

Psychology All-Stars: Charles S. Carver

November 10, 2004

In an ongoing series in which the APS Student Caucus talks with distinguished professors, APS Fellow and Charter Member Charles Carver recently shared his advice for success and challenges facing graduate students. Carver is a professor of psychology at the University of Miami and editor of the Personality Processes and Individual Differences section of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. He is renowned for his research on optimism versus pessimism, approach versus avoidance, coping in cancer patients, and other important self-regulation topics.

Carver

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

CARVER: I was more or less unfit for everything else I looked into. [*Editor's Note: Carver is just kidding, of course.*] My parents hoped I would become a "scientist" until my "D" in college physics for physics majors. The psychology department of my undergraduate college focused almost entirely on aspects of psychology that were very remote from personality and social psychology, where I eventually wound up. My personality course was taught by a clinician who entertained us with stories about clinical cases, and there was no social course at all.

I enjoyed literature courses much more than my psychology courses, but it was apparent that a career path for me as an English major would verge on being suicidal. In retrospect, what always interested me most about literature were the characters in the stories and what made them tick. And ultimately, that's what led me (albeit dazed and confused) into psychology.

APSSC: How did you select your graduate program?

CARVER: I selected the one that let me in. [*Editor's Note: Again, only kidding.*]

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

CARVER: Most rewarding was the experience of becoming really interested in a particular way of looking at the world. It took a very, very long time for that to happen. But when it finally did happen, I realized that I was on the right path toward my future.

Least rewarding would be all the things I had to learn about that seemed at the time either pointless or just not interesting. Some of those same things have since come to seem quite interesting, once I had more mental structure in place into which to fit them. So I guess the moral is that sometimes even the unrewarding-at-the-time can eventually be beneficial.

Calvin, the fearsome yet gallant shag
terrier, is featured prominently on
Carver's Web site.

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

CARVER: I administer a graduate track of a clinical psychology program. Although half the faculty members aligned with this track are not clinical psychologists, all of our graduate students are clinical. (That's not the mistake; that's by way of pointing out the nature of our students.) I see some of these students wanting to race through the training process and move on as fast as they can. Although I can appreciate the desire to have an actual income, I think it's a mistake to do that, for two reasons. First, you need some time to think about and absorb things, and to develop your own point of view on the topics you study. Second, you need enough time to develop credentials that are strong enough to be competitive in the job market.

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

CARVER: If you think you know what you are interested in, look up authors of articles you have read or read about and found interesting and examine their Web sites to see if they are continuing to do that kind of work. If you are less sure what path you want to take, look at departmental Web sites to see what groups exist at various places and what their focuses are. Look for some resonance to the kind of ideas you find interesting.

You can learn a lot from a Web site. For example, at mine (www.psy.miami.edu/faculty/ccarver) you can learn I am more interested in having people learn about the breed of my dog (the fearsome yet gallant shag terrier) and about my brother the science-fiction novelist than I am in having people learn that I am currently editing a section of *JPSP*.

Web sites don't tell you everything, though. Even an exchange of e-mails, though it can be helpful, doesn't tell you as much as a face-to-face conversation (plus, sometimes faculty members don't want to put time into lengthy e-mail exchanges with strangers). These days, interviews play an important role in finding a fit between graduate applicant and mentor.

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

CARVER: I think it's important that you get along well enough personally to actually make this a mentoring process rather than either an ongoing argument or a period of worshipful kneeling at the feet

of a majestic presence. It can be hard to know for sure about this until it's too late. Ask the potential mentor's current students about what it's like to work with him or her. Try to make sure they are answering honestly.

APSSC: What advice would you give to graduate students, in particular on how to become first-rate researchers?

CARVER: Pay attention in statistics classes. Do the homework. Always analyze your data yourself and make sure you know what the data are saying by talking about them in front of peers and faculty. Take more statistics classes. You will need these practical skills.

But practical skills are only part of what you need. You also need ideas, the intellectual scaffolding. Be sure you take some seminars or participate in some discussion groups that force you to explore ideas and what's connected to what. Read more widely than you naturally would for your courses (even the seminars). Even read weird stuff, if someone you respect says it's interesting.

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

CARVER: Today everyone has to claim to want a career in academia in order to get into prestigious schools. Not everyone is cut out for academia, though. You have to have a deep need to understand how things work, and you have to be very internally motivated, because the external rewards are relatively slow in coming and fairly far between. You also have to have (or stumble across eventually) some question or idea that is particularly compelling to you. Don't be surprised if it takes a while for the question to arise or for its true importance to you to become clear. Let it come in its own time, but keep giving it lots of chances to find you by exposing yourself to ideas. I should note, though, that success also requires some practical things. You need to understand how the academic system functions, how the profession of being an academic functions, and how the politics of academia work. Learning those things is part of mentoring.

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

CARVER: We will continue to have fads every few years, and some of the fads will grow to become core parts of the field. We will continue to fragment into sub-disciplines whose members mostly don't have time to read and learn outside their own areas. We will continue to spend more time than we should as sales agents for our ideas. Some people will continue to link pieces of ideas across the boundaries, though it will become harder and harder.

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

CARVER: Forty-eight hour days, for starters. It would also have full support for up to six 12-month years at a level that would sustain normal life. A lean, mean, tight, wiry set of core courses (covering a broad range of the core topics in psychology, not just the specialty the student will later pursue), followed by plenty of seminars in whatever the faculty members want them to be on. It would have a statistics sequence that didn't have to go too fast and included the cutting edge as well as the basics, and a departmental budget that could support bringing in people with important and challenging ideas to give talks. It would include enough time for faculty members to be able to spend at least weekly time with

each mentee individually, apart from whatever research group meetings are held. And, my program would have only the finest of faculty, who know just how to design those lean, mean courses and teach the critical information, with no useless boring topics included.