

Champions of Psychology: Paul E. Spector

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This is an ongoing series in which highly regarded professors share advice on the successes and challenges facing graduate students. Paul E. Spector is a professor of industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology and the I/O doctoral program director at the University of South Florida. His more than 100 journal articles have appeared in many journals, including Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Management, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Journal of Vocational Behavior, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Personnel Psychology, and Psychological Bulletin. At present he is the Point/Counterpoint editor for Journal of Organizational Behavior, and is on the editorial boards of Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Organizational Research Methods, and Personnel Psychology. In 1991, the Institute For Scientific Information listed him as one of the 50 highest impact contemporary researchers (out of over 102,000) in psychology worldwide.

APSSC: What led you to choose psychology as your career path?

SPECTOR: I started as an undergraduate in physics, and in my freshman year a friend in my dorm sold me (really cheap) the textbook and 2 sets of old exams for the introductory psychology course. I found the field to be fascinating and it seemed like the new frontier. So little was known there was no limit to what you might do. I changed my major to psychology and never looked back.

APSSC: How did you select your graduate program?

SPECTOR: I didn't really select it. My senior year was the height of the Vietnam War and you couldn't get a draft deferment for graduate school. I applied to my undergraduate school because it was free, but I didn't expect to be able to go to graduate school. They ended the draft at the end of my senior year, but it was too late to apply elsewhere, so I stayed at USF.

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

SPECTOR: Having 4 years to just study what I was interested in and concentrate on my own professional development. I had few responsibilities other than my assistantship and my own studies.

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

SPECTOR: Not staying focused on their goals and insufficient time management. Mostly it affects their research activities, i.e., thesis and dissertation, as well as publishing. Some students say they want academic careers, but spend their time in the early years on coursework and other nonresearch activities, spending too little on developing their own research program.

APSSC: What advice would you give to undergraduate students who are applying to graduate school or

preparing to do so?

SPECTOR: Do your homework and find out what you need to be competitive and make a plan to achieve it. That includes maintaining a solid A average, preparing for the GRE, and getting research experience.

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

SPECTOR: A mentor should be someone whose research interests match the student, has a compatible work style, and is skilled at working with students. For example, a student who needs a lot of structure should not choose a mentor who is too laid back and nondirective. Collect information about prospective mentors, including their research interests, their supervisory history, and their work style. The interests you can find on websites and in vitas, or you can do a Psychlit [PsychInfo?] search for the individual. You can ask about supervisory history, including how many students they currently have, how many they have graduated, and whether or not they tend to lose students along the way—either to other faculty or dropout. Keep in mind that young faculty won't have had the time to mentor a lot, so consider how long they have been faculty members. Work style can be found by asking some of their current or former students. Important things are how organized and structured they are, whether they give good feedback, and how responsive they are to requests for help.

APSSC: How does a graduate student become a first-rate researcher?

SPECTOR: It takes a long time to develop research expertise, and it is a lifelong pursuit. The first thing a student should do is recognize that what distinguishes psychology from the dozens of other related fields is that the foundation of our field is research—we are an evidence-based discipline. That means that all of us either do research or apply the findings from research. Whether we choose an applied or research career, we must have research expertise. In graduate school a student's research should be top priority. Each student should at all times have a research focus or topic. It can change over time, but there should always be one. It can be the topic of the thesis or dissertation, but it doesn't always have to be. Time each week should be spent reading papers on this topic, and each new journal issue should be scanned for papers on the topic. Students should also be active in research, and this goes beyond the thesis and dissertation. Early in the graduate school career this will likely mean working on other people's projects, such as faculty or more senior students. After a year or so in school each student should begin developing their own projects. Results should be submitted to conferences and journals. Every student should have these experiences, even those who know they want applied careers. You use the same skills for both academic and applied careers, although how you use those skills can differ.

APSSC: What advice would you give to graduate students who want to have careers in academia?

SPECTOR: You must develop a research program to be competitive on the academic job market. Make the best of your opportunities to get involved in research, but be sure to spend most of your research time working on your own projects, i.e., those you take the lead on, write, and are first author. Choose a research topic, read everything you can find on it, and then begin conducting your own studies. Many articles, especially review papers, will discuss research gaps that need to be filled. Look for themes and let these suggestions guide your plans. Write down ideas into short prospectuses or a page or two. Seek feedback from others on your ideas, e.g., faculty. Work hard to develop your writing. This is done

through practice, so you should write often, even if it is only to write short one or two page overviews of ideas.

APSSC: What do you see as the future of psychology?

SPECTOR: The future of psychology is very bright, especially in the “applied” areas, that is, those areas in which there is both an academic and practice career path. I know the most about my own field of industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology. According to data from the American Psychological Association, PhD production in I/O psychology has more than doubled in the past 20 years in the U.S., and the field has been spreading rapidly worldwide during the same time period. The job market at the current time is very favorable to new PhDs, with our new graduates being highly sought after by different kinds of employers.

APSSC: If you could design the ideal program for training graduate students, what would it be like?

SPECTOR: The ideal program has a stellar cast of faculty who are both research active and student oriented. The program has attracted highly talented students who work hard to develop their own research and analytical skills and prepare for a career. The climate among students and faculty is cooperative, with the shared goal of creating a program that facilitates student and faculty development. There is support for the program in the broader psychology department and university. A good indicator of an ideal program is a high volume of research presented at conferences and published in top peer reviewed journals.