FAQ for Prospective Graduate Students
Sarah Kate Bearman and the LEAP Lab at UT Austin, Department of Educational Psychology

This document\(^1\) tries to answer frequently asked questions (FAQ) from prospective graduate students who are interested in applying to the School Psychology doctoral program at UT Austin to work with me, Sarah Kate Bearman, and thus the LEAP Lab (Leveraging Evidence and Advancing Practice for Youth Mental Health Services).

I often receive email queries or requests to talk or meet before applications are due, and this document is an attempt to address some of the topics we frequently discuss. In addition, because the UT School Psych doctoral program is a mentor model program (that is, students enter as a member of a faculty lab and receive the majority of research mentoring and academic advising from that faculty member), making sure that there is a genuine fit between your interests and my program of research is really important! I encourage you to read this document and also check out my lab website and some of the publications we have had recently in order to move beyond the few sentences about me on the UT faculty webpage and consider if my interests and yours align!

1. **Are you accepting new grad students for Fall 2022 admission?**

I will be reviewing applications for 1 new PhD student for Fall 2022 admission.

2. **Do you accept grad students for terminal master’s degrees/specialist programs?**

Our School Psychology program at UT offers a specialist-level (LSSP) School Psychology masters, and a number of fantastic LSSP students are completing their required research hours in my lab, with my never-ending gratitude! However, applicants to the master’s program need not identify a mentor and are not accepted into a lab in the same way. A percentage (~25%) of LSSP students who apply to the doctoral program in their second year are accepted.

3. **Do you provide funding for PhD students?**

There are a number of different funding options in our doctoral program that are offered by individual faculty via grant appointments (GRA), within the department or college via teaching assistants (TA), and offered by the department, college, and university via fellowships. Each student’s funding package may look a little different depending on their prior experiences, the projects current faculty have, and the qualifications of different fellowships. In general, I work very hard to fully fund my doctoral students using all of these mechanisms, and all of my

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\(^1\) This was inspired by similar FAQs shared by Dr. Jessica Schleider, who runs the Lab for Scalable Mental Health at Stony Brook University, Dr. Mitch Prinstein, who runs the Peer Relations Lab at the University of North Carolina, and Dr. Tyler Renshaw, who directs the School Mental Health lab at Utah State University. Thanks to all of them for their innovation and generosity!
current students receive full funding. Funding generally consists of a monthly living stipend, tuition waivers for up to 9 hours, and student health insurance. Students are still responsible for paying other student fees required by the University. To receive and keep GRA and TA funding, grad students are required to (1) hold a 20-hr week assistantship, (2) be continuously enrolled as an active student, and (3) remain in good academic standing and (4) have adequate performance in that role.

4. **What characteristics are you looking for in grad students who join your lab?**

Most students who apply to the doctoral program have strong academic records, great experiences, and are clear communicators—those are pretty uniform qualities. So, when I review applications and interview potential students, I am trying to determine whether they will be a good fit with my program of research and expertise, and whether what they need to meet their goals is what I have to offer. I’m particularly eager to accept students who want to pursue a career path that includes research or teaching at the college/university level. I recognize that you are early in your career and may not know exactly what you want, but I encourage you to consider whether you want something different than a traditional full-time practitioner/clinician role. Although I highly value clinicians, an essential component of the doctoral training is research—it’s going to be a big part of your life—and I am really most interested in applicants for whom that is exciting! That said, I know your interests and ambitions will evolve during your training and ultimately, I care most about preparing students for the careers they want.

Beyond that, here’s a list of other characteristics I consider:

- Research interests compatible with my lab’s main focus on evidence-based mental health intervention effectiveness and implementation science
- Strong interest in community settings, including—but not exclusively or even primarily—schools
- Some awareness of the research-to-practice gap in youth mental health services
- An interest in mental health providers and service systems
- An interest in and respect for working with complex, low-resource settings and the families they serve, who are often those who have been historically excluded and underserved.
- Previous research experience related to youth mental health services
- Flexibility, conscientiousness, and collaboration!

5. **What should I do in my application to signal that I want to work with you?**

Make sure you are applying to the School Psychology Ph.D. program—I do not supervise students in other areas within Educational Psychology or in the Psychology department. Be sure to choose my name as faculty you would like to work with, and use your personal statement to clearly state why working with me and being in my lab would meet your needs. Often students describe their interests in the diagnostic categories that my work focuses on (e.g., anxiety,
depression, conduct, PTSD and OCD), but my program of research is much more concerned with the facilitators and barriers of treatment effectiveness and implementation than any particular diagnostic group.

6. **Do you have any advice for writing an effective personal statement?**

Here is what I am most interested in learning about a potential applicant from their statement:

- What are the reasons you are motivated to get a PhD in professional psychology, given that there are other routes to being a clinician and other types of PhD’s that do research?
- What are the particular reasons that you’re interested in the aspect of research that you want to pursue?
- Why are you particularly interested in our doctoral program, and in my lab/program of research?
- What are your career goals and ambitions—knowing that these may change!
- If you came to UT, how would your interests/skills/experiences complement our program?

7. **If I join your lab, what projects will I work on?**

This is a hard question to answer, as there are a lot of potential variables to consider—the different stages projects are in and the needs we have, your interests and talents, new projects that may be emerging and what others in the lab are already doing—and what data they are using—on current projects. The best place to start (if you haven’t already done so) is by reading through our lab’s website with a focus on current projects. Regarding current research projects, there are quite a few at different stages. But they generally focus on: 1) testing the effectiveness of treatment and prevention efforts that leverage the existing evidence base for youth depression, anxiety, conduct, and trauma problems 2) testing implementation strategies (supervision, consultation) that support providers 3) looking at the role of intervention fidelity in outcomes. During COVID, we also have been following two samples of participants who were already participating in some of our projects in order to better how the pandemic and other consequent events impacted kids and families. You can get an even better feel for the types of stuff I do in my lab by checking out my google scholar page and seeing what I publish. If you don’t see a topic, population or outcome it may mean it’s really not a part of my expertise—for example, I don’t study academic or instructional interventions or outcomes as a primary research emphasis.

8. **I’m mostly applying to Clinical/Counseling PhD programs—is your lab a good fit for me?**

Our school psychology program has a strong emphasis on preparing students to do research and to practice in the multiple ecological systems that impact kids—including families, schools, health care, social service systems (child welfare and juvenile justice) and specialty mental health clinics. Students in our programs are very successful in acquiring internships and
postdocs in a variety of settings; in recent years, the majority have applied to and received internship placements in academic medical centers. Below is the list of internship placements of my mentees or those whose dissertations I chaired since I joined UT Austin in 2014. In general, I find that our students receive as much (or more!) high-quality, evidence-based mental health intervention training as students in other professional psychology programs, and have the added advantage of expertise in the school system—a place where kids and families spend an awful lot of time and where the majority of youth receiving mental health care receive it.

**LEAP Lab and Bearman research mentee Internship placements:**

2019: Montefiore Medical Center  
UCLA Semel Institute
2021: Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia  
Wellsan Philhaven CBT  
Harvard Children’s Hospital  
Dell Children’s Medical Center/Texas Child Study Center

**9. Is it okay to reach out and express my interest in applying to work with you?**

Contacting me directly won’t have an impact on your application, as I will give every completed application a full review, whether you’ve reached out in advance or not. Please contact me if you have a question that will help you to clarify if my lab or I am a good fit for you, but also don’t feel obligated to contact me—and if I take a while to respond (or don't reply) please do not consider that any indication of my enthusiasm for your application.

**10. Can I reach out to your current grad students?**

Graduate students are a great source of information. You can learn more about my current grad students on the “People” page of our lab website which will direct you to their page on our college’s website. However, prior to reaching out to them, please read this FAQs document and review our website and the UT Department of Educational Psychology and School Psychology webpages. Graduate students are very busy so the best use of their time is to provide insight on what it is like working with me, or being in our lab, or doing the PhD program at UT more generally.

Here are some good resources to support you in this journey. Many were developed for applicants to Clinical Psychology, but I think it is all applicable to School Psych and particularly to my lab. Best of luck!

- [An article about what mentors look for in applicants in research-intensive labs.](#)
- [APS article about applying to grad school in psychology](#)
• Real-life examples of personal statements from previous clinical psychology applicants (again, these are totally generalizable to school applicants!)
• Section 2 of Dr. Mitch Prinstein’s “Uncensored Advice for Applying to Graduate School in Clinical Psychology”