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# Interview with Current Graduate Students

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## Bradley Layton

Candidate for PhD in Epidemiology  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

## David Shwalb

Candidate for PhD in Counseling Psychology,  
University of Missouri

## Jacob R. Hickman

Candidate for PhD in Comparative Human  
Development  
University of Chicago

## Wendy Birmingham

Candidate for PhD in Social Health Psychology  
University of Utah

*Q. Why did you decide to go to graduate school? Why that particular graduate school? Why that particular degree? How did you choose?*

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**Layton:** Getting a PhD in epidemiology was not my top choice until well through undergrad. In fact, I didn't even know what epidemiology was until the end of my sophomore year. I had planned on going to medical school for years, but once I began my undergrad work, I realized that there were multiple opportunities in research that I hadn't even considered. I chose getting a PhD in epidemiology and public health because I felt it was a great balance of medical science mingled with behavioral and social considerations. It seemed to fit my interests in medicine and research with a population perspective.

When researching graduate schools, I wanted something that was well-ranked and respected academically, would have reliable funding sources...and was in a good LDS environment. I visited schools to get a feeling of the area and people involved (you can't get it all from a website). In the end, I chose the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I visited and loved the area—a highly edu-

cated area surrounded by universities [and] computer and biotech companies. The Church was strong and thriving with large wards, a temple nearby, and many other grad students and young professionals like me attending the singles and family wards. The university and department [were] welcoming and had a warm, collaborative feel—unlike the “degree factory” vibe I got from some other schools. A unique feature of UNC was that...they would accept [me] to the PhD program and let me earn a master's [degree] on the way. This was the deciding factor for me, as it meant I wouldn't have to pay for a master's degree (which are typically unfunded), then go through another round of applications after two years.

**Shwalb:** It was required for my career field. In order to become a licensed psychologist, you need a PhD or a PsyD. I [chose] the University of Missouri because the counseling psych program there has consistently been ranked among the top five programs in the country for the past 50 years. Also, MU places a huge emphasis on cross/multi-cultural competency, which is something I value as a therapist and as a person. Counseling psychology offers a nice blend of training in clinical [work], research, and teaching. With this degree, I can do pretty much anything a clinical psychologist can do, except my training has placed a huge emphasis on multiculturalism—something I know clinical psychology values, but not to the same extent, I believe, as counseling psychology. To understand this, all you have to do is compare a counseling psych and [a] clinical psych journal.

**Hickman:** I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago in the Department of Comparative Human Development (where I will finish my PhD this year). I chose this particular program and this particular institution...because of its strong interdisciplinary focus and the strong interdisciplinary tradition and intense intellectual atmosphere at the University of Chicago. More particularly, the Department of Comparative Human Development focuses on several interdisciplinary fields,

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including cultural psychology and psychological anthropology. I had majored in psychology and anthropology as an undergraduate at BYU, and I was looking for a program where multiple methods and theoretical approaches can be pursued unfettered. In this department, and at the University of Chicago more broadly, I found a place where disciplinary commitments take a backseat to “interesting questions.” Finally, I decided to go to Chicago... to work with my advisor, Richard Shweder. He has pioneered important lines of research in cultural psychology and psychological anthropology, and I have thoroughly benefited from his mentorship throughout my graduate career.

**Birmingham:** I wanted to teach; I love to teach. But I didn't want to teach elementary school or high school. I love little kids in elementary school. I love them, but I wanted to teach older kids. But I didn't want to teach high school because I wanted to teach people who wanted to be taught. And so I just wanted to teach at the university level, and to do that, I have to have a PhD. But somewhere along the line, somewhere in that whole process, I found out I really love research too, which I didn't know going in. And then one day I thought “this is really awesome too, and I love doing it.” So I wanted the PhD originally so I could teach. Now I want it so I can teach and do research. I went to the University of Utah, and that's where I got my Master's and my PhD. The [PhD] program is social health psychology, so social psychology with an emphasis on health, and...specifically what I look at is social relationships and how those relationships can affect us physiologically. So, specifically I look at cardiovascular health...different types of relationships, the quality of those different types of relationships, whether they're positive relationships or negative relationships or a mixture of both positive and negative, and how those types of relationships affect cardiovascular functioning and cardiovascular disease risk.

*Q. What are some differences and similarities between academic life as a BYU undergraduate student and a graduate student?*

**Layton:** As I was finishing my undergrad, I told the psychology professor with whom I did research that I was excited for grad school because it “wouldn't have all the hoops to jump through like undergrad.” She laughed, and responded, “Grad school still has hoops to jump

through—they're just higher, and smaller, and on fire.” She knew what she was talking about.

Graduate programs, particularly doctoral programs, have long lists of very specific requirements—practicum experiences, required core classes, deadlines, qualifying exams, teaching requirements, presentations, publishing requirements, etc.—and you are responsible yourself for making sure they get met. You are a lot more independent in grad school, and while almost any program has a set of core requirements, you can tailor most of your graduate experience to fit your research interests. Your department or adviser won't tell you all the classes you should take, what you should research, what seminars you need to be attending, what journal articles you should have read, etc. You figure those things all out by yourself with guidance and help from others, but ultimately it's up to you to decide what direction you take your career in.

**Shwalb:** Life is much different as a graduate student. There is much more independence regarding research, assistantships, and externships. However, I find I am still as busy with classes, and now I have the added pressure of teaching, doing independent research, and seeing clients on top of my normal load of classes. As a PhD student in psychology, I feel like I am a full-time employee and a full-time student. Being at a public school is also very different from being at BYU. Pros and cons, of course, but I miss BYU a lot!

**Hickman:** Academic life in graduate school is much more driven by your individual research interests. There is a lot more flexibility in the types of courses you can take, and you have to take more initiative to seek out relevant seminars anywhere on campus (at least in my experience). In this sense, graduate study is much more learner-driven. I would certainly say that the workload in graduate school exceeded that of my busiest undergraduate semesters. Part of the issue here is that [your] research is always looming in the background, and coursework and everything else you do in graduate school really is focused on helping you do better research and eventually complete a quality dissertation. Student and faculty relationships are qualitatively different as well. Rather than simply having a student-professor relationship, faculty tend to see graduate students as incipient colleagues. I very much value the personal relationships that I have with the faculty in my department.

Birmingham: I was an undergraduate [at BYU]. I felt... that much of the work that I was doing as a graduate student was [what] I had already done here...as an undergraduate. The undergraduate program here was such a great program...It gave me so many opportunities to do things that when I ended up in graduate school, there [were] a lot of things that I was like "oh, and I've already done that," "oh, and I know how to do that and I know how to do that" because I had been so well-prepared by BYU as an undergraduate. So I did find that [at] the University of Utah, as a graduate student...it was an easier switch in roles because I had been well prepared. It's always scary to go in, and there were times that I sat in meetings going "oh, I have no idea what they're talking about." And I think that's anybody...that starts a new program.

But I felt well prepared...There were many graduate students that had never run an experiment when they came into graduate school. And I had, because...Dr. Holt-Lunstad gave me the opportunity to run one of her studies...So there were a lot of things that the other students were saying: "oh, I haven't done that," or "oh, you have more posters than I do," or "oh, you've had more opportunities to do conferences." And I felt like I had already had the opportunity to do that. There's a lot of stuff you have to do as a graduate. There was a lot more studying; there was a lot more reading. I feel like I've read the entire library and still haven't read enough. There's always a lot more reading, and there's a lot more participation in the lab work. You're responsible for whether that stuff gets done correctly more than you are as an undergraduate.

*Q. What advice do you have for undergraduates?*

**Layton:** It may seem obvious, but I think undergrads who are contemplating graduate school need to understand what graduate students do, and what you actually do with a graduate degree. I worked as a research assistant for Julianne Holt-Lunstad and Tim Smith, professors in psychology and counseling psychology, respectively, while at BYU, and part of my responsibilities involved reading and summarizing hundreds of research articles. That experience taught me exactly what PhD-level research was about because I had read these articles by researchers all around the world in several different disciplines. I have also known a few students who end up in grad school without really understanding what grad school is about—

they just see it as the next step. They find out the hard way.

On a lighter note, I would advise all students, undergraduate or graduate, to keep some sort of outlet throughout [their] career. Grad school especially can be pretty consuming of your life, energy, and free time. I sang in choir my entire time at BYU, and after moving to North Carolina, I continued singing in some form or another (e.g., community, church, and professional choirs). Some semesters I have been busier than others and have had to cut back a bit, but having some aspect of my life that was not just more school is very important to me. It's very easy for me to bring work/school home with me, and there are times I just need to get away from it for a little bit. And one more thing. Take more statistics classes. No matter what you're doing research in, you need statistics. Lots of them.

**Shwalb:** If you want to go to graduate school, get a good broad general education as an undergraduate. Become a good reader and writer. So much of your success in graduate school depends on your ability to effectively communicate. Also, get as much experience in research as you can, at every level (e.g., conceptualization, study design, data collection, analysis, writing).

**Hickman:** If graduate school is on your radar, then the number one recommendation that I can offer is to get involved in research as early as you can. Establish relationships with faculty and think about what type of work you would want to do in graduate school, and let this guide your involvement in research as an undergraduate. Doing this will also help you get to know your subfield more intimately, such as key theorists, styles of argument, etc. It is also quite useful to attend the professional conferences, present your research, and network with people that you could possibly work with in graduate school. These personal connections go a long way in helping you get a spot in your ideal graduate program.

*Q. Do you have any interesting experiences from graduate school to share?*

**Layton:** I have felt like a student-in-training my entire time in graduate school until just recently. I went to a medical conference and listened to several people give presentations about various topics, and was happy to see

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someone give a presentation on a topic closely related to my dissertation. I noticed a few things in the presentation that suggested the researchers had made some common mistakes in this particular type of analysis, but I was quite confident that they would very quickly be pointed out by others in the question/answer session following the presentation. However, I soon realized that no one was going to say anything and likely no one else may have recognized that there may be a rather serious problem. Then it struck me that in this large presentation hall full of physicians and researchers, I was likely the only one who had studied this particular issue in great depth. Even still as a “student,” I had a valuable voice and expertise to add to this larger research community. I made my comments, asked a question, and for a brief moment, felt like a bit of an authority. After that I kept working on my dissertation proposal, and the feeling faded somewhat, but it was a great moment nonetheless.

**Shwalb:** I’ve had lots of interesting experiences from graduate school. I’m in the military and was deployed to Iraq in the middle of my PhD program. I’ve also had 3 babies while in grad school, which is definitely not the norm outside of BYU. Being a Latter-day Saint in grad school has itself been an interesting experience. I often find myself needing to defend and explain Church teachings that I previously took for granted as being the social norm. My testimony and being a family man throughout grad school has made me ever more grateful for the blessing it is and the eternal perspective one gains through Church membership.

**Hickman:** My most enjoyable year in graduate school was conducting fieldwork in Thailand. I spent a year in a Hmong village, interviewing, surveying, and conducting participant observation. The latter entailed farming with families from my village, attending rituals and religious events, and otherwise striving to get a in-depth sense of daily life for Hmong people in this community. This was a period of intense data collection, but the relationships that I established in my research and the variety of incredible experiences made it the most enjoyable aspect of my graduate student experience.

*Q. What is life like in the day of a graduate student?*

**Layton:** Every single morning, I wake up and debate if I’m going to work from home that day or go to my

cubicle at the university....Ultimately I concede that I will get more done if I actually go to school, so I drive off to school. The schedule of most days is up to me. Each week, I have a few seminars that I go to; I [listen] to presentations by other students or visiting researchers about their work. I also have a journal club that I go to weekly where we discuss recent new studies [that] have been published....I have pretty regular meetings with my dissertation advisor...and other members of my doctoral committee to update them on the progress I’m making or ask for help and advice on pieces where I’m stuck. Occasionally I’ll sit in on courses I took a few years ago when I realize that I’m a little shaky on a concept that I really should know better than I do. I spend most of my other time reading through literature relevant to my field, piecing together portions of my dissertation proposal, grading papers for the class I TA, or wasting time, which unfortunately happens a little too often. In the evening, work usually comes home with me. Fitting in social time, church activities, institute classes, and downtime is important to me, so I make sure those happen, too.

**Shwalb:** I get up every day at 6 a.m. and go to the gym. I work out for an hour and then head over to my office at the university counseling center. I see clients for 60-minute sessions throughout the week. On Thursdays, I provide supervision to a master’s-level student in an entry-level practicum site. On Tuesdays I go to my advanced classes. I meet with my doctoral advisor as needed to work on my dissertation. I also have a weekly meeting with a research team, led by another faculty member. I don’t work on Sundays and rarely need to work anymore on Saturdays. I try my best to be home every day by 6 p.m. I need to be much more efficient with my time than most of the other students in my program because I have a family of my own and because of my Church callings. Grad school isn’t easy, but it can be very rewarding at times.

**Hickman:** As an advanced graduate student, a typical day consists of balancing the various demands of dissertation writing, job applications, and, for some, teaching responsibilities (to make money!). This can get complicated at times, as some activities take priority over others (whether you mean to let them or not). Some days are exclusively devoted to one task or another, but the trick is to not let the dissertation take a backseat, but also not to shortchange yourself in teaching opportunities and the



networking and research involved in applying for tenure-track jobs. I find myself making up a lot of time late at night, when there are fewer distractions.

**Birmingham:** Research is the most important thing. At least in my program, it was research. And you have to do the teaching, and you have to do the TAing, kind of to pay the bills... Research is the main thing, and reading the journal articles and really getting up to speed on whatever your chosen area is—really getting up to speed on the literature in that. It's not a huge percentage...but it does take up time.