DEVELOPMENTAL DISCOVERY DAYS, PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY [Aug13-Aug14]

Panel: <u>PERSONAL STATEMENTS</u>

Panelist #1 (current graduate student):
- get feedback from professors!
- narrative of your research journey, what led you to apply to this lab, why is this the perfect place to end up after your trajectory, why would you be a good fit
- chronological experiences can be effective – why you did each experience, how did that lead you to the next one, and what you learned
- multiple personal statements for multiple lines of interest / paths at that time (e.g. memory with some development, childhood adversity with some memory)
- make an outline first!

Panelist #2 (current faculty member):
- the personal statement is critically important, offers an insight that is very hard to get from other parts of the application. PIs skim through parts that are the most important – recs + statements
- first and last para
    o first para – why are you interested in this field / what is your motivation
    o don't make your first para about "my granddad has dementia" – not unique at all
    o should grasp the reader – should be heartfelt, but not trivial
    o last para – are you a good fit for the dept, who are you interested in working with
    o what and who you're interested in, cite multiple people who would be a good fit for your broad interests bec not all PIs will be accepting students, relationships may not always work out
- if you do not have research experiences - recruit ideas about why you're applying
    o express rigor even if you don't have details about what you've done

Panelist #3 (current faculty member):
- personal statement is about who you are
- hook (bring the reader into the story)
    o do not be too personal, keep it professional
    o focus on the cognitive processes, not emotional responses or difficulty
    o should be related to research
- preparation for the position you're applying to – "where would they need additional training and is that something my lab can provide?"
- make a list of research experiences and assign one para per experience – list is more appropriate for CV, however, statement is a STORY about who you are as a researcher
- what exactly did you do – what was your contribution to the project, what was your role (skills) – giving evidence is important
- understanding of the research that you worked on
    o intro to the project, what was the point of the study
    o and then what you did day-to-day
- have one coherent story (the research experiences should tie together) – who am I as a researcher? make middle paragraphs relevant to last paragraph
- last para – highlight your fit, list 2-3 ppl, what are you interested in studying (you do not need to have a concrete study idea)
- PIs focus on 1) how are they as a writer and 2) do they fit into my lab
- make a list of experiences and do some pruning (you do not need to include all experiences)

- what should we emphasize more in the middle paragraphs – hard skills or soft skills?
    - describe project, describe your role – do not give too many details (e.g. "I know SPSS"), demonstrate your knowledge and soft skills, why was this a transformative experience
    - soft skills can be talked about in recs and demonstrated during interviews – more effective

- Can we mention personal or non-academic experiences?
    - if it shows motivation, mention personal experiences / non-research experiences. otherwise, it is not really generalizable – talk more about what you would like to learn, mention classes and papers
    - if you are mentioning, maybe include it in first para

- What do you mean by the rigor component?
    - you're writing for a reader – you're trying to convince someone to invest in you (time, energy, resources)
    - "how trustworthy are you as an investment for me, how can I meet your needs as a student"
    - competence, confidence, compassion
    - PIs think: "are you sure about this?" research is polarizing (big ideas are exciting and great but you need to be patient and persevere during the boring parts – research should be boring, detailed and thorough)

- Should you try to connect experiences that seem unrelated? Diff fields of psych? Moving from social to clinical?
    - research papers need to tell one story, so PIs want to know that you are capable of doing that through your statement
    - everything is related if you think hard
    - showcase your interest in that topic A and explain what led you to topic B
    - do not do it if it feels ingenuine
    - example: "I was introduced to research in this way, I fell in love with the process, but classes made me excited about this specific content, and my skills were transferable"

- If there are any red flags in our application, should we provide an explanation in the personal statement?
    - it depends - if you are close to one of your letter writers, ask them to tell the story. otherwise, you can tell it
    - if it is one or two low grades, ask letter writer to talk about your strengths and mention why low grades were not the norm for you
    - if you have a story that people can relate to, you can explain it in the statement (identity crisis, if there was a catastrophic event - explain how you got back on track)
    - there are many parts of evidence, you can show evidence and proficiency in other ways – "yes this looks like a red flag, but here is some more evidence"

- Is the personal statement more like a lit review or a discussion section?
    - your statement should bring your CV to life - your CV is not the best indication of who you are and your fit
    - the CV is missing the writing component and motivation component – the details of "why"
    - last para – research aspirations with the professors, how would the program support this

- If you know you want to be in academia, should you make it explicit?
  - you can but that is the assumption
  - academics love to believe they are training you to be an academic – don't mention you want to move to industry
  - research is emphasized more than teaching, some programs train you more on teaching than others - you will be exposed to teaching experiences, but training is not the main focus