

# Champions of Psychology: Laura A. King

March 22, 2005

*As part of our ongoing series with psychology's leading professors, Laura A. King, University of Missouri-Columbia, recently shared her advice for success and challenges facing graduate students. King is a distinguished personality researcher interested in what qualities constitute "the good life." Her research concerns how our daily- and life-long goals relate to subjective well-being, physical health, personal growth, and personality development.*

APSSC: What were the most and least rewarding aspects of graduate school for you?

KING: No question, the most rewarding aspect of graduate school was doing research. It was an amazing time of being thoroughly engrossed in the research process — every day, every moment. I was one of those insanely enthusiastic students who fell in love with the process. It was no coincidence that the work we were doing was focused on things like daily goals, daily diaries, etc. Getting to know everyday people that way was remarkably fulfilling to me.

No matter what you ultimately study, any research experience is worthwhile, because you are gaining tools you'll use forever. Also rewarding for me were the quantitative classes I took. I was and am by no means the world's quant jock, but, again, I felt enormous satisfaction in attaining skills that I would use; it was like learning new languages for a long trip around the world.

I also enjoyed going to conferences and schmoozing with psychologists. It was especially important to me to have a sense of the humanity of academic psychology. Talking to the "greats and near greats" about their work, as well as talking to graduate students from other institutions, helped me feel connected to a larger community of thinkers. For me, as an extravert and sociable person who is not entirely well-suited to sitting alone in front of a computer for days on end, this was enormously helpful.

The least rewarding aspect of graduate school was probably living in near-poverty. Also, eventually, it catches up with a person that too much in your life is out of your control. At that point, you are clearly ready to embark on your own program of research.

APSSC: What common mistakes do you see graduate students making?

KING: Probably the biggest mistake is putting too much emphasis on coursework over research. This is a habit from undergraduate school that cannot be recovered from too quickly. Take seriously what you hear about grade inflation in graduate school and focus on what will eventually end up on your vita.

Sometimes students get too attached to one way of looking at things. When I was a student, I heard Gary Schwartz give a talk in which he asserted something I think all students should hear: "The data are always friendly." That is, even when the p-values aren't going your way, the data are giving you information you need to attend to. It is very unlikely that participants all banded together to vex you. As

much as it is “easier” to look at your printout and see those happy p-values, that’s not where all of the learning takes place. You can learn a lot from what doesn’t work out, even if you can’t publish it. Hypotheses have to be open to revision when things aren’t working out the way you planned.

Some students are very sensitive to negative feedback. I think the way to think about this is that you and your mentor are both committed to working on the same goals — to run the very best studies and to write the very best papers you can. Lots of red ink can be difficult to take when you are accustomed as a great undergraduate to seeing very little of it. The revision process is not a grading process. It’s about honing a piece of work to its very best.

I also think students sometimes miss the importance of doing things that are not directly “their own,” like pitching in on a project or running some participants. Sometimes students come in feeling like they are already done — they have an idea and want to pursue it. It is important to be open to the education process of graduate school. If your mentor hands you a topic, a paper outline, or some data, act on it. Immediately!

Students also make the mistake of not reading enough. Most students arrive at graduate school several thousand pages behind in their reading. Even a very good idea has probably been thought of, in some form, by someone else. It’s a good idea to see if that is the case.

Another mistake I see students make is confusing lack of success in graduate school with failure in life. Not everyone is cut out for a life in research psychology. Finding out that research is not something you really have a passion for is a success — it is important feedback and a good reason to look for your bliss elsewhere. If you are forcing yourself to do what is expected of you in graduate school, you might be better served by pursuing something else. There is no honor lost in making that discovery.

APSSC: What advice would you give to students applying to graduate school?

KING: Get involved with research as soon as you can and develop relationships with researchers at your undergraduate institution. Also, take the GRE early and often. When you write your personal statement, the content may be less important than the quality of your writing. And take a good look at the fine social and personality program at Missouri!

Look at a program and see how many of the faculty are actively involved in research. Look at publication records — how many students appear as co-authors or even first authors? I worked with a junior faculty member who was as motivated as I was to do research and publish good work. If I had only looked at “established” folk I might have missed out.

APSSC: What suggestions do you have for choosing a mentor?

KING: Talk frankly to students who work with this person. Ask them about how often they see their mentor and what the interactions are like. You have to think about what kind of relationship you would be comfortable with. Some mentors are blunt, harsh, and even occasionally not so nice to their students. If you find yourself challenged and motivated by someone like that, go for it. If you know you are more thin-skinned, avoid it.

If you are someone who wants to go out on your own and study whatever you like, find out if that is a possibility with this mentor. When I went to graduate school, the first year I was so nervous and overwhelmed I don't think I had a single really good idea (okay, maybe one). It was great to just jump on board with someone else's idea and contribute to it, work on it, and make it great while my own creative process percolated. Don't ignore junior or less established researchers as mentors, either. These folks are likely to share with a new student a strong motivation to produce and that can be a great opportunity.

APSSC: Your research deals with how our goals relate to subjective well-being and living the "good life." Do you have any advice to offer students on how to make the most of their current lives, academically and otherwise?

KING: Oddly, I'd say enjoy your time in graduate school. Although it can be truly challenging at times, it is really a weirdly special time on which you will eventually look back with some degree of fondness — believe it or not. Enjoy the process as much as you can and try to maximize your positives by really dedicating yourself to the goals that are likely to be rewarded.

Keep your intellectual life as rich as you can by not getting too narrow in your thinking, reading, and activities. Keep in mind that real life is where the action is — research problems can present themselves not just by reading psychology but by observing real people in their real lives. Talk to students from other areas within psychology and in other fields about their work, and try to look beyond the boundaries that divide our field and academics in general.

I am not one who thinks that graduate school is not a time to have a "real life." You may have to keep it a secret, but have a life. Happy people think creatively and expansively, and I think there is too little of that in most settings.

APSSC: Recently the US House of Representatives criticized your National Institute of Mental Health grant on the meaning of life, goal pursuit, and well-being, saying it wasn't about serious mental illness. Do you have advice for students on dealing with people and institutions that fail to understand the importance of social/personality psychology research? What larger implications of this failure of understanding do you foresee?

KING: Personality and social psychology are definitely at risk, because our work is not likely to be couched in scientific jargon. We use the language of everyday life, so everyday folks are bound to think "Hey I knew that already." People don't always remember that lots of them also already "knew" that women were morally inferior to men and that blacks were less intelligent than whites until solid scientific evidence pointed to the contrary. Scientists, students, and others have to stay dedicated to good science, regardless of its particular place in political agendas. Do what you love.

As far as the future goes, with the "reorganization" that has occurred at NIMH, social and personality psychologists face a new challenge to demonstrate the applications of our work. I think most people would agree that there are larger social issues that ought to be part of NIMH's agenda. That message has to get out to the public and to politicians.