The Winding Path: Reflections on Preparing for a Career in Neuropsychology

Derek McKay PhD
Mercyhurst College, dmckay@mercyhurst.edu

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The Winding Path: Reflections on Preparing for a Career in Neuropsychology

Cover Page Footnote
Derek McKay (dmckay@mercyhurst) is currently a professor at Mercyhurst University and a practicing neuropsychologist.
The Winding Path: Reflections on Preparing for a Career in Neuropsychology

Derek A. McKay

Department of Psychology, Mercyhurst University, Erie, PA

Abstract

Career decision-making can be a complicated process, particularly for Psychology majors who often find many areas of the discipline interesting. Students are often confronted with questions such as, “what do I really want to do?”, and “how much future education will I need to achieve my goals?” Moreover, there are often many uncertainties regarding how to take specific steps toward a particular professional direction in Psychology. In this article, neuropsychologist and university professor Derek McKay shares a unique perspective on his own process of finding his way toward a career as a neuropsychologist. He addresses a number of important steps in the transition from undergraduate education to graduate school and offers helpful guidance for selecting one’s own path toward a desired profession.

It is not uncommon for my undergraduate psychology students to use office hours to discuss life after graduation. They may include questions about graduate school, how to write a cover letter, jobs that psychology majors might be available to them, or a host of other inquiries. You may have used office hours with your professors in the same way. Within our discussions, I often go back to one simple truth: your path will likely be winding. Mine certainly was. For many of my colleagues across a variety of academic, business, and clinical worlds, this was the case. Some students work under the assumption that everything in the world will line up perfectly for them. This is not the way the world works. It will never be this way because life is unpredictable.

There are several practices and traits that I tend to see in myself and in colleagues that have allowed for success in our areas of study or practice, however. This is the focus of this paper. By the way, success is relative, correct?

What I deem successful in my life may not look the same for you. With full certainty, however, I can say that I am happy with where I am in my personal life and professional career. So, I would like you to consider some of these “tips and tricks” as I say to my students.

First, a bit of background. I am originally from Erie, Pennsylvania and owe much of my success to the support from my family including my wonderful mother, father, brother, and sister. I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Penn State Behrend and later attended the University of Akron. There, I earned my Master’s degree and Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology.
As part of the requirements for my Ph.D. program, I completed a one-year American Psychological Association (APA)-accredited internship on the neuropsychology track at the North Texas Veterans Administration (VA) Healthcare System in Dallas. After that, I completed a two-year APA-accredited postdoctoral residency in clinical neuropsychology. Out of residency, I was hired as a staff neuropsychologist at Meadville Medical Center in Meadville, Pennsylvania (only forty-five minutes from home) and became board-certified in neuropsychology. I worked there for three years until I was hired as a full-time faculty member in the psychology department at Mercyhurst University in Erie, PA. On the side, I own a neuropsychology private practice called Flagship Neuropsychology where, on average, I see three to five patients per month and conduct neuropsychological evaluations. Why did I spend this entire paragraph telling you about my educational and career history? Was this to "toot my own horn?" Not at all. Rather, it was to show you that my path has been marked by circumlocutions, or shifting "all over the place." Literally, all over the place, from Pennsylvania to Ohio to Texas to Virginia to working in cities and rural areas within hospitals and universities and outpatient clinics. This leads to tip number one: Be flexible.

Although I am a neuropsychologist by training and professional identity, I never set out to enter this profession. In fact, until around my third year of graduate school I honestly did not know the discipline really existed. Looking back from my vantage point now, I recognize a number of questions I might have asked myself along that way that could have been helpful in directing my interests (and further questions). I have included these in Table 1 as a set of self-checks that might be useful when thinking about the characteristics, interests, and issues related to making this career decision.

For me, it was not until I took an intelligence testing course as a graduate student and became intrigued when a new practicum site was added for that year that I developed an interest in neuropsychology as a possibility. The practicum requirements were 100% assessment (no therapy hours) at an outpatient neurology clinic. It was really at this placement and working with a
neuropsychologist that I decided that this was what I wanted to do long-term. I had to be flexible though, because it meant revamping my plan of action for the next few years. Recall that my program was in counseling psychology, not neuropsychology. The program was not built to produce neuropsychologists and so this meant seeking out opportunities that would make me competitive for a neuropsychology internship. If not for the support of two faculty (Dr. Kevin Kaut and Dr. David Tokar) and my girlfriend (now wife, Christine), I probably would not be where I’m at today. Drs. Kaut and Tokar set up opportunities for me to gain research experience, in addition to the clinical experience I was getting at the neurology clinic. However, I knew that to be competitive for an internship in neuropsychology, I would have to probably add a year to my graduate schooling. This was hard for me to accept, at first. It meant pushing things back one year which was not something I wanted to do. But, I had to be flexible. Which leads me to tip number two: **Grind.**

I heard the quote: “You can’t cheat the grind” somewhere at some point during graduate school and it really stuck. The way I interpreted it is that you cannot really take shortcuts in producing good work. By the way, I’m not advocating for working 20 hours per day to become burnt out and hate your life. There is a time for self-care, fun, and rest, of course. What I am saying, though, is working towards a goal (especially a large goal like a graduate degree or a promotion at your job) takes work. You may be thinking, “Of course Dr. McKay, we all know about the value of hard work.” What I’m talking about isn’t just working hard. It’s **grinding,** which essentially means committing yourself to your goals and doing your best to pursue those with diligence. It is a steadfast mindset that says “keep the trendline moving upwards despite daily/weekly/monthly variations.” Do the things that keep you connected to others helpful to you, and take the time necessary to

**Table 1. Questions to consider when thinking about a potential career in neuropsychology**

“Am I interested in working with people?”  Ultimately, clinical neuropsychology is a helping profession, and you will be working with a variety of people in a clinical capacity. Your roles can change over time, however, a desire to help others is a must.

“Am I willing to devote the time to education and training?”  A neuropsychologist will typically earn an undergraduate degree, followed by graduate school ultimately earning a doctorate degree, followed by a two-year postdoctoral residency. At minimum, this may around 12 years to complete (and sometimes longer). Additionally, relocation around the country is likely as you complete each step.

“Am I interested in assessment?”  All neuropsychologists will be trained to conduct therapy; however, a neuropsychologist’s “bread and butter” is assessment. Assessments may include psychological, neuropsychological, baseline cognitive screenings, academic, intellectual, presurgical, forensic and more depending on your training and setting.

“Am I interested in mental health care?”  Neuropsychologists are trained as psychologists first, which means you will be working within the mental health field. Settings vary, but may include hospitals, outpatient clinics, schools, private practice, and so on. Sometimes this means working with individuals with serious mental health concerns including suicidality so you must be OK with working with a variety of presenting concerns and populations.

“Am I interested in biology?”  Becoming a neuropsychologist requires an appreciation for brain and body. Specialized training will occur in neuroanatomy, psychopharmacology, and brain-behavior relationships, making an interest in biology and medicine important.

“Am I interested in how the brain works and how it is related to the body, cognition, mood, etc.?”  Neuropsychology is truly an integration into these areas and neuropsychologists aim to understand this interwoven nature.

“Am I interested in playing detective?”  The assessment process, and especially the neuropsychological assessment process, can feel like playing detective sometimes. You are often gathering information, data, and “puzzle pieces” in order to answer referral questions and best help the patient, the referral provider, and the family.

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invest in your desired outcomes. For me, it was meeting up with my buddy Chris and putting in the late hours on a Saturday night or going to Panera on a Sunday morning to work on a dissertation. It was working on my goals when nobody else was looking. Studying that extra hour because I wanted to perform my best. The most respected and successful of my colleagues have this mindset and this is the mindset that I adopted. In everything you do, invest in yourself because you will see the hard work pay off.

This leads me to tip number three: Form connections. There will be times when discovering someone or having a relationship with someone can open doors. In some cases, unfortunately, it can lead to nepotism.

GRIND, v.

“Get Ready to INvest with Diligence”

An action mindset focused on advancing your best interests and growing your professional identity.

I would argue that social currency is one of the greatest forms of currency on this planet. An example comes to mind. In my first or second year of graduate school when we started seeing clients in our department counseling center, we used a tiered supervision system. That is, newer students would see clients and were supervised by older students. Those students were then supervised by faculty in their actual supervision. My supervisor was Teri and she was a wonderful supervisor. She graduated shortly thereafter. Fast-forward about 10 years and Teri (now Dr. Connelly) works at the Erie VA Medical Center. Last year, I let her know I was starting my private practice and she suggested becoming a “Care in the Community” partner with the VA which involves seeing patients referred directly from the VA. So, I did; now I have a steady stream of referrals within my practice. We have lunch every couple of months, which allows us to remain connected. It was all because of the early connection that was formed and simply staying in touch with people. It’s how this journal (Journal of Neuropsychology and Behavioral Phylogeny) was formed, how countless research projects develop, and how people get potential job interviews. Form connections. Talk to people. Introduce yourself. You never know where it might lead or how it might come back to you at a later time in your career.

Which leads me to tip number four: Enjoy what you do. This is true for those in graduate school, just starting a new job, or for seasoned professionals in the workforce. Enjoy what you do. About one-third of your life will be spent working. Make it count and make it meaningful to you. Of course, you will not enjoy every second of work. But, over time, if you realize the job or program isn’t for you, it’s OK to explore other options. Nobody should fault you for seeking out opportunities that may align more with your goals and desires.

Seeking alignment with work and professional goals is a critical part of career success. And, this became a primary emphasis for me early in my career. In my first job out of residency, I enjoyed working with patients and my co-workers, many of whom I would now consider friends. But, I started to not enjoy what I was doing. Hospital policy made it difficult. So, I explored other options. I’ve always loved teaching and I recall a moment while working at the hospital that I thought, “I really miss teaching.” I missed doing research. I missed working with students and supervising/advising them. Most of all, I missed being in front of an audience talking about things I was passionate about. So, I applied to and was hired by Mercyhurst University. I love it. Being in academia is truly where I belong. But having the clinical
practice on the side also fulfills that desire to be applied and to help patients in the community. Plus, since it’s my own business, I get to run it my way. I get to bring real-life cases and information into the classroom. It is truly a merger of two things that I’m passionate about. By the way, don’t chase the money. I fell for the trap and regret it. Do what you love and the money will come.

These four tips that I have mentioned here often come up in discussions with my students, and I hope you consider these in whatever stage of life you are in and whatever path you might be on currently. Be flexible. Grind. Form connections. Enjoy what you do.

In addition to these tips for career development, I also try to help students understand something of the process and commitment necessary to eventually reach a career objective in neuropsychology. Obviously, each career has its own general path, but there are often circumstances and requirements unique to each career selection and direction.

Table 2 offers a brief overview of the sequence involved in eventually becoming a neuropsychologist. The six steps addressed there are intended to provide some general guidance regarding the issues a student might need to consider when thinking about such as career direction. My best suggestion would be to make a connection with someone in the field, or seek out another professional who might be able to help you establish a contact with someone who works in the profession. Gather information, ask questions, and use the resources available to you to best prepare yourself to make the best-interest decisions. It is not a bad idea to look at Table 1 and Table 2 together, and see how all of these issues fit with your interests and long-term career aspirations.

It is worth noting also that there are a number of things students can do during their undergraduate programs to enhance their interests and preparation for a possible career direction in neuropsychology. Obviously, coursework available to you in your undergraduate program is an important first consideration. Undergraduate courses that would be relevant to a career in neuropsychology (refer to Table 3) include courses related to assessment (e.g., Tests and Measures), therapy/helping skills, clinical psychology, ethics, cognitive psychology,
developmental/lifespan psychology, pharmacology, neuroscience, biology of behavior, statistics, research methods, sensation/perception, and courses related to mental health diagnoses (often called “abnormal psychology” in most departments).

Embrace your education and invest in becoming the best and most well-rounded student you can be. Diversify your educational portfolio by taking courses in broad areas where possible. Yes, even learn from your general education courses and see how these relate to the study of human behavior. And through it all, and most importantly, embrace the winding path.

Table 3. Suggested undergraduate coursework to consider

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