

Pathways to Research Panel

- May 06, 2021 -

On May 6, 2021, the Psychology Department hosted a panel for undergraduate students to ask questions about career paths and graduate programs in Psychology research via Zoom. Our panelists consisted of Ben Strom (Ph.D), Su-hua Wang (Ph.D.), and Heather Bullock (Ph.D.) who shared their experiences and perspectives.

About our Panelists:

Ben Storm is an associate Professor in the Cognitive Science area at UCSC. He received his Bachelor's in Psychology at UC Santa Barbara where he originally planned to go into clinical psychology. It wasn't until he talked to a research professor and got involved in a lab during his third year that he discovered his field of interest and pursued his Ph.D. at UCLA. His research focuses on memory: how we remember and/or forget and the role of forgetting in resolving competition during retrieval, overcoming fixation while thinking and solving problems, updating autobiographical memory, and facilitating new learning.s.

[UCSC Memory Laboratory | Ben Storm, Ph.D.](#)

Su-hua Wang is a Professor of Developmental Psychology at UCSC. She received her Bachelors and Master's in Taiwan. Originally, she wanted to be a clinical psychologist, but decided to pursue a degree in Developmental Psychology right before entering graduate school. She directs the UCSC Baby Lab and is also the Director of New Gen Learning, an interdisciplinary consortium that brings professors and students from different research disciplines to study the strengths of learning in children and students from underserved backgrounds. Her own research investigates how learning occurs in the first few years as babies and young children interact with parents and with various cultural tools such as toys, books, and technology.

[Baby Lab | Su-hua Wang, Ph.D.](#)

[New Gen Learning Research Consortium](#)

Heather Bullock is a Professor of Social Psychology at UCSC. She attended a small liberal arts college and was interested in clinical psychology. It wasn't until she wrote her senior thesis that she grew excited about research and after that, she attended a conference and became interested in pursuing a career in research! Her research focuses on economic justice and addressing social justice issues and fighting for change. She is the Director of the Blum Center here at UCSC that gives inclusive research opportunities for students!

[Heather Bullock, Ph.D.](#)

[The Blum Center](#)

Many students wonder whether they should try to join a research lab. What do you think are the benefits of joining a research lab? Are there any downsides?

- You get first hand experience interacting with psychology and cognitive science. This helps you understand the literature in your courses as well as the process and thought processes.
- You get to work closely and build connections with faculty and graduate students.
- You build critical thinking skills as you see how research is done. You get to take part in the psychology and cognitive science that you learn in the classroom.
- Research experiences will be helpful for your career even if you're going into another field/career.
- There is an expected time commitment and time-management skills are important in many aspects of life.

How can a student get into a research lab?

We post the research opportunities on the Psychology Department [website](#). These opportunities are very connected with the courses you take. Having a connection with an assistant in the lab is very helpful to learn about these opportunities and get involved. Reach out to faculty and ask about their research if you're interested in it!

What are you, and other faculty members, looking for when you are reviewing applications for a research assistant position?

- Different labs have different processes: both Storm and Wang allow their RAs to interview and choose students for them, other Professors might not do this, so be proactive by getting to know both your TA and faculty.
- Faculty look for:
 - Availability and/or time schedule compatibility (3rd or 4th years are typically preferred because their schedules tend to be more flexible, but 2nd years can be considered).
 - Match of whether the research topic is right for the student!
 - Whether you have taken certain courses associated with the research (to be familiar with cases and studies).

Can you talk a little bit about finding research positions after you graduate? When would that be a good idea, and how can you find those positions?

- Reach out to faculty, there are some opportunities available, but the important thing is being proactive.
- Summer internships are available in places near you which can get you experience. It's never too late to apply! You can reach out to local researchers/research facilities to ask about potential opportunities to support them.

Are there any other positions outside of being a research assistant? I know there are Lab Managers, but are there other positions that a student or graduate can take?

- While the position titles don't typically vary, the tasks you are being given are different from lab to lab.

What are some different research careers in cognitive science and psychology?

- People with research skills can work for the local, state, and federal government for assessing the success of a program or initiative.
- You can work at a non-profit as a grant writer!
- Social work, counseling psychology, and others that require masters degrees.
- Teaching, if you pursue a teaching credential as well.
- You can use research as a way to articulate your skills for your resume:
 - Professor Wang recommends to all her students that they keep a list of jobs they do in the lab.

What are your favorite and least favorite aspects of being a professor?

- More flexible for your research (i.e. you get to choose what you're researching for however much time), but there's a lot of responsibilities with teaching (teaching, committees, research, mentoring students, etc.)

How can I stand out in such a competitive field?

- Just talk to us! Engage with your courses and instructors (they will notice!)

Is there clinical research?

- Clinical psychology does have research. While most people think about the practical work, Ph.D. programs in any perspective are highly-research based, even if you don't pursue it after graduating.
- There are lots of different clinical programs: some that focus on research while others focus on practice. It depends on the skills which the programs will teach you.

What is something you wish you did or knew more about before pursuing your program and research?

- Imagine what they are looking for in a graduate student and what work you are going to do.
- The balance of not being in the workforce/making money while in graduate school.
- Feel free to take a break in between graduate school, take the time that you need.
 - That year off can help you gain some skills and work on your statements or gain other experience

What are some of the different degrees I can pursue to do research?

- Masters programs that require a thesis with all the work being done in 2-3 years
 - Some support you in certain career paths and to pursue a doctoral degree
- PhD is more research oriented, takes 6 years
 - More research oriented
 - Seeks to create a research scholar who wants to teach
 - Tuition remission plus possible stipend (for being a TA or researcher)
- PsyD
 - More practice oriented
 - More expensive and less likely to be funded
- Don't be afraid to reach out to the university and ask about the funding, don't be shy! It may not be as expensive, depending on what funding packages they offer students

What advice would you offer for students trying to decide which graduate program to choose?

How should I prepare for applying to graduate schools? Where do I start?

- Reflect on what you are really interested in: papers you read, ideas that are really interested to you and if the authors teach at a university, contact them and ask if they are accepting new students
- See if the program has any focus to make sure it is the right program for you.

What can I do at UCSC and beyond to improve my chances of getting into a research-focused graduate program?

- Working in a lab will help you first understand whether you really like research and want to pursue it further
- Work on skills that might not be directly linked to research but that connect to the topics that you are interested in and can feed into your research interests.

Did you encounter any imposter syndrome? How did you cope?

- Just know that if you are feeling that way, you are not alone! Even faculty still feel this and are happy to talk about your experiences so that we can start a conversation about the hardships of the university and help.
- Peer support is incredibly important and helpful, chances are you are all feeling the same way!
- The majority of people who succeed in their field have imposter syndrome and it's a thought we all experience and it's completely normal to have.