs associated with printing, mailing, and travel. While there is some cost inherent in maintaining a web site (all of the active and accredited programs already do so), travel, printing, and mailing costs are greatly reduced for both the organization and the applicant by using the Web for recruitment and application. However, it should be noted that for applicants who choose to print web based materials, applying may actually become more expensive, as printing cost are passed to the applicant.

The Role of Web Design in Recruitment

The design of a web site is important to influencing a potential applicant's decision-making process (Cober et al., 2003; Cober, Brown, Keeping, et al., 2004; Williamson et al., 2003). In one study 26% of students chose not to apply based solely on an organization's poorly designed web site (Williamson et al., 2003).

A number of web design factors that can be used to promote an organization's recruitment image are discussed in the literature. Cober, Brown & Levy (2004) describe three areas in which web sites could be described: form, content, and function. These areas are used to describe a site's aesthetics, information, and usability. The manner in which color, text formatting, pictures, video, et cetera are used can have a major effect on the attractiveness of a web site. The use of photographs, presented in an ordered and relevant manner, is recommended to improve an organizations recruitment image (Braddy et al., 2003). Additionally, the inclusion of photos of personnel on an organization's web site has been linked to applicants being more

attracted to an organization. In one study, applicants rated sites with photos of personnel as more personable and more informative than sites without such photographs (Thoms et al., 2004). Instead of traditional paragraph text, it is recommended that a web site's text should highlight the important information by 1) placing it near the top of the page, 2) using bullet points rather than paragraphs, and 3) using bold or italic letters for the most important items (Braddy et al., 2003). Research has demonstrated that web site content concerning financial compensation, benefits, the culture of the organization, and opportunities for professional development are important to applicants' perceptions of organizational attraction. Additionally, simplicity is preferred in web design to increase user friendliness and ease user navigation (Nielsen, 2000). By attending to these factors in designing web pages, programs have the potential to improve their web site's ability to generate applications.

Web Sites' Implications for Diversity

Bidell et al. (2007) extended research that had previously examined professional psychology training programs' use of paper application packets. This study examined the use of content related to diversity in psychology programs' web pages. During studies of paper application materials it had been determined that content related to diversity is positively correlated with minority student enrollment. The Bidell (2007) study found that diversity related content had actually decreased on programs' web pages in comparison to their 2002 study of paper application packets. They recommend attention to diversity related content when designing a program's web site, as it is a cost effective method of attracting diverse students.

The Need for Program Disclosures on the Web & Ethical Implications

APA seems to understand the importance and ubiquitous nature of web pages. Recently, the APA committee on accreditation published specific guidelines stipulating that accredited

programs present certain information and statistics about their program on the program web site.

The APA committee states:

“The Committee believes that all doctoral programs should therefore minimally provide the following information regarding education and training outcomes and accurate program descriptions as of January 1, 2007 to potential students in its public documents including its web site, if it has one: time to program completion; costs (tuition and fees); internship acceptance rates; fellowships and other funding available, and student attrition rates” (APA, 2006) (www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/rev_disclosure.html).

The committee further details the information, which must be included on programs’ web sites.

Under the topic of time to program completion the committee writes that programs should provide the mean and the median number of years in which students completed the program during the past seven years. Programs should also provide separate versions of this data for those who entered with a master’s or bachelors degree, and data on those who completed the program in fewer than five years, five years, six years, seven years, and more than seven years.

Under the topic of program cost the committee requires information on the tuition and fees per student for the current first-year cohort and for full-time student tuition, tuition per credit hour for part-time students, and any fees assessed to students beyond tuition costs. Additionally, information on financial aid, grants, loans, tuition remission, assistantships, and fellowships can be included.

The committee also requires programs to post detailed information on internship acceptance rates and attrition rates. Programs must post the number and percentage of students who obtained internships, paid internships, APPIC internships, APA accredited internships, and two year half-time internships. Also, programs must post the number and percentage of students who did not complete the program after leaving for internship. Internship and attrition data should be calculated for students over the past seven years.

In light of this pending requirement, the researchers were curious to see the kinds of information that Counseling Psychology programs provided on the Internet and also to evaluate the types of designs, ease of use and overall attractiveness of program's web sites prior to the implementation of the new guidelines. Through this investigation researchers hoped to gain an understanding of program web sites in the field and provide some useful guidelines and suggestions that go beyond the new requirements.

There is also literature in the field that supports this practice of disclosure of program outcomes to potential students. A study conducted by Neimeyer, Saferstein, and Rice (2005) found that a Counseling Psychology program's training model and the emphasis placed on science, practice, or balanced science and practice had a significant effect on the type of pre-doctoral internship site that students were matched with. It would be beneficial for potential students to be made aware of a program's training model and the type of internship sites that students are often placed into so they could make informed choices about their education. Furthermore, Cherry, Messenger, & Jacoby (2000) state that making programmatic statements about the training model and the internship placements that students receive, provides evidence of honest advertising, in that programs accomplish what they plan to. The program web site is one of the more important places where such statements can be made.

For accredited Counseling Psychology doctoral programs the issues are not limited to effective recruitment, there are also ethical issues involved. For example, in the APA code of ethics, Standard 7.02, Descriptions of Education and Training Programs, of the APA's code of ethics states that:

“Psychologists responsible for education and training programs take reasonable steps to ensure that there is a current and accurate description of the program’s content (including participation in required course- or program-related counseling, psychotherapy, experiential groups, consulting projects, or community service), training goals and objectives, stipends and benefits, and requirements that must be met for satisfactory completion of the program. This information must be made readily available to all interested parties.”

The Internet is one such place where this information should be available to all interested parties. Additionally, Standard 7.04, Student Disclosure of Personal Information, states that a program or training facility should clearly identify in its admissions and program materials if it requires students to undergo psychotherapy. As the Internet is likely to be a student’s first contact with the program, standard 7.04 implies that programs identify student therapy requirements on their web pages (APA, 2002).

Philosophical and Theoretical Approach to Research

It is important for qualitative researchers and readers of qualitative research to be familiar with the multiple philosophical approaches to research and inquiry, or *research paradigms*. Paradigms are sets of beliefs that guide our actions. A research paradigm describes one's views on the nature of reality, truth, or certainty (ontology), how reality is known or learned about (epistemology), how one's values or world view fits within research (axiology), the type of language to be used in discussing research (rhetoric), and the methodological assumptions that arise based on one’s ontology, epistemology, axiology, and rhetorical views (Creswell, 2007; Morrow, 2007).

All research is based in such a set of assumptions or worldview; however, qualitative researchers make this explicit in their writings. Most quantitative research is based on a positivist or postpositivist approach. Positivist paradigms assume that a single objective reality exists, which is observable. A positivist researcher strives for a detached, objective, and value-free perspective (Morrow, 2007). Postpositivist paradigms assume that multiple perspectives exist,

and favor multiple observations (triangulation), rigor, and logic (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research can be based on a number of philosophical underpinnings, which includes postpositivist, constructivist, interpretivist, critical-ideological and post-structuralist (Morrow, 2007).

Constructivist paradigms view reality as subjective; reality is co-constructed through the interactions of observers. Researchers operating in a constructivist paradigm are assumed to have values (Morrow, 2007). Constructivism emphasizes studying people in the settings where they normally spend their time, rather than in a lab (Charmaz, 2006), and an emphasis is placed on participants' subjective experiences (Creswell, 2007). Interpretivism emphasizes that there are as many perspectives as participants plus the perspective of the researcher. The researcher's perspective is assumed to exist and subjectivity is part of the study and the product of the research (Morrow, 2007). Critical-ideological paradigms accept that there are multiple realities and focus on how reality is formed through transactions by power and oppression (i.e., those with power impose their view of reality on the less powerful), and thus these researchers focus on social justice and ending oppression (Morrow, 2007).

Grounded Theory

This study is based in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and utilizes grounded theory approach as described by Strauss and Corbin (Creswell, 2007) and Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory methods were originated by Glaser & Strauss during their 1967 study of death and dying. 'Grounded' refers to being derived from or closely tied to the data (Creswell, 2007; Creswell et al., 2007). Researchers use grounded theory to build theory from raw data (often in the form of interviews), rather than test existing hypotheses (Creswell, 2007). The author initially chose to use Strauss and Corbin's approach to grounded theory as it is recommended because of their systematic approach; furthermore, Creswell (2007) recommends that a beginning

qualitative researcher gain comfort and familiarity with one approach and to keep one's study concise and straightforward. During the course of the study, the researcher moved away from Strauss and Corbin's approach, as their suggested axial categories imposed a poor fitting framework on the data, and adopt elements of Charmaz's (2006) approach to grounded theory. Charmaz's approach allowed for greater flexibility in analysis of the data.

The author chose to use grounded theory methodology when conducting this study for several reasons. Grounded theory fits with the author's personal philosophy of how knowledge is created by using a bottom up and hands-on approach. Its methods of interviewing and analysis fit well with the author's professional skill set. Grounded theory is designed for studies, like the current one, with a small number of participants (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, grounded theory was chosen because Creswell (2007) recommends its use when there is no existing theory that would answer one's research questions. In the case of this study, most of the relevant theories that do exist come from the field of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and apply to job applications and the field of business. Grounded theory is also recommended when developing a theory about how people are experiencing a phenomenon. This seems to fit with the author's desire to understand applicants' experiences. Lastly, the product of grounded theory (new theory that is closely tied to the accounts of the participants) fits with goals for this study (Creswell, 2007).

Grounded theory calls for conducting analysis and coding in a circular, three-stage process. These stages are open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves reviewing the data for major categories of information. In axial coding, the researcher further organizes the data by selecting one open coding category, called the core phenomenon, on which to focus further analysis. Selective coding is the final stage of analysis. The researcher re-reads

the manuscripts to identify all of the data that fit with each category. The researcher can use the model to develop hypotheses, visuals, narratives and/or propositions that explain the relationships between the categories in the model. This product is reported toward the end of the study (Creswell, 2007). A model is considered to be saturated when interviews provide no new data, categories, or themes. When saturation is reached, the researcher stops collecting data (Creswell, 2007).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Setting

Data were collected at a large, public, Southeastern university in the department of Counseling and Human Development. The department includes four master's level programs and two doctoral programs, including the Counseling Psychology doctoral program. The Counseling Psychology program requires a master's degree for admission, and it receives an overabundance of qualified applicants for approximately 10 positions each year. The department's student body and faculty reflect the population of the surrounding region (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008) and include students from other regions of the U.S. The programs within the department generally use a cohort model, in which students move through the program with a clearly identified group of peers. Students most frequently interact with other students who are enrolled in the same program for a given academic year; however, interaction across programs and cohorts is common.

Participants

Eleven students participated in the study. Students varied demographically by gender, age, race, and ethnicity. The participant group was comprised of nine females and two males. Participants self-identified as Asian-American (2), African-American (1), and European-American (2), and White (6). Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 32 with an average age of 26.4. Participants stated that their social-economic background was middle class (4) or upper-middle class (7). Two participants were second-year Community Counseling master's students,

and nine participants were first-year Counseling Psychology students. Participants stated that they applied to an average of 6.2 total doctoral programs and an average of 5.8 Counseling Psychology programs during their application process. The number of programs that participants applied to ranged from 1 to 12 programs.

Qualitative samples are often purposefully chosen rather than randomly selected to maximize opportunities to learn from the participants (Suzuki, Munider, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). Thus, it was important for this researcher to choose participants for inclusion in the study who could maximize the richness of the overall data set by discussing varying perspectives on the application process and their decision-making during the process. Data were collected from first-year doctoral students in Counseling Psychology and second-year master's students in Community Counseling at the university where this study took place. The first-year doctoral students had completed the application process approximately nine to twelve months prior to being interviewed. The Community Counseling students had completed the application process approximately three weeks prior to being interviewed. This sample was selected because the researcher had developed good rapport with a majority of the sample and was familiar with the context in which they live and work. Having established rapport with interviewees and having background data about the lives of interviewees are grounds for data to be considered rich and sufficient (Charmaz, 2006). Using a homogeneous sample, such as the one used in this study, increases the likelihood of the researcher being able to recognize themes within the participants experiences (Creswell, 2007). Data were gathered from first-year doctoral students during the period from January 2nd, 2008 until April 25th, 2008. The two Community Counseling students were interviewed on May 1st, 2008.

Positioning the Interviewer/Primary Investigator

I am a male, White, doctoral student in an APA accredited Counseling Psychology program with a master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling. I wrote this manuscript and collected and analyzed data for this study during my fourth and fifth year in my program. I have interests in psychotherapy, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and the training of psychologists. I conducted this study partly to fulfill the requirements of my doctoral dissertation. Prior to conducting this study, I completed three years of coursework and practical clinical experience, and during two of those years I worked as the graduate assistant to the Community Counseling master's program. My association with the master's program allowed me to mentor several students as they engaged in the application process. As I am a student in the same program as this study's participants, I have had varying levels of professional and social interaction with the participants. Overall, my relationship with these participants and my training as a counselor allowed for greater rapport and trust during interviews for this study.

The Researcher's Personal Narrative

In part, my interest in the studying Counseling Psychology web pages was sparked by my experiences in applying to Counseling Psychology programs in 2003. Like the vast majority of applicants, I had never independently engaged in a national application process. I did not know where to start or how the process might be completed. Experiences working in close proximity to Counseling Psychologists during my master's program had led me to believe that Counseling Psychology would be a good career choice, and it had shown me that I was capable of doctoral study. I liked the people I had met in the field, the clinical work, and the research. Yet, these experiences did little to orient me to the application process.

I began by going to the web pages of universities that I thought might house a Counseling Psychology program. It was sometimes difficult to just locate a program's web page, and I found myself frequently feeling uncertain about my ability to find and evaluate the information. In other words, I knew enough to know that I did not know what I was doing. As I learned more, more questions arose. In what school or college are these programs housed? Am I sure this isn't a Clinical Psychology or Counselor Education program's web page?

Later, I began researching the programs on the web. Is this program accredited? Do they prefer students with a master's degree? How long will this program take to complete? Will I meet admissions criteria? Each question was accompanied by hours of searching the Web and mounting uncertainty and anxiety.

After selecting half-a-dozen programs, I began to search the sites for application materials. Can I apply online? What do I need to mail? Where do I send my materials? After getting a sense for the standard materials that were part of an application packet, I wrote my essays, edited, and rewrote them. Then a faculty member, my mother, and my wife each read and edited my essays. I rewrote them again, and obsessed over them. Then I carefully massaged each essay to present myself as a good fit for each program that I had selected.

During this time my wife was also going through this same process while applying to Clinical Psychology programs. As the application deadlines got close, my wife, who is normally long on patience, and I became increasingly frustrated with each other. Over a weekend just prior to several of the application deadlines, we found ourselves in the Federal Express office, after-hours, having a heated argument while we were trying to express mail several of our application packets. The cost of express mailing was breaking our thin graduate student's budget. The time spent researching programs was limiting free time that would normally be devoted to our

relationship. Numerous small uncertainties, anxieties, and stressors related to the application process had mounted and were pushing the limits of our abilities to cope.

A few weeks passed after the application deadline without hearing anything of significance from any of the programs, and I started to think that I was “so over it.” I consciously and verbally denied caring about the outcome, and when I did reflect on the prior months, I viewed the application process as a foolish waste of my time. Then, letters and emails from the programs began arriving. I received a few invitations to interview and a couple out right rejections. I also learned that I had neglected to include a work sample with one of the applications, which had excluded me from consideration at one program.

I went back the web pages of the schools where I was invited to interview, and I began researching their programs and faculty. Who were the faculty members? What were they interested in? What had I told them that I was interested in? Based on the web pages it was often difficult to discern which professors were core members of a program’s faculty, which were adjunct, and which were attached only to the department but not the Counseling Psychology program. I continued to inform myself about the programs that I planned to interview with by using the Web until the interview days arrived. I even printed out the faculty bios to take with me to the interview.

At the interview, programs were not always what they had seemed on the Web. One program had waited until the interview to reveal their university’s enormous tuition and the fact that their 20-hour per week assistantships were only good for a partial tuition waiver. While this information had not been readily available on the program’s web pages, the financial cost of the program was readily observable on the tired faces of the program’s students. One faculty

member that I met with had taken on entirely different areas of interest than were included in her bio, and a few had used a photo that was clearly taken decades before.

As I am writing this as a part of my dissertation, I was accepted to a program. I benefited from the experience when I applied for internship, and I will again when I apply jobs. That said, I wouldn't want to repeat my application experience. Looking back, I was rather naïve. There are many things I would have done differently. In fact, I'm not sure that I ever made a phone call to the programs prior to mailing my applications. In retrospect, I would have called early on. Also, I did not learn about how I could track the status of my application online, until very late in the process. I didn't realize that there are published guides to applying to psychology programs, until I was interviewing. I also failed to distribute my applications among programs that varied in the level of competition among applicants. My identity as a White male afforded me the privilege of having only scholarly, rather than personal, interest in how training programs addressed multicultural issues.

In my opinion, some of the difficulties could have been easily avoided and some of the uncertainties clarified with a simple orientation to the application process. While some applicants receive this orientation formally or informally through interaction with faculty members, it could be made widely available by including it in programs web pages and linking program web pages to a central location such as the APA's web site.

In sum, through my own experiences and through observing and mentoring master's students as they applied to doctoral programs, I developed an interest in how students use the Web during the application process. I developed this interest because I noticed that many students including myself found the process to be confusing, frustrating, and less than user

friendly. It is my hope that conducting research in this area will improve the way information about professional psychology programs is made available.

Data Collection

When using grounded theory sampling, data collection, and data analysis are intentionally a simultaneous and circular process. This entails intentional selection of participants, followed by data collection and analysis. The analysis of initial data informs and influences the adaptation of interview questions, selection of other participants, and further analysis throughout the study (Charmaz, 2006).

This study utilizes a sample that is purposeful. Suzuki et al. (2007) writes that qualitative samples are often chosen purposefully to maximize opportunities to learn from the participants. Creswell (1998) also encourages researchers to purposefully sample participants so one can best study the problems being examined. The researcher interviewed participants who had completed the application process to gain perspectives on the overall process.

Instruments

Demographic questionnaire

The participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire immediately following the interview. The purpose of the questionnaire was to aid in describing the sample. Participants were allowed to fill-in-the-blank rather than being forced to choose a response. Information requested included gender, age, SES, racial/ethnic heritage, program of study, number of years in the program of study, number of schools applied to, and the number of Counseling Psychology programs to which the participant applied. See Appendix E for the demographic questionnaire.

Interviews

The author conducted all of the interviews to ensure adherence to grounded theory methodology, to reduce interviewer variability, and to increase the likelihood that the author would be intimately familiar with the data. By becoming familiar with the methods of grounded theory and consistently using these methods across interviews the author was able to maintain reliability. The author employed intensive qualitative interviewing methods; in which the interviewer has greater control over gathering and analyzing data (Charmaz, 2006).

Qualitative in-depth interviews have been described as being conversations with a purpose. In these conversations, interviewers employ good listening skills, interpersonal skills, subtle probes, and frame questions to increase the quality of data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Creswell (2007) recommends beginning interviews with a broad or “grand tour” question that allows the participant to describe the process being studied. The initial interview question used in this study was designed to allow the participants to broadly describe, in their own words, their experience with using Counseling Psychology program web sites during their application process. Thus, the participants were asked to, “Tell me about the process of applying to doctoral programs.” This question was followed with, “Tell me more about the role web sites played in the process.”

The interviewer also employed floating prompts such as minimal verbal responses (e.g., uh-huh) and facial expressions to elicit elaboration from the interviewee. Planned prompts were also used to obtain address topics that the interviewee did not address without being prompted (McCracken, 1988). Interviews became more focused as the interview progressed. The interviewer asked questions to address axial elements such as the core phenomenon, causes, strategies, and consequences. The individual interview protocol is included in Appendix D.

The following questions were asked as the interview progressed:

- Tell me about what the process of applying to doctoral programs was like for you.
 - Tell me more about the role web sites played in the process.
- What would you say were some of the most important events that happened as you applied?
 - What role did web sites play in these events?
 - What was the context of those events (the before and after/ the outcome)?
- How did the process start? What happened next?
- What problems did you face when applying?
 - What problems did web sites present?
 - Did you have any problems with things not being up to date or have difficulty with navigation?
 - How did you handle those problems?
 - What happened as a result of how you handled those problems?
- Tell me about how web sites influenced your decision-making?
- How did your mood affect you use of web sites?
- How were program web sites useful and not useful when you were applying to doctoral programs?
- What parts of web sites do you remember as having a positive or negative impression on you?
- What differences did you notice between how the programs looked on the Web and how they appeared when you saw them in person (when you interviewed with them)?
- What other information would you want students, faculty, or the research audience to know about how you used Counseling Psychology program web sites?
- What else would you like to see on program web sites?

Data was collected during 11 individual interviews with 11 total participants. The interviews were semi-structured and participants' comments were frequently summarized and

reflected by the interviewer. Reflection allowed the interviewer to verify understanding and allowed participants to clarify their responses. Occasionally, a follow-up question was asked by the interviewer to clarify a participant's response. Individual interviews averaged 35 minutes; however, they varied greatly in length. The longest interview lasted 90.5 minutes, while one interview of poor quality lasted only 12.5 minutes. All other interviews lasted between 20 and 44.5 minutes. All individual interviews were conducted from January 2nd, 2008 to May 1st, 2008.

A follow-up group interview was conducted with four participants after all individual interviews were completed. This group interview was used as an opportunity to build trustworthiness and check the emergent themes with the participants (Marrow, 2007). During this group discussion the researcher presented tentative themes and connections gained from the analysis of the individual interviews, and encouraged discussion and elaboration about the themes. The group interview occurred on July 25th, 2008 and lasted 60 minutes.

Interview questions were originally created through a process that involved brainstorming, followed by culling and combining questions. The author received feedback and suggestions from persons with expertise in qualitative research while developing interview questions. Questions then went through several revisions prior to being used. Interview questions were further modified throughout the study to reflect the evolving understanding of how participants used the Web during their application process. The evolution of interview questions is illustrated in Appendix G.

Data Gathering Issues

Six of the interviews were conducted in the Counseling Psychology department's in-house counseling clinic in the college of education. This setting was used because many of the participants were familiar with the setting, as they are students in the department, and likely had

a class or practicum that took place in the clinic. The clinic's rooms are sparsely decorated and contain utilitarian furniture that allows for the multiple uses of counseling, psychological testing, and instruction. Two interviews were conducted in participants' offices, two interviews were conducted in the office of the primary investigator, and one interview was conducted in the home of the primary investigator (at the request of the participant).

Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder, which was placed on a table. Using the recording device helped the investigator to attend to the participant and to track the conversation. Prior to the interview, participants were given informed consent that made the purpose, goals, and process of data collection transparent. Participants were also informed about the recording device at this time and they were able to consent to being recorded. At the close of each interview participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation in the study. The informed consent and debriefing statement can be viewed in Appendices C and F.

The researcher transcribed and analyzed all of the interviews to insure confidentiality and familiarity with the data. The researcher used Dragon Naturally Speaking, a voice recognition software package to transcribe all of the interviews. The researcher listened to brief sections of the interview, repeated them aloud, and the software converted the researcher's voice into text in Microsoft Word. All confidential information (audio recordings and transcriptions) were given a randomly chosen numerical code, and confidential information was separated from participants' identifying information. All confidential information was kept in a locked file cabinet and a password protected computer in this researcher's locked office. Audio recordings were erased following transcription, which occurred within 30 days of recording. All transcriptions and other data will be kept for a period of three years, as is required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Only the researcher and the researcher's research supervisor will have access to

confidential information. An example of a section of a transcribed interview can be found in Appendix H.

There are some small potential benefits and minimal risks associated with participation in this study. The participants, who are graduate students, will be able to observe qualitative data collection methods. Participants may benefit from having the opportunity to reflect on their decision-making process during the period when they applied to doctoral programs. Participants will receive no financial compensation. Participation in this study involves no greater risk than normal human interaction.

Analysis

Consistent with grounded theory, data collection was conducted in a circular fashion. Data were collected, transcribed, coded for themes, and these themes were analyzed for categories and subcategories. Initial analysis of one interview was used to inform and adapt collection of the next. This process is known as constant comparison.

Each time new data were gathered, they were compared to the prior data, themes, and categories. These comparisons allow for further refining of the categories and the interview questions. During follow-up interviews or interviews with new participants, the researcher asked questions to fill in the gaps between categories or solidify categories. This circular process, known as constant comparison, allowed the researcher to develop theory that is closely tied to the data (Charmaz, 2006). This process culminated with the creation of new theory and a model which explains the experience of the participants (Creswell et al., 2007).

The researcher also employed interpretive analysis. This required the researcher's involvement at every point in the process. Having an in-depth involvement in rapport building, interviews, transcription, and analysis allowed the researcher to move findings beyond the

explicit statements of the participants and identify implicit meanings (Charmaz, 2006). Yet, the researcher balanced interpretations with participant quotations in this manuscript to avoid imposing a framework on the data (Yeh & Inman, 2007). Constant comparison and interpretive analysis contrast with the postpositivist perspective which favors multiple observations (triangulation), rigor, and logic (Creswell, 2007).

Coding occurred in three stages. Open coding occurred first and involved a process similar to brainstorming, as the researcher reviewed the data for major categories of information. The researcher made notes or memos about any categories that came to mind when transcribing the data. While transcribing, the researcher highlighted sections of the transcription that seemed to depict an emerging theme and made comments/memos using functions of Microsoft Word (Yeh & Inman, 2007). To aid in identifying categories the researcher looked for themes, properties, and subcategories that formed a continuum or marked opposite ends of a continuum. During open coding, the researcher organized the data as a list of categories and sub-categories (Creswell, 2007).

After making notes and memos during transcription, the researcher re-read each interview and cut and pasted participants' sentences and paragraphs verbatim (and occasionally paraphrased) into Microsoft Word tables. The researcher chose to electronically sort data using a word processor as the author was most familiar with the capabilities and tools of Microsoft Word (Ezzy, 2002). The author chose not to literally cut participants' statements from transcripts and sort them manually or employ analysis software because the benefits are questionable and at significant cost (Ezzy, 2002). Each significant topic discussed by the participant was labeled with a code or phrase describing the topic discussed and the participants' identification number

(e.g., “Stress, P2”). For an example, see Table 3 below. An extended section of this table can be found in Appendix I.

Table 3

Sample Section of Tables Used During Open Coding

Category	Quotation
Stress, P10	I was always so stressed at the time too. Feeling real overwhelmed And the processing center gets backed up and then you go through this agonizing stress, when you're not hearing them
Organization, P10	I started getting real organized. Well, first thing I did, I made a spreadsheet, and I started getting all the requirements down. So I could check them off as I went. And I started making individual folders, and I started basically getting my time and my schedule for getting finished organized.
Mentoring, P10	I guess the way that I found out about the other two schools was, one of them was recommended to me by a faculty here. He said you should check out this school and I did, and decided to apply, and I checked it out online.
	Decision-Making
Other factors, P10	Typically when they look cheap, when it looked thrown together, and it looked like these faculty [members] don't have it together. That was the assumption, if the web site is not together, how much trouble am I going to have getting stuff taken care of in this department when I'm there? But when the web site was like, solid, like at [Program], then it was really engaging.
Geography, P10	The other program was pretty much a location type thing. It had a good program, but it also had a nice location.

Following this step, the researcher grouped the codes from across all of the interviews that contained similar themes; this formed a 30 page Microsoft Word table containing two columns. The left column contains the code and identification number, and the right column contains transcribed sentences. See the example section below. Appendix J contains all of the codes used to label comments by participants in this study.

Table 4

Sample Section of Tables Used During Analysis

Category	Quotation
	Time Consuming & Stress
Stressful, P3	So I think it was – it was actually... it was kind of stressful. Just to get everything ready. To put everything together. I think the actual – I don't really get stressed out about interviews. I don't get really stressed out about writing things. I think it's just the whole making deadlines, making sure everything is in place – all the 5000 pieces of information that you have to turn and are all done on time and the transcripts are getting their okay. All that good – I think it's all the coordination that it requires. That was kind of the biggest part.
Stress, P8	I was very anxious to make sure that I wasn't missing anything. I think, because I was so kind of anxious and unsure web sites to me seemed a lot less invasive. Like I could go on the web site and find out everything without having to contact the person. I guess being very anxious, it was helpful to have all that information there without having to seek it out from someone. Like back then I can't remember a time when I just wasn't anxious. Even logging onto the web site produced anxiety, just because I was just really wanting something...very passionate about it. And not anxiety in a bad way, but kind of just that nervous energy.
Stress, P10	I was always so stressed at the time too. Feeling real overwhelmed

The second stage in analysis is axial coding. In this stage, the researcher further organized the data by selecting one open coding category on which to focus further analysis. This category is called the core phenomenon. The researcher then went back to the data and created categories around the core phenomenon. During axial coding it was important for the researcher to attend to discrepant cases or categories that were not included as part of core constructs (Creswell, 2007). In preparation for the group interview, the researcher summarized themes that were frequently discussed by the interviewees during individual interviews. See the summary of themes used during the focus group in Appendix K. This process involved collapsing, dividing, and/or renaming categories to better fit the data. During this process, the

researcher began to sketch diagrams and models using these themes; the researcher continued this process while transcribing the group interviews. After sketching several drawings of the model, the researcher used Microsoft PowerPoint to develop a digital drawing the model. The model is a visual depiction of the data used to illustrate findings.

Selective coding is the final stage of analysis. The researcher re-read the transcripts to identify all of the data that fit with each category. In this manner data was examined and reexamined in an effort to build a theoretical model around categories. The researcher used the model to develop hypotheses and visuals. This product is reported toward the end of the study (Creswell, 2007). A model is considered to be saturated when interviews provide no new data, categories, or themes. When saturation was reached, the researcher stopped collecting data (Creswell, 2007).

Quality Assurance & Trustworthiness

Having rapport with interviewees is an important factor in insuring that data is accurate and has depth (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998). In addition to having prior relationships with the interviewees and sharing commonalities of being a counselor and a graduate student, the researcher has a strong ability to build rapport. By establishing and maintaining rapport it is likely that data obtained from interviewees is trustworthy.

In grounded theory research, researchers are encouraged to gain an understanding of the participants' worlds, but at the same time maintain marginality. Marginality is the process by which a researcher maintains the status of having both insider and outsider perspectives. Marginality allowed the researcher to take on the participants' perspectives, yet also allowed researchers to take an outsider's perspective and raise questions during analysis and data collection (Ward, 2005). The researcher has relationships of varying lengths as a peer and

colleague with the participants in this study. Moreover, the researcher shares the roles of being a counselor and a student in the same department with the participants. Thus, the researcher has developed an in-depth understanding of the worlds of the participants, but the researcher has limited ability to take an outsiders perspective. To counter the researcher's limited ability to have distance from the world of the participants, the researcher has taken several measures. These measures include bracketing assumptions & expectations, discussing data collection and analysis with a faculty member, and disclosing personal experiences, relationships with participants, and motivations.

Several measures were undertaken to verify data. Verbal reflection of statements during the interviews was an initial step in this regard. A member of the Counseling Psychology faculty reviewed the themes and discussed them with the researcher. The data was reviewed for negative cases, in which the participants made statements that disconfirmed themes. A follow-up group interview was held, and four participants reviewed the themes that the researcher drew from the data. An auditor reviewed the author's analyses and provided feedback on the themes, conclusions, and the model that was developed. Lastly, member-checking was completed. Two participants from the study were provided with a manuscript of the results of this study, and they provided feedback on how the results were consistent or contradictory with their experience. Participants commented that the results generally captured their experience, "Overall, I think your dissertation did a great job summarizing what I had to say." When providing feedback the participants wrote 36 comments which indicated aspects of the results fit with their experience. The participants made six comments indicating that aspects of the results did not fit with their experience, and commented that five aspects of their experience were not described by the results. Often elements that were not included in the results were elements discussed during

individual interviews and were specific to a single participant. The author used the table included in Appendix L to examine participants' feedback provided during member checking.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

While actual applicants' experiences are variable, the findings of this study describe commonalities, or themes, across applicants' experiences. Themes and sub-themes were certainly not observed or noted for each participant in the study; rather, themes were discussed or endorsed by multiple participants. When interviewed, most participants discussed the process of applying to psychology programs in a chronological fashion. Therefore, the findings are best related in a manner that reflects the chronological order of events that many applicants experienced during the application process. For the purposes of discussion, a model with four stages was developed which reflects this chronological order: Researching Stage, Applying Stage, Interviewing Stage, and Endgame Stage. A brief narrative description of the stages follows the model. Each stage and its corresponding themes and sub-themes is then described in greater depth accompanied by participant quotes. Participant quotes which describe the time line of events which make up the application process and themes that spanned the length of the model are discussed at the end of the chapter.

Model of the Application Process

A model of the application process was developed based on interviewees' experiences. The model illustrates the process of application to professional psychology programs. See figure 1 for a visual depiction of the model. Stages should be seen as overlapping, rather than being discrete.

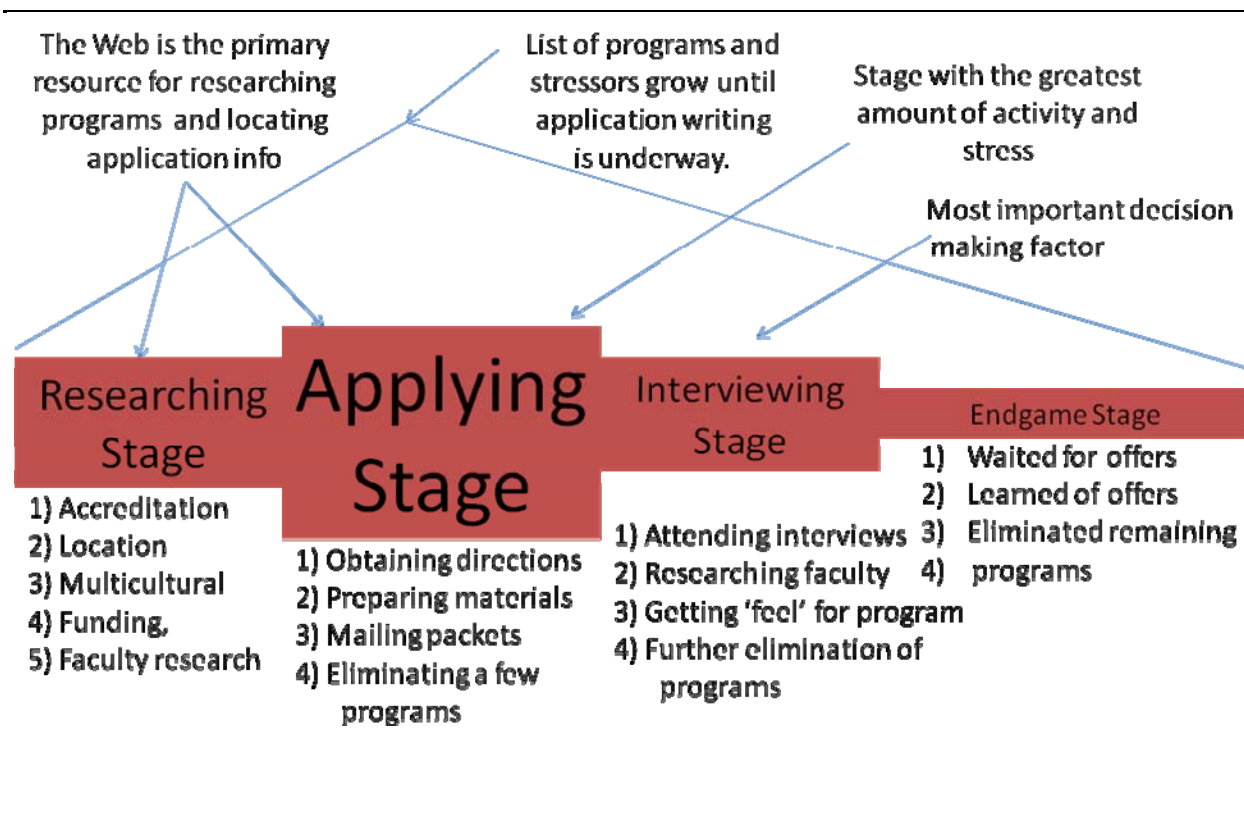


Figure 1: Visual Depiction of a Model of the Application Process

During the Researching Stage, applicants began by researching programs on the Web during the summer or early fall. They identified APA accredited programs and developed a list of programs/schools to potentially apply to using criteria that emerged during the researching process. The criteria included: 1) accreditation status, 2) geographical location, 3) multicultural commitment, 4) available funding, and 5) faculty research interests. Applicants often used the Web to obtain information about the application requirements of each program on their list during this stage. A key finding related to this stage is that the applicants first went to the Web to research programs, and they obtained the vast majority of their information from program web sites, except in cases where applicants had an established personal contact with the program

(e.g., same department or university as an applicant's master's program). As application deadlines approached, applicants decreased their efforts related to researching programs and began writing and preparing applications.

The Applying Stage involves writing essays, completing forms, and obtaining transcripts and recommendations. As one would expect the Applying Stage required extended periods working at a desk and computer to complete paperwork. Often applicants completed the essays and written materials required for one school and used them as a template to prepare materials for other programs. With the onset of preparing applications, the subjective experience of applicants became increasingly stressful. Applicant's described gaining clarity about the amount of work and effort required to apply to each school. Until this point, the list of programs to which the applicant intended to apply had grown, but as the applicant began preparing applications their stress level increased and the length of the list ceased to grow. As applicants completed and mailed some applications, those with longer lists eliminated some programs which had a difficult application process, difficult to navigate web site, or were a questionable fit for the applicant. This is a key finding of this study, as at this point in the process applicants had little, if any, personal contact with the programs. Applicants' judgments about which programs to eliminate were often based only on contact with a program's web site. The Applying Stage came to a close as applicants placed their final application packets in the mail, usually during mid to late December.

The Interviewing Stage begins as applicants are notified of invitations to interview with programs. This occurs typically between mid-January and early March. When applicants became comfortable with the number of interview invitations they had received they often eliminated any programs that they found less desirable if they had not already completed the application.

Applicants continued to use program web pages during this stage to gain familiarity with the professors they would interview with and to further their familiarity with programs. Applicants described attending a variety of different types of interviews. Types of interviews included: applicant-panel, multiple one-on-ones, group, psychodrama/activity, and phone only. Applicants described “interviewing the program.” They used the interview as an opportunity to ask questions of faculty, current students, and other interviewees. Additionally, they described “getting a feel for the program” by observing how the faculty and students interacted with each other. They also evaluated programs’ commitment to diversity. A key finding associated with this stage is that applicants' experiences at interviews were the most important factor in choosing a program.

Following interviews, applicants learned if they had been offered acceptance to any programs. Applicants then decided if they would accept an offer, and sometimes they chose between multiple programs. This Endgame Stage typically begins in February and lasts as late as the deadline for accepting admission on April 15th. The activities of this stage can be highly variable. For some, this stage lasted only minutes as they accepted an offer from their top choice as soon as it was received. At this point, applicants who received an offer to one of their top choices decided if they would cancel further interviews. A few applicants faced a more difficult choice between programs they found equally desirable. Others were wait-listed, waited for several months to make a decision, learned of acceptance on the final day, or received no acceptance offers.

Researching Stage

Interviewees had various levels of orientation and preparation going into the Researching Stage. Occasionally, interviewees described having a naive approach at this early stage, “I didn't

plan ahead, because I didn't even really expect to originally apply.” This naivety affected their choices, “I was too lazy to take the psych GRE. So I looked only at Counseling Psych programs.” In contrast, other interviewees appeared to be well prepared and thorough in their early decision-making. One interviewee described her approach to forming an early list, “I started very early in the summer before my second year of my Master's program. My goal in the Master's program was to go to a PhD program, so I was working towards that goal. I wrote my personal statement, worked on my resume, started making my list, sat down with [my partner], and went through some mutual places together, and then after I had my initial list -- we didn't have advisers in my Master's program, so I just made an appointment with the professor who I felt like I trusted. And he kind of said, this is not a good fit for you, this is a good fit for you, and kind of reduced the list further.”

The Web is a Primary Resource

“Pretty much all of my information came from the web site.” This interviewee's statement summarized a key finding of this study. Nearly all of the students interviewed described how the Web was a primary source of information throughout the application process, particularly during the Researching Stage. The same interviewee went on to further describe the role of the web site early in the Researching Stage, “I was able to get most of the application materials online, to see the faculty, to see what kind of research is going on, and see what classes, see how long it takes.” Another applicant summarized the role of the Internet in the application process, “It was a lot of Internet work. I don't know how people did before they had the Internet. I just spent a lot of time looking things up.” The final interviewee in this study stated the importance of web sites to the process of researching programs, “The only program that I applied to that I didn't get all my information solely off the Internet was [my home

program]. It was all online. It was my sole source of information on three of my programs. Everything from the faculty, to the programs' general highlights, to the application forms, to the materials, the contacts. Yeah, that was absolutely indispensable.”

Another interviewee echoed this point, and he added that a program's web site was his first point of contact with most programs. “For me they were kind of the first way into looking at PhD programs. I think that would probably be one of the very first steps I ever did when applying for a program was to go check out their web site, even before I really started formally applying for the PhD programs....see who is there...see what the application process is like. I relied pretty heavily on using the web site.” Likewise, for many interviewees the web site was very often the initial point of contact with a program. Another interviewee expanded upon this point. He said, “Going to the web site for me was just kind of one of the more primary things I ever did when I was looking at a school. I never called them and asked them to mail me application materials, or anything like that. It was just automatic for me to go online and assume that all the information I need is going to be there. I don't think twice about going to a school's web site to find out information about them.” Another interviewee described how she used programs' web sites to learn about faculty members without making a personal contact, “They were my best friend throughout the process. The web sites at all the schools that I was looking at were, for the most part, pretty helpful. So the web sites were very helpful in telling me faculty interests, faculty e-mail and names. So the faculty information was helpful on the web sites and information about how to apply and the requirements for applying were helpful.” In sum, applicants looked first to web sites to learn about programs and gained most of their information about programs through the Web, prior to making personal contact.

Making a List

Interviewees discussed a process of forming a list of schools where they intended to apply early in the Researching Stage. While most interviewees only discussed applying to the field of Counseling Psychology, some students discussed considering doctoral programs in Counselor Education, Clinical Psychology or PsyD programs early in their decision-making process. For example an interviewee said, “The first time I looked broadly at the psych field. I looked at PhDs, PsyDs, clinical, counseling.” One interviewee briefly explained her decision-making process in choosing a field of study, “I was working at the time, and I realized I needed to go back to school. So I tried to figure out whether I was going to do clinical or counseling. So I was looking into the different programs. So I would pick counseling because of my interactions with counseling and clinical psychologists that I’ve known and I felt more comfortable in a counseling psychologist role.” Upon choosing a field of study, potential applicants began to form a list of programs by considering a set of criteria. For example, a student explained, “I started going to their web sites and checking out who had faculty research interests that were close to mine, how long the program was, what kind of assistantships they offered, what kind of funding, and pretty much what opportunities there were.” Interviewees stated that they considered: 1) accreditation status, 2) geographical location, 3) multicultural commitment, 4) available funding, and 5) faculty research interests. See the table below for the number of interviewees who discussed these criteria.

Table 5

Number of Interviewees Who Discussed Specific Decision-Making Criteria

Decision-Making Criteria	Number of Interviewees
Geographical Location	7
Accreditation	5
Multicultural Commitment	5
Available Funding	3
Faculty Research Interests	3

Accreditation

Many interviewees said their first step was to identify accredited programs, usually through a web page maintained by the APA (www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/counspsy.html). One interviewee explained, “First thing that I definitely did was to go to APA's web site and look up the accredited programs. I know that accreditation is key, and everyone always says it makes licensing a lot easier.” After beginning with a list of accredited programs, applicants used other criteria to reduce their lists of prospective programs. For example, “I started by looking at accredited sites and narrowed them down geographically and by reputation of the program. The APA web site was probably my first point of researching these things, accredited sites and whatnot.”

Geographical Location

Nearly all of the interviewees discussed how the geographical location of programs factored into their decision-making process. For example, an interviewee described how he considered two regions that were in proximity to friends and family, “I think I was kind of looking at two places geographically. I think one was kind of staying put. You know, I felt kind

of rooted to the area because I have friends here. The other places, I was considering were clustered up a little bit closer to home, because I still am thinking about going back closer to home at some point. You know starting a doctoral program would be a natural transition to be able to move and start something new. So that was some of the context was just trying to gather where I wanted to live. Do I want to stay put kind of near where I was, or do I want to go a little closer to home?" In addition to considering how a program's geographical location would allow for maintaining proximity and relationships with family and friends, interviewees considered how a program's location would affect their partners. An interviewee described how she and her partner considered geography, "The major [decision-making factors] were probably just trying to pick which places to apply to that would be best for both of us, to have opportunities for both of us--and also where we want to live. Like would we want to live in Nebraska somewhere?" Additionally, the reputation of geographical regions factored into interviewees' decision-making process. "We pretty much just researched the cities and weather was a big thing for me. I hate being cold, and the prospect of moving someplace warm was real exciting. He really wanted to go to California, but I don't know why."

Multicultural Commitment

"If they had social justice/multiculturalism piece -- that's something that was important to me when I was looking at programs." Like this interviewee stated, a program's commitment to multicultural issues and representation was considered by many of the interviewees during the list making process. Another interviewee said, "I would look at the cohorts, the previous cohorts, to see if African-Americans were being admitted...the rates, the numbers. Because that comforted me to know that I'm not coming to a school where I'm one of 20." Another interviewee connected their preferences for programs with a commitment to multicultural issues

and geographical location. She said, “I really wanted a diverse faculty and faculty whose research interests I could match. I needed to be in an institution that supports social justice. I knew that I couldn't go to a school that was really homogeneous, or that was in an area that was extremely homogeneous. So that was also a limiting factor for me in, where I was willing to go.” Potential applicants not only preferred programs with a commitment to multiculturalism, but eliminated programs that lacked a strong multicultural focus; an interviewee reported, “I crossed off a lot of schools from my list at that point because there wasn't a very strong multicultural or social justice component.” Another said, I did a lot of research, and I really only applied to schools where I knew there was some sort of a social justice emphasis. I called and asked other students about places that seemed like they might [have a social justice component], and if I found out that they didn't, I took them off my list.”

Available Funding

Interviewees also weighed a program's ability to provide funding. An interviewee explained, “That's another factor, I only applied to places with funding. Then I find out that they only guarantee funding for the first year. So even though I was really excited about a program's location and research, it wasn't an option. So I ruled that out.” Another interviewee discussed how it was difficult to find information on a program's ability to fund students. He said, “One big thing about applying to these programs was funding. It'd be like pulling teeth. It is not on the web site in most cases. And you really had to get it out of the faculty. If you go to the graduate coordinator and you're like so what about funding. And in some cases the reason they weren't upfront about it is because they didn't have funding.”

Faculty Research Interests

“I also wanted to look at programs where my research...the type of research that I’m doing is done.” Interviewees attempted to find a match between their research interests and faculty research interests. One interviewee described how she was advised to consider this factor, “And I kind of ran into a dilemma because I wanted to come back to [my home state] with my family, but at the same time there's not a lot of research being conducted on [my research interest in my home state]. So my mentor was like, you really need to come up with a compromise. What's more important to you, your research or is it being with your family? Because I was really, really, starting off very fresh, and I was just picking by geography. And my mentor was just like that may not necessarily be the smartest thing to do, because you're wanting to do something that's very specialized and you need more guidance and expertise on it, which may not be offered at some of the colleges that you're looking at.”

Positive Aspects of Web Sites during the Researching Stage

Interviewees discussed a number of aspects of program web sites that they found to be generally pleasing and beneficial to developing their understanding of a program. Interviewees stated that they found faculty profiles with CV’s and research interests to be useful. “I felt like the faculty -- most every web site was good at listing faculty members and interest of faculty members. Some were more comprehensive than others saying which research they are currently involved in, whereas others said just general interests. So I found the ones that were more specific to be more helpful.”

Student Profiles

Interviewees also preferred sites that included student profiles. “I really like student profiles. I think that's important. I like sites that had faces with the names and information. As

silly as that is, having the picture of the professor or the picture of the grad students helped me make a more personal connection.” Photos of students were also preferred. Another interviewee stated, “And I appreciate it actually, some of the universities that had pictures of their students. So, it’s good to see. It kind of gives a face to the program. I know some programs go to the length of not just having a group picture but having individual pictures of students and their research interests.”

User Friendly

Interviewees endorsed a preference for sites that were easy to navigate. For example, “The ease of using the web site made a difference too. The easier it was for me, the more likely I would be to want to go ahead with the process.” Interviewees discussed their preference for navigation menus, “I really liked [name of college] where all the links were on the side and everything was really well written and you could tell that it was edited. They took pride in what they were writing and showing. There were some [sites] where navigation was really easy for me. Like there were links on the side for faculty. So you go to counseling psychology program, and then financial or funding, and faculty interests, current students, and all the big topics. And you can click on each link and navigate really smoothly and easily from one to the other. And then there were others where it was more cryptic and you had to be on another page and click on the link on that page.” Another interviewee stated her preference for clearly named links, “Yeah, I like being able to find what I need to find pretty easily. I like having really explicit links that let you know exactly what it is that you're clicking on.”

Aesthetically Pleasing

Aesthetically pleasing web design was preferred by interviewees. “When you see a web site and you can tell that someone spent time on it, not only to make it visually pleasing, but

organizationally easy to manage you want to learn more about that school.” Pictures aided in making web sites aesthetically pleasing and increased applicants' interest. “I really enjoyed ones that were bright and pretty and had pictures of the campus. I liked ones that showed students. I just felt that the aesthetics were a little bit more engaging; they reached out to me more.” One interviewee provided an example of a web site's design that she preferred, “Division 17’s new web site is a good example of bright colors and it has drop-down menus at the top that has every page that you could possibly want to go to. I think that web site does a good job of balancing it looking nice with it being really easy to navigate.”

Content Specific to Multiculturalism

Interviewees indicated that they preferred to see clear and detailed information about multicultural aspects of programs. “I really liked seeing demographic information. I liked seeing the demographics of the last cohort, etc. etc. That kind of information. And I feel like some colleges don't post it on purpose. But that helped me with some of the decisions. Environmental and cultural factors are important to me.” Another interviewee said, “Let's see, I like the programs that showed in different ways how social justice is integrated and not just saying 'we emphasize multiculturalism here.' And one an example would be at [name of college] they have a first-year experience infused into the program there. Students have to do community outreach. So they have a whole page. I really like having its own page, not just a sentence in there.”

Negative Aspects of Web Sites during the Researching Stage

Interviewees discussed numerous aspects of program web sites they found to be problematic. “There are a lot of web sites that you just can't Google.” As this interviewee stated, some program web sites were difficult to find using search engines. Another interviewee described this problem, “If it was difficult to find a web site that was really annoying. Like if you

just Google 'counseling [name of college]' or 'counseling psychology [name of college] PhD' and if it didn't come up that would be annoying.” Once applicants reached a program's web site, they encountered problems with the information available and problems with design and navigation.

Not Up-to-Date

Applicants often found that program web sites were not up-to-date. “Sometimes stuff isn't up-to-date. Sometimes it was just that they would have like last year's application or last year's information or even last year's deadline.” An interviewee related an example of how out-of-date information could be problematic, “My frustration was that it wasn't all that up-to-date. For example, there was a faculty listing. I read all their profiles. I selected the ones that seemed to match my interests and I started emailing them one-by-one, so I could get up with them. And the very first person I emailed told me that she was no longer with the university, but her name was still on there.” A third interviewee shared an experience with this problem. “The folks at the University of [Name], bless their hearts, were so damn behind in getting things updated it was like November before they had the sign changed for the application for the oh-eight year. And that was a problem with the web sites. And that also reflected poorly on the program in my mind.”

Too Little Information

Interviewees frequently discussed web sites having too little information. “There were web sites that didn't have much of anything on there. For me that says something about an organization. If it's not updated, if you can't find a whole lot of information, I'm less likely to put my time and effort into coming to interview or even applying.” Another applicant echoed this statement, “One school that I applied – oh, didn't end up applying, but wanted to apply, was [College Name]. I remember that they had barely anything on the web site.” Another applicant

discussed how web sites with too little information were problematic, “I think sometimes there was also like just some information that wasn't there. That would've been interesting to see. Like, did they post on their web site like a schedule of classes that you would potentially end up taking? So you kind of go into the process not knowing certain things or not being able to find out certain information in advance.”

“There wasn't really information about funding upfront.” Interviewees discussed encountering problems with web sites providing very limited information about financial aid. Interviewees elaborated on the problem with the lack of information about funding on web sites. “Information about funding is also something and they don't always put right out there, because they know their funding isn't great. And they don't want to put that out there that ‘hey, not everybody gets it’, or ‘we only guarantee a couple of years’ or ‘hey, we don't guarantee it at all, so good luck finding it!’” Another interviewee discussed her preference for specific information about funding, “The most cryptic part was financial information. Nowhere did I find that information, on any site! I want to know the number of students [who receive funding] and the amount of the stipends, generally, or a range and the amount of time that's covered throughout their studies. It was just not available.”

“Cheap Looking” Design

“The ones that aren't so much [aesthetically pleasing], you just think, “oh boy, it's like I'm going to the Wal-Mart grad school here.” Applicants described how the design of program web sites reflected on the program, department, and institution. “It's kind of interesting that the web sites all usually look pretty nice, and if they didn't. Then I made a more negative assumption about what the department must be like in real life.” Another interviewee had a similar response, “If I saw a web page that looked kind of cheesy or looked as if it was not as professional, then I

was like well maybe that school doesn't really care about how things look or how professional they are.” Applicants also made assumptions about a programs faculty based on the web site, “Typically when [the web site] looked cheap, when it looked thrown together, it looked like the faculty didn’t have it together. That was the assumption, if the web site is not together, how much trouble am I going to have getting stuff taken care of in this department when I'm there?”

Inconsistency in design between university, department, and program web sites was also concerning for applicants. “Like, I think one thing that bothered me at a certain school, is that you come to the main page, you click around and then all of a sudden it takes you to this page that looks really old. It looked like they hadn’t updated the look and feel of it to be consistent with the previous page. Sometimes, I was like okay, that's kind of cheesy or sometimes it would make me doubt that it was the most recent information, like am I in the right place?” This issue was commented on by another interviewee, “They've got a good web site, but they've also got this other page that they've put on there. It's newer--totally different color scheme that doesn't match any of the other stuff that they've done. It's a blue color scheme with crummy graphics and cheap looking text. Versus the other one that looks much more elegant and they've got the pictures of the students pontificating on the side.” In sum, web sites represent training programs early in the recruitment process, and applicants form judgments and make decisions about programs based on the web site.

Eliminating Programs Prior to Personal Contact

This is a key finding of this study. Applicants' impressions of programs based on visiting web sites led to the elimination of programs from consideration prior to interviewing. This was the case for six of the eleven participants in the study. Applicants often cited aspects of content (information), form (design), and function (navigation) as reasons for their judgments and

decisions to eliminate programs. One applicant had developed a metaphor for this process. He said, "I think the web site is the window to the program. It really is, and if the glass is nice and dirty and you know you can't really peer through to see. How can you really make a decision -- I mean you can come into the door and check out the program, which I did in some cases. But in some cases I just felt like 'ahhhhh, I don't even want to bother.'" He further described how both content and navigational elements of web sites affected his decision-making process, "Sometimes it wasn't sort of the process aspects of the web site. The web site's content was not to my liking. For example, accredited program, highly recommended, I leaf through the faculty interests and there's one person or none who do anything related to what I'm doing, and so I say, 'hey, that's too bad, but I probably won't bother [applying] here.' Or it could be that the web site is impossible. Like, for example, there is a university in Canada. I just couldn't get anywhere on that web site. I love that city but it's so far away, so I couldn't go visit there anyway so I was like 'I'm just going to stick to one Canadian university.' So there I could say the web site almost made sort of a... it wasn't a decisive factor but it tipped the scales. It's funny how it works but you know."

Other interviewees specifically endorsed deciding not to apply to a program based on content, form, and functional elements of a web site. One interviewee described having an emotional reaction to difficult to navigate web sites. "I usually didn't apply to places that I had a hard time navigating their web site. It just kind of annoyed me that this was the primary way to apply to their program and they're not taking the time to keep it easily accessible to people. And yeah, I should be able to figure out how to navigate a web site, but, I don't want to spend more than a small amount of time trying to get to where I need to go on the web site. So I usually would just be annoyed and not apply." When asked to provide feedback to training directors,

another interviewee emphasized how web sites were central to her decision-making process, “I would want them to know I used web sites definitely as deciding factors, as far as where I was going to apply and what were my first choices and what professors wanted to work with. So I think the web site, helped me to determine a lot of stuff about my future. I think sometimes even when I looked at the web site and read people's research it made me interested.” An interviewee commented that he eliminated programs based on information obtained from web sites, and also formed negative impressions based on the design of web sites. He said, “If I go to the web site and find out some information about their application process and I’d realize that they don't take people who already have a Master’s degree or something like that. So just finding out that information on their web page--very quickly I need to rule out their school. So I think just based on certain information that I could find out online sometimes that would allow me to make a decision on whether I need to apply the school or not.” He went on to say, “If I saw a web page that looks kind of cheesy or looked as if it was not as professional, then I was like well maybe that school doesn't really care about how things look or how professional they are.” Another interviewee echoed this sentiment and cited limited online content as a reason for eliminating a program from consideration. She said, “Sometimes you click on a web site, and there are no pictures just names, and some people had a vita and some people didn't. So it was kind of all over the place. So that kind of played a part as far as being able to eliminate schools that I would not be interested in.” Based on interviews, it is evident that applicants make judgments about programs, and even eliminate programs from consideration based on the content, design, and navigation elements of web sites.

Applying Stage

Number of Programs Applied to

Participants applied to an average of 6.2 total doctoral programs and an average of 5.8 Counseling Psychology programs. The number of programs that participants applied to ranged from 1 to 12 programs. Participants described applying to more than 10 programs as “a lot,” and they used the word “only” when discussing applying to three or fewer programs.

Mood and Web Use

Interviewees discussed how their mood interacted with their use of the Web. While interviewees described being excited by what they learned on the Web, frustration was the most commonly discussed emotional reaction to program web sites. The time pressure associated with the application deadline seemed to increase applicants' anxiety, and resulted in reactions of frustration. One interviewee said, “When I'm anxious or stressed, I have a lot less patience when I can't find things that are supposed to be there. And as my stress level went up closer to the application deadline, if I couldn't find something I'd be impatient. Just not having any tolerance or actually even looking at the page, if it didn't just pop right out at me I'd get frustrated.” Interviewees emphasized this point; program web sites that were difficult to navigate were also frustrating, and furthermore were at risk for being eliminated from an applicant's list of programs, particularly at the end of the Applying Stage. “Okay, it depends on what stage I was in of applying. Toward the end, if I was feeling really sick of applying. Then I was more likely to become really frustrated with web sites that are giving me a hard time and just write them off. Whereas in the beginning, when I was a little bit more excited about the process, it was not quite as frustrating to me.” Another applicant discussed how an emotional reaction to a program's web site affected his interest in applying. He said, “I think if I got frustrated with it, I couldn't find

what I wanted, I started to get annoyed, and not want to keep looking, then I was like, 'well then forget it. I'm not going to apply here if I can't find what I'm looking for.' Or if I found that somebody was doing something really interesting, I wanted to look at their article. It made me more interested and feel better about applying there. I definitely think it affected me both positively and negatively.” It is apparent that content, design, and navigation can influence the mood of a web user, and the mood of a web user can have an effect on their interest in applying to a program.

Positive Aspects of Web Sites during the Applying Stage

Interviewees stated a preference for centralized application information and ability to submit applications online. They stated a preference for application information that was detailed, easy to find, and grouped together with instructions on how to complete the process. For example, “I think if everything was kind of easy to find -- if it was easy to find what forms to download, maybe they had those all in one place. I think one school, that I'm thinking of in particular, they have this nice-- this one Word document that you could download that had pretty much everything that you needed inside of it, all in one place, instead of having to go here for one thing, here for another thing. So I think just having everything accessible and easy to locate all in one place is kind of a good feature.” Another applicant stated her preference for clearly stated application steps, “My favorite thing that any site would do is when they give you the steps to apply: ‘step one do this, step two do this.’ In those steps they'd have, ‘this is where you mail this to,’ ‘this is our GRE code,’ ‘this is the deadline.’ Because how much time do you spend going through the site trying to unearth the GRE code? And they'd have some stuff that had to be sent to the university and some stuff that had to be sent to departments. And so the web sites

where they just gave you a list of this is what you do and this is where you send it, that was the best part.”

Applicants also discussed largely preferring an Internet based application process. “One thing I did find helpful was I think some schools that do really have a lot of their application process online, meaning that you can apply and submit online, fill out your application online, check the status of your application online. I found that to be very helpful. Just to know that you go to this web site and you log-in, and it tells you whether your letters of recommendation had been received, that your fee is been paid, or something like that. I think that was helpful to be able to go to places like that, whereas for some schools it just seemed more of a paper-based snail mail process.”

Negative Aspects of Web Sites during the Applying Stage

Applicants were frustrated by program web sites where the application information and forms were difficult to find or unclear. “I would have to hunt around for different types of information in different places to make sure that I was downloading all the right forms. And if it was hard to find things and that was a little bit more of a negative experience.” One applicant shared an example of how it was sometimes difficult to find the correct forms, “I mean being a fairly Internet and computer savvy person, I could not find one or two of their required forms that I needed to be submitted. I combed through all the web sites and did searches and it wasn’t there. I had to call the program director, and get her on the phone, and say sorry could you forward me the form it doesn’t seem to be there. And she said yeah it’s kind of hidden, and I apologize for that, we’re redesigning our web site for next year, but for this year... And she literally led me through seven or eight steps before I could get to that form, and she’s like ‘and then you have to scroll down and to the right and there is the little icon for the word file.’ And I

was like, 'oh that's right it is there, huh.' So that was frustrating because some of the web sites are more user friendly than others." Lack of clarity in application information was also problematic for applicants. An applicant shared her experience in applying to a particular program, "All four or five of the programs in counseling related fields are rolled into one application process, but then there's different things for each sub department. So it was hard to figure out what I was supposed to turn in, to do, and how many copies in one envelope or four envelopes. Did everything need to be sent from the institution directly or can it be sent to me...or sign over it and then you can send it?"

Applicants discussed having difficulty with application information and forms being located in decentralized locations. For example, necessary forms may be referenced on a program's web page, but located on a page maintained by the graduate school. Without a direct link it becomes somewhat difficult to find the correct form. An interviewee described such a scenario, "In grad school [the application process] is very decentralized. It's like you send some stuff to the graduate school. You send some stuff to the department. You send some stuff to both places. Similarly, with the web pages I think information can be a little inconsistent. I remember specifically at one school, I think I kind of had to really hunt around to find the right form to download for letters of recommendation. The department's web site didn't have it. I had to go to the college's web site or something like that to download it or something like that. So I think that just being able to find things in the right places was sometimes a problem. Another applicant discussed having difficulty navigating a graduate school's web site, "The graduate school's web site is not that easy. When I applied to the graduate school, it was kind of difficult to figure out the grad school's home page. And where their forms were, and where their application stuff was."

Another aspect of application information being decentralized is the use of Web based applications. Interviewees discussed a number of difficulties with Web based applications. One interviewee stated, "The problem is that you do have to fill out something for the actual school as well, and so it was sort of confusing. You had to go back and forth between the school's web site and ApplyWeb. It's a portal. ApplyWeb is the one that comes up most often." She added "I honestly would almost rather download a PDF just straight from the [program's] web site. As opposed to one of these portals -- and it's more than just ApplyWeb." She continued to describe the process of using a portal to apply and the associated problems, "You go and you have to have an account. And it would generate a password for you and it was -- I had eight different passwords going at one point. And it was sort of a mess. And you get logged out, because your time expired. And you have to insert text into the fields, and your text is always formatted differently in their field. So it's just a pain. And there's no one to contact if anything goes wrong. There were several times when I was going 'I don't know what to do in this section' and the help button wasn't helpful. I'd call up the school, but that's not the school's web site."

Applicants encountered difficulty in learning if their application materials had been received and if their applications were complete. Some programs have web sites designed to allow applicants to check the status of their application, but these sites are not necessarily updated in real time. One applicant said, "I called them and said, 'have you gotten it?' and they said 'well, you need to go back and check the web site.' So I said, 'ok, you can't just tell me? That's nice, okay, I'll go check the web site now.' So went and checked web site, and of course my pass code didn't work on their stupid web site. So, I had to apply for new pass code, and after like three hours, while they emailed it to me. I go on, and see that there was no new information on the web site." Another applicant spoke to the problems with trying to learn if one's

application was received. “I think some of it was just communication. Like they sent me a letter saying that I had things missing, but the letter didn’t get to me until a month after the deadline passed.” When applicants became anxious near the application deadline they turned to calling the department to learn if their application was received and complete.

Handling Problems

When applicants encountered problems with program web sites during the application process they contacted the department in an effort to solve the problem. Applicants often picked up the phone in an effort to receive clarification about the application process. “I think sometimes I would just end up calling the school and saying, ‘hey, I have a question about this. It says this on the application that I downloaded, but I wasn't really that clear about what it meant or what it was asking for.’ So I think sometimes I just ended up calling the school or emailing somebody.” A second interviewee said, “If I saw any inconsistencies I would just call. I did a lot of phone calling throughout the process. Just checking-in being like, ‘here's what I have, is my application complete?’” When initial phone contacts did not provide the needed information some applicants were more persistent, “And then I wouldn’t hear back. So frustrating things like that, but what I did a few cases was email students who listed their contact information on the web site and just said, ‘hey, what is the funding situation at your school like.’ Students are really more responsive and quick about it. I found that was a more efficient way of doing it.

Interviewees stated a preference for being able to contact a program coordinator, “I e-mailed the coordinator of the counseling program several times. She was really helpful. She's a doc student that was doing her assistantship. So, she was really helpful and emailed me back and let me know everything that I needed to do or referred me to people that I needed to talk to for those kinds of things. And [her email address] was listed right on the web site.”

Are Things Done for a Reason?

Oddly enough, some interviewees had developed a rationale for the shortcomings of program web sites. Occasionally, following a statement about problems with program web sites, interviewees would make comments to the effect of 'it should be hard to get into a doctoral program.' For example, "In fact, it's almost like the web site discourages you from looking any further and maybe that's part of it. Being highly, highly selective, they don't want 500 applications. You know, they're good with 2 or 300. I think it makes me feel better to think that things are done for reason, because I'm part of one of these programs now and so I would rather think that it is done with something in mind rather than just being overlooked and being inconsistent." Another applicant described how she felt that an application process had been intentionally difficult to complete, "One application was such a pain that it really made me not want to continue applying and I think that was their purpose, to weed out those that did not actually want to finish their application. So it was really just a pain. I would go so far as to say the application from hell. It was awful. And then to just get straight up rejected after doing all that work was sort of frustrating."

Interviewing Stage

Applicants attended a variety of interviews. One interviewee described her relatively relaxed experience with one-on-one interviews and then contrasted it with group interviews and interviews with psychodrama activities. "The group interview I thought was a little terrifying. So I think that was the most nerve-racking. My other interview was very different. That school is very big into the psychodrama. And the grad students are all on a first name basis [with the faculty]. So it was a very different vibe when you walked in. It was just more laid back, like our first one they had us get in a line of where we were on the scientist-practitioner model." Another

interviewee described her experience with a panel interview, “When I went to that interview, you had to be on-point the entire time. It was very rigid. My interview was the entire panel of faculty and myself at the end of the table. It was horrible!”

Interview Experience: The Most Important Part

Central to grounded theory methodology is determining the most important aspect of the participants' experiences. When interviewees were asked to identify what they believed to be the most important event, they named several aspects: seeking recommendations, writing personal statements, application deadlines, in-person interviews, and notification of acceptance to a program. Interviewees most frequently identified the interview and in-person experiences as the most important part. “My in-person experience of the school far outweighed anything that I would of experienced just looking at the web site. Whatever impressions I got when I visited in-person outweighed whatever initial impressions I got just by browsing their page.” Another interviewee stated, “I think the most important thing, in my whole application process, was visiting the programs. The visit really turned things around for me” Another student said, “For me the most important part was my going to interview the programs. Visiting the programs and seeing the campus, it was important seeing the buildings were I'd spend another four years, meeting the faculty. Both the fourth and fifth interviewees listed a number of events but both eventually listed the interview experience. The fourth interviewee said “The interviews are probably the most important part out of the whole thing. They kind of give you an idea of what the program was based on – your interactions in the interview compared to your opinion based on what you've read.” The fifth interviewee said, “I think that another important part of the application process was the actual interviews themselves, because I think that's when I was able to get a real feel for what the school was like.” The eleventh interviewee said, “I think the feel

from the interview was key for me in making my decision. Actually going to a place, seeing its faculty and students, I think that was really important in helping me make my decision.” In sum, while other aspects of the application process were named as being important, the most frequently named important part was the interview experience. Interviewees stated that the interview process outweighed initial impressions formed during the Researching Stage.

Decision-Making Factors during the Interviewing Stage

“I think by visiting the programs it kind of gave me the power to interview the programs.” Interviewees discussed “interviewing the program” by asking questions of faculty and students and “getting a feel for the program.” Another interviewee discussed how contact with faculty influenced their decision-making process. “Dr. [faculty name] was one of the only people who e-mailed me really early. So, I felt that there was an interest [from the program], which made it kind of an appealing place for me. Throughout my interview he made me feel really, really welcomed and desired. I kind of left feeling like wow, what a supportive place, and I felt very encouraged and welcomed and whatever. Which I didn't feel that -- I didn't have that same experience to this extent anywhere else.” Another interviewee discussed how she gained a feel for the program through contact with the faculty, “I think going to the interview and actually going to campus and seeing, and meeting the faculty – I remember it was just a lot more welcoming. The faculty [members] were talking to people and they wanted to get to know you.”

Applicants also contacted students and faculty by email prior to and following the interview. “The way I look at graduate programs is how responsive the faculty is to email is an indication of how responsive they will be in person. It's not a direct correlation, usually, because as we know some of our faculty members just don't email, but they'll talk to you in person.” Another interviewee said, “I contacted some professors to see if they were actually doing

research, but if the web site said they're actively doing research, I didn't bother with that” In sum, personal contact with faculty members and students, whether in-person or by email, was highly influential in applicants' decision-making process.

Culture of the Program Observable at Interview

While attending interviews, applicants were able to observe aspects of the programs that were not apparent on the Web. Specifically, applicants observed the ‘culture of the program’ and the interactional styles of students and faculty. “When you go to a place you can see how the faculty and students interact with one another. If it seems stuffy, or that they're not open with each other, or that it's a huge divide, or faculty are inaccessible for help, that's not something that you can read [on the Web].” Another interviewee discussed observations that he made while attending an interview, “When the program director came in his football jersey with his daughter, who was watching a DVD while we were talking, and then she started talking to me, which is really cool. It was clear to me right there and then how families are valued.” Another interviewee said, “I think some programs are a lot more comfortable than their web site appears. Like there’s not a lot of pictures or a real sense of community, at least not on the web site--which I feel like that can be one of the strengths of the program, that there is a pretty strong community.”

‘I Didn’t Know What to Expect’: A Negative Experience

When applicants encountered unexpected events at an interview there was a tendency for it to be a negative experience. One applicant said, “Am I going to be doing a lot of walking? At [name of university] that was something we didn't know. So they gave us a tour. It was raining, cold, and their campus is all spread out. So I'm just walking and my feet hurt and my stockings ripped. I mean, it was just crazy. So that would be nice to know too, that ‘there is going to be a tour so you might want to bring some comfortable shoes.’” Later in the interview when this

interviewee was asked to provide feedback to training directors she said, “What's the process? How is it going to be? Is it going to be a quick interview? I think sometimes you can prepare better for certain things, so if I know if it's an all day thing that comes with some mental preparation, versus four hours. Is it a group interview? That's different than a one on one. Maybe even saying, ‘in the past this is how the interview has been set up,’ so people can know how to prepare.” Another said, “Psychodrama, I was shocked. I get embarrassed doing things like that. So I think that part was little nerve-racking for me. All they said about their interview process was the day it would be taking place.” Another interviewee said she was requested to arrive early in the morning for an interview, only to learn upon arrival that she would not interview until 4:30 in the afternoon. She went on to say, “I was the last interview of the day, and the two people I wanted to work with both were teaching and were not in my interview. So, I made the trip for nothing. The interview was not a great experience.”

Endgame Stage

The Endgame Stage describes the period following interviews when applicants wait to learn the outcome of their interviews. Similar to the closing moments of a game of chess, most of the pieces, programs in this case, are off the board and only a few potential outcomes remain. The stage begins following early interviews and lasts as late as the deadline for accepting admission on April 15th. Many applicants used the interview process to confirm or rearrange their rankings of programs, and they awaited an offer of acceptance from a program near the top of their list. Following the interviews, applicants’ learned whether they had been offered acceptance to any programs. “They were the quickest turnaround of anybody. It was like right away, you had an interview and then a week after my interview I knew that I had gotten in.” Another interviewee said, “I knew I'd gotten in pretty quickly after the interview. So I was

excited about that because I knew no matter what, I knew I was going to someplace. I was like okay, no matter what I'm going somewhere!”

For some, this stage lasted only minutes as they accepted an offer from their top choice as soon as it was received, “Once I found out that I got accepted, I accepted pretty much immediately.” At this point applicants who received an offer to one of their top choices were likely to make a commitment and cancel further interviews. “And after the interview I really had my heart set on [name of university]. By the time they had accepted me I had already interviewed at three places, and so I canceled the other five [interviews] because I already knew that this was the place. I already got into the school that I really, really wanted to get in. So I canceled the other five interviews.” A few applicants faced a more difficult choice between programs they found equally desirable. “I was very happy to be the one making the decision [about which school to attend], but it was still very difficult. So I went back and forth on a daily basis.”

Others waited for several months before a decision could be made. One interviewee said, “I was wait-listed, so once I found out that I was wait-listed I just kind of -- I really didn't do a whole lot in the meantime.” Another described a different scenario that delayed her decision, “My interviews ended -- end of February, but I knew I'd gotten into [name of university] pretty quickly after the interview. But I didn't decide until the day that we had to decide, because my [partner and I], we wanted to go to the same place. So trying to juggle his wants and mine and our professional careers at the same time was difficult but it worked out well.” Another applicant learned of her acceptance at the last minute. She said she was wait-listed and then she was called on April 15th by the training director. She said, “He said, ‘he could not offer admission’, then he contacted me by phone and offered me admission the next day.”

Some received no acceptance offers, often learning of the outcome of interviews indirectly, “They called the people that they accepted that night. So when I didn't hear from them, I kind of knew that I wasn't in. And so that was sort of the end of the line.” Another applicant said, “They sent me a letter to tell me that I hadn't gotten in, and my dog was chewing up some newspapers at the time. And I took the newspapers out and put the letter in his mouth and let him chew on that. And then, when I finally found out, after having been wait-listed, I got an email saying I hadn't gotten in.”

Overarching Themes

Several themes spanned the length of the model. These overarching themes were: 1) Applicant descriptions of their activities on program web sites. 2) As one would expect, applicants found much of the process to be stressful. 3) During the application process, applicants looked to their formal and informal mentors for support, advice, and information.

Applicants' Activities on Web Sites

Interviewees described how they utilized program web sites. Some common themes were: 1) Interviewees almost unanimously endorsed investigating faculty, searching for faculty members with common research interests, and reviewing faculty bios and CVs. 2) Applicants identified admissions and application requirements/deadlines. 3) They reviewed overarching descriptions of the programs and identified the length of the program. 4) They investigated multicultural aspects of the faculty and students. 5) Applicants also investigated student activities and research being conducted by students. See the table below for the number of interviewees who discussed reviewing these types of information on the Web.

Table 6

Number of Interviewees Who Discussed Specific Activities on the Web

Activity on Web Site	Number of Interviewees
Information about Faculty	10
Application Requirement/Deadlines	9
Program Descriptions	6
Student Activities/Research	5
Multicultural Aspects of Faculty/Students	4

One interviewee touched on a number of these themes when discussing her use of program web sites. She said, “Initially, [I looked at] the application and the requirements. Looked at the overview of the program in terms of how long it generally took and what the demographics of -- the makeup of the faculty and see some of the current student profiles, if they had them. And then from there, I looked at faculty members to see if I would find an appropriate mentorship.” Another interviewee stated what she looked for on program web sites, “I looked at a lot of faculty’s CVs that were posted. I looked at the program of study, what they're offering, anything that was specialized to that program, like, for instance, [an in house counseling center]. What kind of research do doctoral students do, if it was posted on the web site? I mainly focused on the faculty though, looking at their profiles and classes that they're teaching.” A third interviewee explained how she used web sites, “Making sure that I was very clear when the deadlines were, making sure that I was clear what the requirements were. And then also making sure that -- even before the interview I tried to read about as many people as possible. So I used the web site to find out about different professors what was going on in the department, their theories, their philosophies.”

Stress and Anxiety

As one would expect most participants emphasized the stressful nature of the process of applying to psychology doctoral programs. One participant reflected, "I was always so stressed at the time too...feeling real overwhelmed." Another stated, "I would say the process was stressful." A third participant emphasized the continuous nature of feelings of anxiety that she experienced while applying, "Like back then I can't remember a time when I just wasn't anxious. Even logging onto the web site produced anxiety." Participants also emphasized the time consuming nature of the process. The statement "it was like a second job" summed up the process. One participant stated, "It was like a second job, it took a lot of energy, a lot of research. It took a lot of time. It really was like a second job for a while. That's all I did for a while, was go to class come back and spend my weekends applying." Furthermore, a few participants also talked about how they reacted to the stress of the process. One participant talked about becoming aware of being very stressed and compulsively cleaning. "My doctor had to switch me on a different medication before I started doing all this OCD stuff. And that wasn't good. Like, I started cleaning a lot. I was trying to figure out what is stressing me out, and I was like, 'you know, I'm applying for doctoral programs,' and this is like January of last year. So it was just like, 'maybe I am pretty stressed out about this whole thing.'" A second participant described the physical and mental effects of stress, "I dropped like ten pounds because of the process," "I wasn't able to sleep a couple nights trying to plan," and "I remember the two weeks leading up to the interviews, I started getting kind of obsessive and compulsive. I started memorizing faculty CVs."

The causes of stress included taking on added commitments, procrastination, the pressures of marketing oneself. One interviewee explained, "In terms of applying, since I was

working a whole lot...my job was like 60 hours a week, it was a lot of my extra time to fill out the applications to make sure I had all of my GRE scores and transcripts and all those kind of things and a lot of driving around to different schools..." Other interviewees discussed difficulties with time management as a source of stress. One interviewee chose a brief story to illustrate his difficulties with time management during the application process, "I'm good at putting things off until last minute and getting myself to rush. So I remember that I had a classmate of mine who was in my office when I was finishing an application. It was like I was trying to finish it before I had to next day it with UPS or whatever, and I was trying to make it by the deadline when they would pick up the UPS packages. So let's say it is like the last pick-up was at six o'clock, it was like maybe 5:30 in my office, and I'm like filling out all the application forms and putting the last things together and packaging up. And he's like, 'dude, this is due in half an hour' (shared laughing). So I think that one thing was like letting time get the best of me and getting a little bit behind. And I definitely made a lot of trips to UPS and FedEx to get things out at the last minute." In addition to the pressure of time, applicants found that the process of composing the essays and other written materials could be stressful. One interviewee explained, "I had some trouble representing myself in the [written materials] you don't want to sound like you're boasting, or you know like those kind of things. So that was a little difficult working on a good vita that I felt represented the things that I've done." The level of stress experienced by several interviewees appeared to rise higher than one would expect with an ordinary application process. It is this author's observation that the combination of additional time commitments and pressure of marketing and packaging oneself results in a high level of stress for a number of applicants.

Support and Aids

Mentoring

Many interviewees combated stressors with the aid of mentors and organizational strategies. Many interviewees described having a mentor, advisor, or more advanced student in the field of psychology to assist them during the application process. One student described getting advice from mentors about where to apply, “I talked to [professor] and got his recommendations. I talked to [other professor] and got her recommendations. Certainly, she recommended the university where she was at. So I decided to apply there and I talked to my advisor and so forth and so on.” Another student provided a similar example of this sort of mentoring. “I guess the way that I found out about the other two schools was, one of them was recommended to me by a faculty [member] here. He said you should check out this school and I did, and decided to apply, and I checked it out online.” Other students received guidance from their mentor without receiving specific recommendations. One student described the mentoring that she received while forming a list of schools. “I actually checked in with one of my mentors. She gave me a web site that listed all of the counseling psychology PhD programs, and from that list I picked the doctoral programs.” After receiving this initial direction this student returned for further advice and approval, “I wasn't doing a lot of research on the faculty at that point. I was really, really, starting off very fresh, and I was just picking by geography. And my mentor was just like, ‘that may not necessarily be the smartest thing to do, because you're wanting to do something that's very specialized and you need more guidance and expertise on it, which may not be offered at some of the colleges that you're looking at.’ Then I went back to my mentor, and I talked to several professors at that point, asking if this was a good list, and some of them told me that I was aiming for a lot of tier one universities.” Applicants also sought advice when

forming their personal statements. “Two people who were in the doc program there were so phenomenally helpful. The first person that I trusted to ask for feedback [about my personal statement] was a doc student who I really admired, and she was great and helped a lot. Then I went through the process of giving it to one professor and another professor.”

Organization

Interviewees described developing an organization strategy to manage the complicated nature of the application process. In addition to printing hard copies of information found on web sites, interviewees used a variety of information technologies to assist in organization. One interviewee stated, “I started getting real organized. Well, first thing I did, I made a spreadsheet, and I started getting all the requirements down, so I could check them off as I went. I started making individual folders, and I started basically getting my time and my schedule for getting finished organized.” Another student made tables in Microsoft Word. He stated, “I created word files with tables that contained all the requirements and later kind of looked over them, I even printed them out sort of for easy access.” A different interviewee used a function of Internet browsers to stay organized. She said, “I kind of was organized, a folder for each, got it all together, used online and my book [Graduate Study in Psychology] tremendously, a lot. You know, I favorited all of those web sites, and just kept going back.” Another interviewee described how organization became a method of managing stress and anxiety. “I had made checklist. Every time I got something I kind of checked it off. I double checked the envelope that I mailed three times just to make sure everything was in there. And I mailed it off at least a week or two prior to the deadline. And I over-nighted it, because I just wanted to make sure that everything was going to get there.”

Steps and Timeline

In an effort to better understand applicants' experiences in their own words, applicants were asked to provide a timeline of events during their application process. Two interviewees' discussions of the steps they took during the application process are included below.

When asked to provide a timeline of the most important events of the application process one applicant stated:

“Okay, I think most of the applications were due December and January. You know getting everything going probably started around September...trying to get all the transcripts and working on my essays and just making sure I was looking at the programs and picking the right programs that I thought I wanted to apply to. And then getting all the transcripts and finding the money to pay for all of this -- October November. Then I had the bulk of my applications due in mid-December to late December, I think. Maybe December that was an important time, and then kind of beginning of January. [name of university] was the first place that I interviewed. They contacted me very quickly. I think I interviewed January 24. That was kind of the beginning of all of the interviews. And my interviews ended-- end of February, but then I knew I'd gotten into [name of university] pretty quickly after the interview. So I was excited about that because I knew no matter what I knew I was going to someplace. And I was like okay, no matter what I'm going somewhere! And I really liked [name of university], so that was a good thing. And funding is taken care of and that kind of stuff. But I didn't decide to go there until the day that we had to decide.”

When asked “What was the first thing that you did when you started to apply?” and followed by a number of floating prompts such as “What happened next?” another applicant responded:

“I started early in summer. I intended to apply to eight, but I was only able to have time for four applications. I went to APA's web site and looked up the accredited programs, location that was my initial criteria of rejecting places, I started going to programs' web pages and looking to see what they had. I started to look at what the different faculty members were doing, research areas, to see if I matched up, at all. I probably ended up with a list of maybe 10 or 12 programs after I narrowed it. I started concentrating on getting my vita ready and doing the steps that I could that would be general to all of them, ordering transcripts and that sort business. As the semester started going on and getting later and later, it was getting to the point that I had to start eliminating more places. I had asked for letters of recommendation early, so I had forwarded my GRE scores and started writing my personal statements. And throughout a lot of that it was using web sites to see when things were due. I wrote my personal statement. And had some people look at it, give me their feedback, what they thought. So [name of university] was

one of my first deadlines. So I definitely got that one in first and then started altering it, cutting pieces, and adding to what the other schools were looking for and working on each of those applications. I was told two were due by December 1st, so I had those done at some point in November. And the next one was the 15th of December, and the last one wasn't due until January 15th. Then checking all the schools to make sure that you have everything in...those pages. So it's using a lot of those and checking making frantic phone calls, and then it was waiting to hear about interviews or rejections. I heard from them actually about a week and a half after their deadline had passed and I was given an interview. So they had very quick turnaround. I had an interview around Valentine's Day. And then I heard from [name of university], I want to say around mid-January, to set up an interview time. And then had not heard anything from [name of university] or [name of university], and I sort of ended up finding out that I had gotten rejected from both places before they had sent me the letter [by contacting friends who had also applied to schools]. I guess mine was little different, because I heard from [name of university]. I mean, they were the quickest turnaround of anybody. A lot of the pressure was taken off, once I got that first acceptance. So I'm all set. So it wasn't so bad. I know, for others it was probably a lot more stressful. I guess, what was difficult was hearing from both of them positively, because I thought someone would make the decision for me and I wasn't going to be in charge of deciding.”

These extended quotes were included to provide the reader with a greater understanding of applicants' experiences over the course of the application process. The author used these responses and similar responses provided by each of the other interviewees to form the structure of the model.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Increasingly, web sites have become the 'face' of a program to potential professional psychology students. Literature regarding the Internet and organizational recruitment (Cober et al., 2003; Cober et al., 2004; Williamson et al., 2003) indicates that web sites play a key role in the recruitment of potential students. This study utilized grounded theory methodology to examine the experiences of applicants to professional psychology programs and learn how they use web pages during the process. A model of applicants' experiences was developed based on interviews with recent applicants.

The model identifies four consecutive, overlapping stages: Researching Stage, Applying Stage, Interviewing Stage, and Endgame Stage. During the Researching Stage applicants developed a list of schools based on accreditation status, geographical location, multicultural commitment, available funding, and faculty research interests. A key finding related to this stage is that the applicants first went to the Web to research programs, obtained the majority of their information about programs from the Web, and made judgments about programs based on the web site. The Applying Stage involved writing essays, completing forms, and obtaining transcripts and recommendations. The subjective experience of applicants became increasingly stressful during this stage, and applicants began to trim their list of programs. A key finding associated with this stage is that applicants eliminated programs from their list prior to making personal contact. During the Interviewing Stage, applicants continued to use program web pages to familiarize themselves with faculty members and programs. Interviewees described "getting a

feel” for how students and faculty members interact. A key finding associated with this stage is that the applicant’s experience at the interview was the most important aspect in choosing a program. The Endgame Stage concludes the model.

The findings of this study suggest that applicants use the Internet as a primary means for researching programs, deciding on the programs where they would apply, and obtaining application instructions. Yet, applicants based their decision about which program to attend on their interview experiences. This model and the findings of this study have important implications for applicants, training programs, and the APA.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications and Recommendations for Applicants

Orient Early

Ideally, applicants should begin the process of researching doctoral programs and familiarizing themselves with the application process at least one full year before they hope to enroll in a professional psychology program. Assuming applicants who are currently enrolled in school wish to enroll in a doctoral program in the year following the completion of their current program, undergraduates should start at the end of their junior year and master’s students at the end of their first year, approximately May or June of the year prior to enrollment (APA, 2007). The participants in this study who identified themselves as feeling oriented to the application process said they began the process in the spring or summer one year prior to the year they intended to begin a doctoral program and they obtained orientation materials. Applicants that endorsed feeling naïve began the process during the early fall. It is recommended that potential applicants identify orientation resources at least one year prior to the start of the academic year in which they hope to enroll.

The APA publishes Graduate Study in Psychology, which is the traditional resource for orienting applicants to the process of applying. Some available resources that can aid in becoming oriented to the application process are available on the Web at:

www.apa.org/ed/getin.html

www.apa.org/gradstudy

www.uky.edu/Education/EDP/psyprog.html

Take Measures to Avoid Unhealthy Stress

A number of interviewees in this study discussed experiencing a high degree of stress during the application process. Increased time commitments and pressure associated with packaging and marketing oneself were reasons for stress cited by interviewees. While one can be quite productive when working toward a deadline, it is important draw a balance between maintaining productivity and limiting unhealthy stress. This author recommends identifying mentors and orientation materials early in the process. Proper orientation and guidance can help to avoid many instances of confusion and associated stress. It is recommended that applicants set a reasonable goal for the number of programs for which they plan to apply. No more than ten is recommended by this author. Applicants should also select programs that vary in their competitiveness (APA, 2007). Participants in this study endorsed organizational strategy to track application materials, information, and deadlines. Lastly, if time allows, complete an application to a less desired school first. This can remove some of the pressure, as the application does not have to be 'perfect,' and this step allows for the application materials to be improved in later revisions.

Applicants also discussed stress associated with packaging and marketing one's self when writing the personal statement. It is recommended that applicants obtain a template

personal statement from a peer, mentor, or resource. Have someone else with relevant experience read your personal statement and provide you with feedback. There is less pressure associated with working from a guide and knowing that someone with experience can provide feedback.

Supplement with In-person Information

A finding of this study was that applicants often eliminate programs prior to making personal contact. One reason for eliminating programs was their poor presentation on the Web, yet it is not known if there is any correlation between the quality of a program's web page and the quality of a program. In contrast, interviewees stated that the in-person experience at interviews was essential to evaluating programs. Moreover, two interviewees, who went through the process a second time following an unsuccessful application, stated that personal contacts with professors and on-campus visits to programs during the researching stage were essential to their second application process. So while the elimination of programs from consideration is inevitable, it is recommended that applicants seek out some in-person experiences when possible to supplement information obtained on the Web. Calling, emailing, or scheduling a visit are methods for supplementing information on the Web. Contacting application coordinators or current students is recommended, as students often have greater availability and greater freedom to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a program.

Implications and Recommendations for Training Programs

While recruitment is an important reason to maintain a quality program web site there are also many reasons why this may be difficult. There are costs to maintaining and updating a web page. In the era of wireless technology, cell phones, and electronic mail faculty may already feel overwhelmed by technology. Additionally, a program web site may be a product of the thinking, innovation, and creativity of a Counseling Psychology program and a program's Information

Technology (IT) resources for implementing a web page. Yet, it is possible that a forward thinking faculty, who might otherwise field an advanced or user-friendly web site, do not have the resources or computer talent (on faculty or staff) to create such a resource. The following recommendations are made with awareness that a faculty alone may not be able to implement them to their fullest.

Implications of Internet as a Primary Resource

As many of the members of our field applied to graduate school prior to the proliferation of Internet use, the importance of a training programs web site may be misunderstood. The process of applying to professional psychology programs has changed dramatically as Internet use has become common. The findings of this study indicate that current applicants utilize the Internet almost exclusively to learn about programs and complete applications. Findings indicate that applicants use the Internet as their primary resource during the application process. For example, one interviewee stated, “Going to the web site for me was just kind of one of the more primary things I ever did when I was looking at a school. I never called them and asked them to mail me application materials, or anything like that. It was just automatic for me to go online and assume that all the information I need is going to be there.” Applicants first went to web sites to learn about programs and gained most of their information about programs through the Web, prior to making personal contact. Programs should carefully consider how their web site presents their program and the impression potential applicants may form. Appropriate financial and time commitments should be made to program web sites considering their role in recruitment.

Present Well on the Web

Prior research suggests a relationship between the information presented on a graduate program's web site and a prospective student's attraction for that program (Chambers, 2007).

Likewise, this study found that web sites reflect on the programs and applicants acted on their impressions by eliminating programs from their list prior to making personal contact. It is recommended that programs put their best foot forward on the Web. This is particularly true for programs that are hoping to improve the fit of their applicant pool. It is recommended that programs attend to form, content, and functional elements of their web site (Braddy et al., 2003).

For programs that are unable to provide attractive design elements on the web site, it is recommended that they attended to navigation and content. Begin by maintaining a menu with working links or even a list of links to the content of the page. Providing content in which applicants indicate interest, such as faculty profiles, funding information, and information on current students' activities and research, may help to overcome other limitations. Perhaps the best low cost option to improve many program web sites would be to take digital pictures of faculty members and students engaging in professional activities and upload them to the web site accompanied by appropriate captions and text (Thoms et al., 2004).

Interviewees indicated that they preferred admissions and application information to be located 'all in one place.' It is recommended that programs group all application directions and forms to ensure that potential applicants are likely to complete their application. Other information essential to the application process may need to be included in this grouping such as GRE codes or links to graduate school application forms.

It is recommended that programs make a point to review and update their web site following each year's application cycle. Particularly, it is important to update faculty information and application information. It is recommended that a date of last update be included at the bottom of pages that includes such information.

Attend to Interpersonal Factors on the Web and During Interviews

Interviewees described “getting a feel” for how students and faculty members interact when they attended interviews, and they indicated that the experience at the interview was the most important aspect in deciding upon a program. It is recommended that programs consider their presentation and interaction style during interviews, as interviewees are evaluating the program and their fit with the program. Furthermore, it is recommended that programs which wish to attract applicants with a congruent fit provide content on the Web to describe the culture of the program. Such content can include faculty and student photos, particularly photos of members of the program engaging in professional activity (Thoms et al., 2004), text that directly addresses the culture of the program, and specific information on student activities and research. In contrast, programs should avoid presenting on the Web or during interviews in a manner that is false or misleading. In addition to being ethically dubious (APA, 2002), the findings of this study indicate that applicants become critical consumers during the application process and form a negative impression upon learning of being misled.

Form, Content, Function

Form. Findings of the current study noted that the design of some Counseling Psychology web pages was inconsistent with the design of department web pages. Blustein et al. (2005) identified an underlying trend of attrition and vulnerability for Counseling Psychology training programs. These authors focused on increasing programs’ fit with its supporting department and college and improving the programs’ public image, as Counseling Psychology programmatic goals and interests are misperceived as not overlapping well with the goals and interests of their department's other education programs. Improved consistency in design between program and

department web pages may increase the appearance of fit between Counseling Psychology programs and their larger department.

Content. Prior research (Chambers, 2007) and the findings of this study indicate that web sites with limited content reflect poorly on the program. For example an interviewee said, "... if you can't find a whole lot of information, I'm less likely to put my time and effort into coming to interview or even applying." It is recommended that professional psychology programs incorporate photographs of people and places associated with the program into their web sites (Thoms et al., 2004). Research indicates that photos should be presented in an orderly manner that corresponds to text (Braddy et al., 2003). While generic photos (e.g., a stock photo depicting a person posing as an instructor in front of a class) improve the appearance of a web page, they provide little information about one's experience in specific program. Use of photos of an organization's members is linked to applicants finding an organization's web site, more attractive, personable, and informative than sites without such photos (Thoms et al., 2004). Interviewees specified preferring photos of faculty, students, and locations (e.g., buildings, counseling center) associated with the program. A combination of formal portrait-style photos (i.e., typically used for faculty, staff, and student profiles) and more informal photos (i.e., photos taken at a conference or program event) are recommended.

Applicants consider information about funding to be an important part of their decision-making process, yet in many cases faculty members do not know if funding will be available for the following year. A compromise may found in being transparent about the funding situation. This converges with prior research which indicated that students have a preference for clear information pertaining to financial aid cost of attendance (Hunter et al., 2009). It is recommended that program web sites transparently address the availability and amount of

funding or the methods (i.e., assistantships, student loans, scholarships) that current students use to pay for their education.

It is recommended that each program link their web site to web resources which help to orient applicants to the application process. The APA currently provides some information which addresses this topic. University of Kentucky, and Psycgrad.org (www.psychgrad.org/apply.html) currently provide useful web sites with content for orienting applicants. Should a web site be developed by the APA or another entity that provides a central or initial point for applicants to visit, programs should link to this site.

It is recommended that programs designate a coordinator for the application process and provide contact information for the coordinator on the web site. Interviewees endorsed preferring to contact a program when they had a question about information on the web site. A coordinator can be a graduate assistant, faculty member, or staff member who is familiar with the application process. Providing an email address and a work phone number for the coordinator in the application information section provides applicants with direction on how to resolve confusion and receive answers about the application process. Providing a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section or page is another way to provide answers to common questions that applicants have about the process.

Function. Program web sites should be easy to navigate for most first time visitors to a site. Navigation refers to how easy it is to travel around the site and how long it takes to find the information being sought. This construct is also referred to as function, usability, or user friendliness (Cober, Brown & Levy, 2004; Nielsen, 2000). Interviewees indicated that programs with difficult to navigate web sites were at risk for being excluded from applicants' consideration. This was particularly true when application materials and instructions were

unclear, decentralized, or difficult to find. Applicants preferred web sites with drop-down menus and organized application materials/directions. It is recommended that programs incorporate a page that includes all of the information and items needed for a student to apply on their web site. Any forms that are required by the graduate school should be linked directly or include specific directions to find the form.

Submitting Applications

Many programs are still requiring applicants to mail their application packets, and it is recommended that programs adopt a universal online application. Yet, interviewees discussed preferring the option to apply online and finding online application portals (e.g., Apply-Web) to be difficult to use. Therefore, the author encourages programs to be careful to ensure that the use of an online application process makes the application process easier, more efficient, and less expensive for programs and applicants alike.

Multicultural Content

Munoz-Dunbar & Stanton (1999) found that programs with minority faculty members were more likely to successfully recruit minority students. They also learned that training directors believed that having an existing diverse student body was important to recruiting minority students. A program's web site allows it to advertise its existing diversity in a way that potential applicants can readily observe. Programs can display photos of faculty and students, descriptions of research and personal interests, and other demonstrations of a program's commitment to diversity on the web. The current study's findings converge with those of Munoz-Dunbar & Stanton; interviewees considered a program's commitment to multicultural values when applying, and they looked to program web sites for evidence of such commitment.

Content related to diversity in a program's application materials is positively correlated with minority student recruitment (Bidell et al., 2007). All minority interviewees in this study and several non-minority interviewees indicated that they investigated programs' commitment to multiculturalism using web sites. Chambers (2007) found that potential applicants were attracted to programs demonstrating either no multicultural emphasis or multiculturalism emphasized throughout the web site. Interviewees stated a preference for programs that were specific and detailed in relating how multiculturalism is a part of the program, "I like the programs that showed in different ways how social justice is integrated and not just saying 'we emphasize multiculturalism here.'" Like Chambers, the author observed that a subgroup of interviewees who appeared to demonstrate limited multicultural identity development were less likely to investigate multicultural aspects of programs and prefer programs without a multicultural emphasis. For example one interviewee said, "I did not care if they had a social justice/multiculturalism piece....I was more interested in specific subjects and areas of faculty interest than the overall ideology. In fact, I was really attracted to clinical psych programs that were less focused on ideological dogma and more focused on specific areas of scientific inquiry." Consistent with prior findings (Bidell et al., 2007; Chambers, 2007) a program's web site is generally a cost effective tool for recruitment and, specifically, for advertising a program's commitment to multiculturalism and attracting students who wish to receive such training. Yet, this author emphasizes that programs without such commitment should avoid false advertising.

Characteristics of Effective and Ineffective Recruitment on the Web

Based on this study's findings a description can be outlined of a professional psychology program web site that is an effective recruitment tool. An effective web site would have a navigation menu and an aesthetically pleasing design that incorporates design elements of the

department's site. A list of steps and materials needed to apply would be grouped with clear and detailed admissions information. The site would allow for easily accessible online applications. Current faculty photos and information regarding the composition, roles and research of core faculty members would be provided. The site would include content about students with photos. Detailed information regarding department diversity and how the program addresses multiculturalism would be included. The site would provide content that addresses the culture of the program and unique and interesting aspects of the program. Content would transparently address funding or how student fund their education. The site would provide dates of last update, particularly on pages with faculty and admissions information. Specific and detailed information about the course of the program would be provided in addition to applicant, internship placement, and graduation rate statistics.

The findings of this project also allow for a description of a web site that is ineffective in recruiting. Such a page would lack a menu of links and be hard to differentiate from the overall department or similar doctoral programs (i.e., Developmental Psychology, Counselor Education). Application and admissions information would be unclear, confusing, spread out across the site, and lack links to off site materials (e.g., graduate school forms). The site would have limited to negligible information about funding or how students pay for their education. The site would provide at best a cursory discussion of how multiculturalism is addressed. The site would lack content about aspects that are interesting, unique, or outstanding about the program. The site would utilize a single-page web design with black and white text and limited pictures or links. Such a site may be outdated with regard to program information and requirements, and feature links that no longer work.

Recommendations for APA

APA is encouraged to provide public access to a site that serves as a central location on the Web about applying to professional psychology programs. The purpose of such a web site would be to guide applicants in the process of applying and provide links to the home pages of all accredited programs. This site could serve as a starting point for applicants, provide an orientation to the application process which would include a basic outline of the process, some broad statements about the types of programs which exist, recommend more detailed resources, and provide links to existing programs. In turn, programs should provide a link back to the this central page, as many applicants will likely first go to the web site of a program that they are aware of before learning about such a central web site.

A few interviewees stated that they obtained a copy of Graduate Study in Psychology (APA, 2009c) and were guided by this text, yet other applicants described entering the process of applying with limited orientation. Applicants stated that they went to APA's accreditation web page (APA, 2009, May 6) to learn about the accreditation status of programs, but this page does not link to programs and applicants had difficulty 'googling' the programs web site. It may be difficult for uninitiated prospective students to find a comprehensive list of links to professional psychology program sites.

The information needed for an orienting web site is already provided in decentralized locations on the Web. University of Kentucky maintains a publicly available collection of links to program home pages (University of Kentucky, 2006). On the Web, the APA provides public access to a brief outline of the application process (APA, 2009b) and a list of accredited programs without links (APA, 2009, May 6). The APA also publishes a guide to applying to professional psychology programs, Graduate Study in Psychology (APA, 2009c), and has

developed a subscription based version of the guide, Graduate Study Online (APA, 2009a), that includes a searchable database of psychology programs (www.apa.org/gradstudy).

The current study indicates that a minority of applicants access these resources during the application process. It is likely that decentralization and cost limit the number of applicants that utilize such resources. While publication rights are an important, if not essential, revenue stream for APA, maintaining a large, highly qualified, and diverse body of new members of the field of psychology is truly the life blood of any organization (Braddy et al., 2003; Cober et al., 2003; Williamson et al., 2003), including APA. Maintaining a publicly available, centralized site for applying to graduate programs in psychology would be a progressive and effective method to improve the human experience of recruitment of new membership and increase fit between applicants and programs.

Future Research

This study allowed for hypotheses, theory, and a model to be developed, which are grounded in the experiences of actual applicants. While many of the findings may have been anticipated, this study provides supportive evidence of what would have been merely speculation. When this study is viewed in conjunction with the findings of prior research (Bidell et al., 2007; Chambers, 2007; Hunter et al. 2009) that examined professional psychology programs' web sites, an image of the modern recruitment process emerges. Further research is indicated to develop understanding the recruitment of new members to the field of professional psychology.

A web site may or may not be an accurate reflection of the program. For example, a highly successful and competent program may lack the resources, time or interest to devote to creating and maintaining an effective web page. Conversely, a contemporary and sophisticated

web page may not be an accurate reflection of a struggling program. Therefore, it is recommend that further research on program web sites should be done to determine if a correlation exists between the quality of a web site and the quality and fit of students and faculty that a program is able to recruit. This should be undertaken because it is important to know if web page elements, such as content, design, and usability affect the quality of a program's applicant pool and ultimately those who comprise the field of psychology. Additionally, future research linking student or program outcomes (e.g., the number of applications programs received, the quality of fit of applicants, internship sites obtained, graduation rate, and type of employment obtained) to web site quality could be useful. With the increase in information on student and program outcomes available on the Web, useful data should be available online. Investigation of the methods that various programs develop and maintain web sites would also be useful. Further research on applicants' perceptions of web sites is needed. Also, research investigating the possibility of a link between the quality of the program as a whole or student satisfaction with the program and the program's web site would be of interest.

Limitations

As is the case with most qualitative research, a limitation of this study is that data were collected with a small sample which limits the ability to generalize findings to the broader population. Future research could explore the findings of this study using methods designed for larger numbers of participants and/or varied more greatly in their prior academic training. This study used a sample of students in a single department at one university. This methodology increased the opportunity for themes to emerge from the data as there was limited variability, yet limits generalization of the findings.

Furthermore, interviewees were those who had applied primarily to Counseling Psychology programs. These programs have a unique identity and mission and the ability to generalize to other psychological sub-fields is unknown. Further research could replicate the methodology using accredited programs in Clinical Psychology, School Psychology, other related mental health fields (e.g., Counselor Education, Social Work), or a cross-section of professional psychology programs. The program that the majority of the applicants were enrolled in requires a master's degree and receives an overabundance of applications each year. Future research with applicants with only an undergraduate degree or applicants to PsyD programs may yield other findings.

It should be noted that applicant interest in multiculturalism and social justice may be an artifact of this sample. The department and programs where the participants were enrolled places an emphasis on multicultural competence. The broader population of applicants may not endorse this same level of interest in multicultural competence. Nevertheless, attention to the recommendations related to multiculturalism should provide programs with helpful steps for demonstrating a commitment to multiculturalism on the Web.

Due to the ever-changing and fluid nature of the Internet, data can literally change in an instant. Thus, data collected for this study is limited to the period in which interviewees applied. Applicant experiences may be different by the time this dissertation is defended. For these reasons it is not probable that one could replicate this study's findings as the subject is dynamic. However, this author believes that interviews and analysis produced an accurate portrayal of applicant experiences. Aside from an increase in the number of programs moving to web based application portals (e.g., ApplyWeb), there is not likely to be a systematic change regarding the experience of applicants in applying to Counseling Psychology programs.

In conclusion, practical and psychological barriers to fully embracing Web technology on the part of faculty and institutions exist, yet, it is known that the current generation of students has by and large embraced technology and has high expectations and comfort with the Web. Applicants turn to the Web as an initial step to examine their potential fit with programs and target such programs for application. Professional psychology training programs would benefit from making a concerted effort in this area given that a program's presence on the Web affects its perception in the eyes of contemporary students, faculty, and alumni. Continued development in accuracy, clarity, professionalism, and user friendliness of training program's web sites would promote the congruence of applicants with training programs and in turn promote productivity and optimal experiences for professional psychology students and faculty.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CP WEB PAGE SURVEY: CODING SHEET

1. Coder Initials: 2. Date: 3. University:

4. Web Address:

- 5. Program Overview
- 6. General Curriculum Overview
- 7. Program Requirements / Curriculum
- 8. Descriptions of individual classes
- 9. Lists a minor or cognate
- 10. Does the program list an emphasis
- 11. Admissions / Prerequisites
- 12. GRE: A) Range, B) Avg., C) Min.
D) States GRE is required, no stats
- 13. Deadlines for application

- 14. Can you apply online / online admissions?
- 15. Link to Department Admissions forms
- 16. Link to Graduate Admissions forms
- 17. Is there a faculty contact for admissions?
- 18. Faculty names
- 19. Faculty Photos
- 20. Provides faculty email addresses
- 21. Descriptions of what faculty members do
- 22. Date last updated:
- 23. Vitas
- 24. Descriptions of faculty research, publications, etc.
Other Faculty info:
- 25. Student names
- 26. Student photos
- 27. Date last updated:
- Other Student info:
- 28. Staff Names
- 29. Staff Photos

- 30. Date last updated:
- Other staff info:
- 31. Alumni names
- 32. Alumni photos
- 33. Date last updated:
- 34. Model of Training:
- 35. Is there a mission statement?
- 36. Provides Syllabi online
- 37. The site uses videos
If videos, of what?:
- 38. Link to the town
- 39. Information on financial aid or assistantships
- 40. Cost of attendance is listed
- 41. Link to APA
- 42. Link to APA division 17
- 43. Link to APAGS
- 44. State licensure information
- 45. Is student insurance included?
- 46. Newsletters
- 47. Listserv
- 48. Any type of affirmative action statement?
- 49. Statement of APA accreditation
- 50. Date for renewal of accreditation

Other Items:

Comments:

51. Rate the Format (Aesthetics): 54. Use of Web Technology:
(0=Unattractive, 6=Very Attractive) (0=Minimal technology, 6=Very high tech)
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 0 1 2 3 4 5 6

Describe items that affected your ratings: Describe items that affected your ratings:

52. Content (Information): 55. Overall Usefulness of this Site:
(0=No info, 6=Very useful info) (0=Not useful, 6=Very Useful)
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 0 1 2 3 4 5 6

Describe items that affected your ratings: Describe items that affected your ratings:

53. Function (Navigation):
(0=Very difficult to navigate, 6=Easy to navigate)
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

Describe items that affected your ratings:

APPENDIX B

CP WEB PAGE SURVEY: ADDITIONAL CODING SHEET FOR APA REQUIRED INFO

1. Coder ID:2. Date:3. University:

Does the web site contain the following information?

No, none of the info listed below was present

52. Any info on **Time to Program Completion**

- a. mean number of years that students have taken to complete the program
- b. median number of years that students have taken to complete the program
- c. percentage of students completing the program in fewer than five years
 - d. percentage of students completing the program in five years
 - e. six years
 - f. seven years
 - g. more than seven years

53. Any info on **Program Costs**

- a. cost per student of the first year cohort
- b. full time student tuition
- c. tuition per credit hour for part time students, and
- d. any fees assessed to students beyond tuition costs
- e. information regarding current adjustments to tuition
- f. financial aid
- g. grants, loans
- h. tuition remission
- i. assistantships
- j. fellowships

54. Any **Internship** info

Was this info for at least the most recent 7 yrs of graduates showing their success in obtaining internships)

- a. Those who obtained internships
 - i. Number of students
 - ii. Percentage of students
- b. Those who obtained paid internships
 - i. Number of students
 - ii. Percentage of students
- c. Those who obtained APPIC member internships
 - i. Number of students
 - ii. Percentage of students
- d. Those who obtained APA/CPA accredited internships
 - i. Number of students

ii. Percentage of students

e. Those who obtained internships conforming to CDSPP guidelines (school psychology only)

i. Number of students

ii. Percentage of students

f. Those who obtained two year half-time internships

i. Number of students

ii. Percentage of students

55. Any info on **Attrition**

a. The number of students who did not complete the program once matriculated (i.e., left for internship)

b. The % of students who did not complete the program once matriculated (i.e., left for internship)

APPENDIX C

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled "The Experience of Applicants to Counseling Psychology Programs: Applicants' Use of Counseling Psychology Program Web Pages" conducted by Graham A. Hunter from the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services (706-542-1812) under the direction of Dr. Alan E. Stewart, Department of Counseling and Human Development, University of Georgia (706-542-1263). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to how applicants to Counseling Psychology programs use program web pages during the application process. If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

- 1) Participate in an individual interview with Graham Hunter that will last on hour.
- 2) Respond to open-ended questions about the application process and the role that program web pages played in this process.
- 3) Grant permission to be video and audio recorded during the interview so that my responses can later be transcribed.
- 4) Complete a brief demographic questionnaire.
- 5) Participate in a follow-up group interview with other participants that will last for an hour and a half. The follow-up group interview will occur within approximately two months of my individual interview.
- 6) I will be contacted by email to set up the follow-up group interview.
- 7) Grant permission to be video and audio recorded during the follow-up group interview.
- 8) My information will be kept for three years after completion of this study.
- 9) My responses may later be quoted in published research, but will not be attributed to me and will not include content that easily identifies me.

I don't have to answer any of the questions if I don't want to, and I can ask Mr. Hunter about any of the questions that I don't understand. I know that it is fine to say that I do not want to do the interview.

The potential benefits to me are that I will be able to observe qualitative data collection methods. Also, I will have the opportunity to reflect on my decision-making process during the period when I applied to doctoral programs. The researcher also hopes to learn more about how applicants use program web pages.

Participation in this study involves no greater risk than normal human interaction.

I will receive no compensation for participation in this study.

APPENDIX D

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about your use of the Internet in researching graduate schools. I want to know about how you have used Counseling Psychology program web sites during the process of researching and applying to doctoral programs. You can use this web site as a prompt. Let's get started.

- 1) Tell me about the process of applying to doctoral programs.
 - a. Can you tell me more about the role of web sites in the process?
- 2) Describe the time line of the most important events in the process?
 - a. What happened next?
- 3) What were the most important events that happened during the application process?
 - a. What role did web sites play in these events?
- 4) What problems did you face when applying?
 - a. How did you handle with those problems?
 - b. What problems did web sites present?
- 5) What happened as a result of how you handled those problems?
- 6) How did your mood affect you use of web sites?
- 7) How were program web sites useful and not useful when you were applying to doctoral programs?
- 8) What parts of web sites do you remember as having a positive or negative impression on you?
- 9) What differences did you notice between how the programs looked on the Web and how they appeared when you saw them in person?
 - a. What surprised you when you visited the program at the interview?
 - b. Did web sites accurately describe the programs that you visited?
- 10) What other information would you want faculty to know about how you used Counseling Psychology program web sites?
- 11) What else would you like to see on program web sites?

APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please provide the following information about yourself. This information will be used to describe the overall group of people interviewed for this study.

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. Racial/ethnic heritage:
4. Social/economic status of your family of origin:
5. Current program of study:
6. The number of years you have been in this program:
7. The number of schools you applied to:
8. The number of Counseling Psychology programs you applied to:

APPENDIX F

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

I want to thank you so much for talking to me today. I really want to find out about what you think about Counseling Psychology program web pages, and your responses to my questions will help me. I promise that no one will hear your responses, and that I will keep everything you said private. If you would like to talk to my supervisor you can reach him at this number: (706) 208-2993. You do not have to tell anyone else about talking to me today if you do not want to. Thank you again for your time.

APPENDIX G

EVOLUTION OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Individual Interview

1) How did the process of applying to Counseling Psychology programs unfold for you, and what role did program web sites play in this process?

11/14/07 Tell me a story about the process of applying to Counseling Psychology programs.

12/13/07 Tell me about the process of applying to doctoral programs.

2/20/08 Tell me about what the process of applying to doctoral programs was like for you.

2) What role did program web sites play in the process?

2/20/08 Tell me more about the role web sites played in the process

3) What were the major events in the application process?

12/13/07 What were the most important events that happened during the application process?

2/20/08 What would you say were some of the most important events that happened as you applied?

4) What role did web sites play in these events?

5) What preceded or influenced major events?

12/13/07 Can you describe the time line of the most important events in the process?

2/20/08 What steps did you take in the process?

4/08/08 How did the process start? What happened next?

6) What happened before and after these events?

2/28/08 What was the context of those events (the before and after/ the outcome)?

7) What, if any, obstacles did you experience, and how did you negotiate them?

12/20/07 What problems did you face when applying?

8) What problems did web sites present?

3/4/08 Did you have any problems with things not being up to date or have difficulty with navigation?

9) Were there some things that you did to deal with those problems?

2/28/08 How did you handle those problems?

10) What were the outcomes of your decisions and strategies within the application process?

12/20/07 What happened as a result of how you handled those problems?

11) What decisions did viewing programs' web sites help you make?

2/20/08 Tell me about how web sites influenced your decision-making?

12) How did attention or frustration affect your use of program web sites?

12/20/07 How did your mood affect you use of web sites?

13) How were program web sites useful and not useful when you were applying to doctoral programs?

14) What aspects of web sites do you recall having a positive impression on you...negative impression?

12/20/07 What parts of web sites do you remember as having a positive or negative impression on you?

15) What discrepancies did you notice between viewing programs on the Internet and visiting them during the interview process?

12/20/07 What differences did you notice between how the programs looked on the Web and how they appeared when you interviewed with them?

4/08/08 What differences did you notice between how the programs looked on the Web and how they appeared when you saw them in person (when you interviewed with them)?

16) What other information would you want faculty to know about how you used Counseling Psychology program web sites?

1/2/08 What other information would you want students, faculty, or the research audience to know about how you used Counseling Psychology program web sites?

17) What else would you like to see on program web sites?

APPENDIX H

EXAMPLE SECTION OF AN INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Participant #7

04/25/08 12:45-1:25 in room 124 J

Audio recording of Participant #7's Interview: 38:54 minutes

Interviewed and transcribed by Graham Hunter for dissertation

Okay to start off with, I'll give you a broad open-ended question. Tell me about the process of applying to doctoral programs.

It was like a second job, it took a lot of energy, a lot of research. I didn't decide to apply to doctoral programs until very late, maybe July, August-ish, October-ish. A lot of applications had come out, because I wasn't sure if it was what I wanted to do. I wanted to apply to doctoral programs for what I think are pure intentions. Like, I want to do it for the sake of helping people not for the sake of having a Ph.D, for like, you know, superficial prestige. It was a lot of soul searching, because I wanted to make sure I wasn't doing it for superficial reasons. I was doing it because I genuinely wanted to give back and help people. So, because of that, the time restraint, I was really pressured, and by the time I decided yes I wanted to do it for this, this, and this reason -- It just became very difficult for me because I didn't plan ahead, because I didn't even really expect to originally apply.

Can you describe a timeline of the most important events that happened in the process?

Probably the deadlines, haha. I think November December and January were the big deadlines. I think December and January over winter break those were most significant for me. It was very difficult for me to get some of my recommendations on time because some of my professors are like procrastinators. It was also difficult for me to arrange interview times, because my class schedule at [Name of] College was very rigorous. At that time, they didn't allow me to skip classes for interviews. They were very, very strict about that. So those were pretty significant for me, trying to maneuver around the deadlines and the various dates that I had to get things in or show up. And also I got stormed in a couple times at the airport. I missed an interview.

Where did you start out at? What was the starting point for you in the application process? What was the first thing you did when you decided you wanted to apply?

I actually checked in with one of my mentors. She originally worked at [Name of] College, but now she's at [Name of] University. She gave me a web site that listed all of the counseling psychology PhD programs, and from the list that I picked the doctoral programs from. I relied very heavily, actually, on web sites, because that was the easiest and most tangible process for me in the limited amount of time I had. Like, I got information really quick, instead of like calling around or trying to get application material mailed to me. I just didn't have that kind of luxury at that time, especially to make those November, deadlines. And I think there was one in October. So the first thing I did was I wanted to -- I looked at geography. I wanted to come back down South, or at least stay on the East Coast. And I kind of ran into a dilemma because I

wanted to come back to [state] with my family, but at the same time there's not a lot of research being conducted on [race] -Americans in [state]. So my mentor was like, you really need to come up with a compromise. What's more important to you, your research or the work you want to do, or is it being with your family? So you've got to give some, you've got to take some. Because I was going around looking at this list of colleges going, "oh, there is one in Tennessee, let's just apply to that one." I wasn't doing a lot of research on the faculty at that point. I was really, really, starting off very fresh, and I was just picking by geography. And my mentor was just like that may not necessarily be the smartest thing to do, because you're wanting to do something that's very specialized and you need more guidance and expertise on it, which may not be offered at some of the colleges that you're looking at.

So it sounds like you got the web site from your mentor, and you picked schools and went to their web sites and started applying by geography.

Yeah, that's the first thing that I looked at was geography. And then I looked at research, and I crossed off a lot of schools from my list at that point because there wasn't a very strong multicultural or social justice component. I didn't feel like I would get a lot of guidance. And then I think mentoring is something is very important to me. And then I started crossing off -- I looked at a lot of faculty's CV's that are posted. I looked at the program of study, what they're offering, anything that was specialized to that program, like, for instance, we have a center here. Things like that. What kind of research do doctoral students do, if it was posted on the web site. I just clicked around a lot. I mainly focused on the faculty though, looking at their profiles and classes that they're teaching. I crossed out a lot, as a result, from the South, so I kind of went up. I looked at schools in New York. I applied to schools in New York and Pennsylvania, the Washington, DC area, Virginia/Maryland area.

So you found your schools and applied there. Then what happened?

After that I came down to -- I crossed off -- well, I narrowed it down to about 15, 17 schools. That's still a lot of schools. Then I went back to my mentor, and I talked to several professors at [college] at that point, asking if this was a good list, and some of them told me that I was aiming for a lot of tier 1 universities. So, I ended up taking a couple of tier 1 universities off. I took off the Florida universities, just because they notoriously like in-state applicants. And they didn't accept me for master's anyways. So I took them out. I put some more like backup schools, sort of. But you know in the doctoral program, there's only like 35 doctoral programs, so it's not really a backup. So it's like getting in is already pretty good. So I ended up with an original list of 12. I applied to 11. I actually got dropped from [Name of] State, because I forgot to finish the application. They weren't very clear about their admissions guidelines. There was this component -- yeah, I finish that application like a month and a half in advance. And it wasn't until the deadline passed that I called them, and I had not heard anything from them. And they were like, "you never finished your application." And I'm like, "you didn't notify me, you didn't have a checklist." I went based off of the web site. It's just so hard, contacting people in certain departments or the numbers are outdated, so I just went on purely -- and I did okay at the other 11 -- it was just [Name of] State that I couldn't...

APPENDIX I

EXAMPLE SECTION OF MICROSOFT WORD TABLES USED DURING ANALYSIS

Category	Quotation
Stress, P10	I was always so stressed at the time too. Feeling real overwhelmed And the processing center gets backed up and then you go through this agonizing stress, when you're not hearing them
Organization, P10	I started getting real organized. Well, first thing I did, I made a spreadsheet, and I started getting all the requirements down. So I could check them off as I went. And I started making individual folders, and I started basically getting my time and my schedule for getting finished organized.
Mentoring, P10	I guess the way that I found out about the other two schools was, one of them was recommended to me by a faculty here. He said you should check out this school and I did, and decided to apply, and I checked it out online.
	Decision-Making
Other factors, P10	Typically when they look cheap, when it looked thrown together, and it looked like these faculty don't have it together. That was the assumption, if the web site is not together, how much trouble am I going to have getting stuff taken care of in this department when I'm there. But when the web site was like, solid, like at [Program], then it was really engaging.
Geography, P10	The other program was pretty much a location type thing. It had a good program, but it also had a nice location.
	Web Experiences
Web as Primary source of information, P10	The only program that I applied to that I didn't get all my information solely off the Internet was Georgia, because I'm here. It was all online. It was, unfortunately, my sole source of information on three of my programs. Everything from the faculty, to the programs general highlights, to the application forms, to the materials, the contacts. I did call some secretaries and ask about this thing or that thing that had been sent or had not showed up. Yeah, that was absolutely indispensable.
Use of the Web, P10	I went online and I looked at a lot of the faculty and the places that I was applying to. And I had already done that, but I had to go back on and found people who I was really interested in working with. I didn't do any telephone calls, which I should've done. And it was all online. I went on faculty pages and looked at mission statements. Faculty, mission statements -- sometimes I would look at the layout of the program, how many years it took to finish, average time, scores of people who had come in before, the GRE scores, the overviews.
Negative Experiences,	In [university's] case, again, it's not really a very user-friendly

P10	application process. I call them, and said have I gotten in and they said “well, you need to go back and check the web site.” So I said, “ok, you can't just tell me? That's nice, okay, I'll go check the web site now.” So went and checked web site, and of course my pass code didn't work on their stupid web site. So, I had to apply for new pass code, and wait like three hours, while they e-mailed it to me. Go on, and see that there was no new information on the web site, which I assumed meant good information. They hadn't said “you're not in”, which means that you're still in the running. So they were pretty weak.
Negative Experiences, P10	[College] has this processing center that you send everything to. And so you apply, and of course you're applying near the deadline, because you're not as organized as you should be. And the processing center gets backed up and then you go through this agonizing stress, when you're not hearing them – “oh no the office is done and we don't see it.” Well, the processing center is probably backed up. The processor is telling you that it's gotten there.
Web Positive Experiences, P10	at [college], having applied twice I've always been impressed with kind of how friendly everything seems not only online but when you called them too. I was really just struck by -- they're just welcoming and engaging in their language. I just really like that. It just seemed really student friendly, other programs not so much so.
Web Positive Experiences, P10	Things that got me excited were finding programs that were great fit for me. And seeing faculty who were doing things that were completely up my alley, and having the horribly misguided thought, “wow I'm doing exactly what they're interested in and this is going to be great.” So faculty bios, as nerdy as that sounds, would get me excited. Their mission statement was really cool. Their mission statement, I thought was really synchronous with my ideological stance.

APPENDIX J

TABLE OF CODES USED DURING ANALYSIS

Time Consuming & Stress	Decision-Making Factors
Stressful, P3	Decision-Making Factors: Accreditation
Stress, P8	Accreditation, P2
Stress, P10	Accreditation, P1
Stress, P11	Accreditation, P2
Stress, stress reaction, P3	Accreditation, P4
Stress, stress reaction, P7	Accreditation, Geography, Reputation, P6
Like a full-time job, P7	Accreditation, P11
Like a full-time job, P1	Decision-Making Factors: Personal Contact w/ faculty & students
Like a full-time job, P2	Personal Contact, P1
Full time job, Stressful, P4	Personal Contact, P1
Working and Applying, P2	Personal Contact, P3
Procrastination	Personal Contact, P2
Procrastination, P2	Personal Contact with Faculty, P1
Procrastination, P3	Personal Contact Responsiveness of Faculty, P1
Considering Types Programs	Personal Contact with Faculty, P2
Applied to Other programs, P1	Personal Contact with Faculty, P4
Deciding What Type of Program to Apply to, P2	Personal Contact w/ faculty, P5
Applying to other programs, P4	Personal Contact with Faculty, P8
Applying to other programs, P6	Decision-Making Factors: Eliminating Programs based on web site
Avoiding the psych GRE	Eliminating Programs based on web site, P1
Avoiding the psych GRE, P6	Eliminating Programs based on web site, P2

Avoiding the psych GRE, P11	Eliminating Programs based on web site, P3
Making a list of Programs to Apply to	Eliminating Programs based on web site, P8
Final List, P1	Web reflects on program, P2
Final List, P2	Not applying to a school based on a web site, P7
Final List, P3	Web reflects on program, P3
Final List, P4	Decision-Making Factors: In-person more important in decision-making than web sites
Final List, P5	In-person more important in decision-making than Web sites, P1
Final List, P6	In-person more important in decision-making than Web sites, P3
Final List, P7	Decision-Making Factors: Geography
Final List, P8	Geography, P1
Final List, P11	Geography, P2
Cost of Applying	Geography, P3
Cost of Applying, P2	Geography, P3
Cost, P7	Geography, P3
Difficulty in writing application, avoid boasting tone in materials, P2	Geography, P4
Mentoring	Geography, P7
Mentoring, Big Name, P1	Geography, P8
Mentoring, Advisor, P1	Geography, P11
Mentoring, reviewing application materials P2	Exploring local area on the Web, P3
Mentoring, P4	Decision-Making Factors: Ranking
Mentoring, P7	Ranking, Reputation, P3
Mentoring, P8	Rankings, P1
Mentoring, P10	Decision-Making Factors: Research

Organization	Research, P1
Organization, P1	Faculty Research Interests, P2
Organization, P3	Decision-Making Factors: Importance of Financial Issues
Organization, P4	Funding, P1
Organization, P8	Funding, P4
Organization, P10	Cost of Living, P2
Timeline/Steps	Decision-Making Factors: Diversity
Timeline, P1	Considering Diversity, P3
Steps, P2	Diversity, P4
Timeline/Steps, P4	Diversity, P7
Steps, P5	Diversity, P8
Steps, P6	Diversity, P11
Steps, P7	Decision-Making Factors: Partner's Career
Steps, P8	Dual Career, P4
Steps, P11	Dual Career, P2
Important Event	Use of the Web
Most Important Part, P1	Use of the Web, P1
Most Important Part, P2	Use of the Web, P2
Most Important Part, P3	Use of the Web, P3
Important Event, P4	Use of the Web, P5
Most Important Part, P5	Use of the Web, P6
Most Important Part, P7	Use of the Web, P7
Most Important Part, P8	Use of the Web, P8
Most Important Part, P11	Use of the Web, P10
Most Important Part, Outcome P5	Use of the Web, P11
Decision-Making Factors:	Negative Experiences

Responsiveness of Faculty	
Responsiveness of Faculty, P1	Negative Experiences, P1
Fit, P7	Negative Experiences, P4
Web Positive Experiences, Fit, P10	Negative Experiences, Waited all day to interview, P5
Web as Primary source of information	Negative Experiences, P5
Web as Primary source of information, P1	Negative Experiences, P6
Web as Primary source of information, P2	Negative Experiences, delayed correspondence, P7
Web as Primary source of information, Initial impression, P3	Negative Experiences, P8
Web as Primary source of information, P4	Negative Experiences, P10
Web as Primary source of information, P6	Negative Experiences, P11
Web as Primary source of information, P7	Web Positive Experiences
Web as Primary source of information, P8	Web Positive Experiences, clear on accreditation, P1
Web as Primary source of information, P10	Web Positive Experiences, faculty contact info, P1
Positive Experiences	Web Positive Experiences, faculty interests, P2
Positive Experiences, P1	Web Positive Experiences, faculty interests, P4
Positive Experiences, Quick Interview outcome, P2	Web Positive Experiences, faculty profiles, P8
Negative Web Experiences	Web Positive Experiences, P11
Web Negative Experiences, Claims of diversity on web site, P4	Positive Experiences, student profiles, P5
Web Negative Experiences, No Ratings on Web, P1	Web Positive Experiences, student profiles, P6

Web Negative Experiences, Can't find forms, P1	Web Positive Experiences, Student Photos/info, P1
Web Negative Experiences, Can't find forms, P3	Web Positive Experiences, P7
Web Negative Experiences, unclear application process, P5	Web Positive Experiences, P7
Web Negative Experiences, P7	Web Positive Experiences, Faculty Photos, P1
Web Negative Experiences, Not up to date, P1	Web Positive Experiences, Mission Statement, P1
Web Negative Experiences, not up to date, P2	Web Positive Experiences, reminder emails, P1
Web Negative Experiences, not up to date, P3	Positive Experiences, submit and check application online, P3
Web Negative Experiences, Not updated, P7	Web Positive Experiences, navigation menu, P4
Web Negative Experiences, not updated, P10	Web Positive Experiences, navigation, P5
Web Negative Experiences, P8	Web Positive Experiences, navigation menu, P7
Web Negative Experiences, Lack of continuity with Univ site, P1	Web Positive Experiences, navigation, P8
Web Negative Experiences, inconsistent design, P3	Web Positive Experiences, generally helpful, P1
Web Negative Experiences, P10	Web Positive Experiences, P11
Web Negative Experiences, Cheap looking, P1	Web Positive Experiences, design, P5
Web Negative Experiences, Cheap looking, P2	Web Positive Experiences, aesthetics, P7
Web Negative Experiences, Cheap looking, P3	Web Positive Experiences, aesthetics, P10
Web Negative Experiences, Cheap looking, P10	Web Positive Experiences, integration of multiculturalism, P4
Web Negative Experiences, Using a PDF, P1	Web Positive Experiences, P7

Web Negative Experiences, online applications, P1	Web Positive Experiences, P8
Web Negative Experiences, inconsistencies across programs, P1	Web Positive Experiences, central application info, P3
Negative Experiences, A decentralized application process, P3	Web Positive Experiences, clear/detailed admissions requirements, P4
Web Negative Experiences, P5	Web Positive Experiences, clear application steps, P6
Web Negative Experiences, does not promote program well, P1	Web Positive Experiences, supportive tone, P4
Web Negative Experiences, unclear, P1	Web Positive Experiences, P10
Web Negative Experiences, isn't aesthetically pleasing , P4	Web Positive Experiences, P6
Negative Experiences, unclear financial info, P1	Differences between in-person and web site experience
Web Negative Experiences, unclear financial info, P4	Differences between in-person and web site experience
Web Negative Experiences, unclear funding info, P11	Differences between in-person and web site experience, P3
Web Negative Experiences, Difficult to find home page, P4	Differences between in-person and web site experience, P4
Web Negative Experiences, Difficult to find home page, P2	Differences between in-person and web site experience, P5
Use of the Web, Difficult to find home page, P5	Differences between in-person and web site experience, P6
Negative Experiences, applied to wrong prog, P7	Differences between web site and in-person experience, P7
Web Negative Experiences, too little info, P4	Differences between web site and in-person experience, P8
Web Negative Experiences, too little info, P2	Differences between web and interview, P11
Negative Experiences, Unavailable information, P3	Mood X Internet

Web Negative Experiences, P6	Mood and web use
Web Negative Experiences, P8	Mood, P4
Web Negative Experiences, too little faculty info, P8	Mood, P5
Web Negative Experiences, too wordy, P7	Mood, P6
Web Negative Experiences, commercial, P10	Mood, P7
Problem Solving	Mood, P8
Handling Problems, P1	Mood, P10
Handling problems, P3	Mood, P11
Problem Solving, P4	Feedback for Readers
Handling problems, P4	Feedback, P1
Handling problems, P5	Feedback, P3
Handling problems, P8	Feedback, P4
Handling problems, outcome P7	Feedback, P5
Handling problems, outcome P6	Feedback, P7
Handling problems, Outcome, P5	Feedback, P7
Develops a reason for programs' shortcomings	Feedback, P8
Developing a reason for programmatic shortcomings, P1	Feedback, P10
Developing a reason for programmatic shortcomings, P1	Feedback, P10
Interviews	Feedback, P11
Interviews, P11	

APPENDIX K

SUMMARY OF THEMES USED DURING FOCUS GROUP

Stress	<p>The entire process is stressful. It requires a time commitment similar to a full-time job. Putting parts of application off until the last minute. Having a stress reaction with compulsive aspects An incomplete application</p>
Programs Applied to	Avg. 6 programs, 5.8 CP programs, Ranged from 12-1 programs
Stressors	<p>Money Time Struggling with balancing an arrogant/boasting tone with self-promotion in materials</p>
Aids	<p>Sought mentoring from advisors and doctoral students: preparing list of schools and editing essays. Parents helped with financial burden Developed an organizational system The Web is a primary resource</p>
Decision-Making Factors	<p>Considering different programs: counselor ed, clinical, and counseling psyc. Accreditation status Geographical parameters Ranking/reputation Personal Experience: In-person, phone, email w/ faculty responsiveness of faculty w/ students Programs web site factoring into decision-making Based on specific site content Based on navigation/aesthetics Funding/Financial Concerns Evidence of commitment to diversity and multiculturalism Photos and research interests Research Interest Match Partner's Needs Available financial resources for traveling to interview</p>
Most Important Part	<p>Interviewing/Personal Contact with Programs Followed by the usefulness of the web site</p>
Web Positives	<p>Faculty Profiles w/ photos Student Profiles w/ photos Online/email responses about application completion Easy to navigate Menus</p>

	<p>Application Info is detailed, easy to find, and in one place</p> <p>Clarity and detail in multicultural info</p> <p>Aesthetically pleasing</p>
Web Negatives	<p>Can't find application forms/info</p> <p>Unclear support of claims of diversity</p> <p>Not up to date</p> <p>Inconsistent design w/ Univ web site and rest of program site</p> <p>Site looks cheap</p> <p>Decentralized application process w/ Grad school w/ programs in a dept</p> <p>Unclear or no financial aid information</p> <p>Difficult to Google and find the dept home page</p> <p>Too little information</p>
Differences between online and in-person	<p>Online is often not representative / does not correlate with in-person experience</p>
Mood and Web Use	<p>Frustration & decreasing time = less patience = less likely to apply / complete applications (particularly with less desired schools)</p>
How to handle problems	<p>Call and Email faculty, students, staff</p> <p>Contacts were inconsistently responded to</p>
Developing a rational for a program's underdeveloped web pages	<p>Applicant's often develop a reason for programmatic shortcomings</p> <p>Rationalizations for negative aspects of programs' web pages</p>

APPENDIX L

MEMBER CHECKING

Content Area	Fit	Comment	Comment
Overall endorsement of results	Y, Y	Overall, I think your dissertation did a great job summarizing what I had to say.	Overall I had a very similar experience with only a few differences.
Researching Stage			
Web is a primary resource	Y		The web was clearly a primary source of info for me
Web reflects on program	Y		They didn't even have complete faculty pages and that reflected poorly on the program.
List Making: 1) Accreditation 2) Faculty Interests 3) Geography 4) Funding 5) Multicultural	1) Y, 2) Y, Y 3) Y, Y 4) N 5) N, Y	I agree that geographical location was very important to me since the doctoral program is a four year program and I would spend a lot of time there. However, a strong multicultural component was also a salient point for me.	I did not care if they had a social justice/multicult piece....I was more interested in specific subjects and areas of faculty interest than the overall ideology.
Considering other programs of study	Y		I also looked at Clinical
Contacting faculty prior to interview	Not in results		Another primary source for me was contacting profs that I had found on the web.
Length of program	Not in results		Length of program was also big for me.
Positive aspects of sites: 1) Faculty Profiles 2) Student Profiles 3) User Friendly 4) Aesthetically Pleasing 5) Content Specific to Multiculturalism 6) Welcoming Tone	1) Y, Y 2) N, Y 3) Y, Y 4) Y, Y 5) N, Y 6) Not in results	I definitely agreed with the user friendly websites. The more navigable the website, the easier I could identify with the program. I felt that well-organized websites reflected the organization of the department.	I also enjoyed websites that posted information about their students. This meant to me that the students were an important aspect of the program. Websites that showed strong multicultural commitment were ones that caught my eye the most.
Negative Aspects:		I echo the frustration	Totally agree on all the

1) Difficult to Google 2) Not up-to-date 3) Too little info 4) Limited aesthetics	1) Y 2) Y, Y 3) Y, Y 4) Y	described in your dissertation about faculty CVs posted that were no longer at the school	negative aspects of web sites: not up to date, to little info, cheap looking design, difficult to navigate. All of these made schools look less appealing.
Application Stage			
1) Centralized application info 2) Apply online 3) Submit letters of rec by email	1) Y 2) Y 3) Not in results		Centralized application info and ability to submit materials on line ...totally agree was very cool. Totally agree the clearly defined steps for application were very helpful.
Handling Problems by calling/contacting program	Y		Like some of your interviewees, I did a lot of calling to certain schools. Having a coordinator there who was friendly and helpful was nice too when I was sending emails to the program to check if everything was in order.
Rational for shortcomings	Y		I too, often wondered if they were trying to weed me out by making the app process a pain.
Interviewing Stage			
Interview is most important	Y, Y	I agreed that the interview experience was important.	The interview was crucial.
Endgame Stage			
Waiting for offers and decision	Y		Like a few of your interviewees, I waited to see if another school was going to accept me before I accepted an invite.
Overarching Themes			
Mentoring	Y		I definitely sought advice from peers and faculty concerning my application materials.
Activities on the			I agree that faculty profiles

Web: 1) Faculty Info 2) Application Info 3) Program Descriptions 4) Student Info 5) Multicultural Aspects 6) Brief & Thorough	1) Y 2) Y 3) Y 4) N 5) N 6) Not in results		were important. I didn't like reading a book either when I was considering faculty interest...brevity and thoroughness were appreciated. I could not possibly have cared less about student profiles.
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