

COMMENTARY

# Evaluating online I-O graduate programs: An information-seeking guide for prospective students

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Kraiger et al. (2022) provide a thorough evaluation and argument for the utility of online graduate education as well as important considerations surrounding potential downsides of completing graduate studies in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology online versus in person. We feel a logical next step in advancing the discussion provided by Kraiger et al. is to approach this topic from the perspective of aspiring graduate students in I-O psychology. Specifically, when evaluating potential programs and universities to attend to earn a graduate I-O degree, prospective students should ask questions based on the recommendations and comments about online education advanced by Kraiger et al. We organize these questions into three categories: (a) questions for the program in general, (b) questions for specific faculty, and (c) questions for the student. The full list of questions is provided in Appendix A.

In the section on questions for the program, we will discuss how each question helps the prospective student evaluate the potential of an online program, such as its rigor, support, and preparation for careers in I-O psychology. The faculty-specific questions are designed to support gathering information about the idiosyncratic mentorship styles of particular faculty members. In addition, we provide questions that prospective students should ask themselves to identify personal preference and fit for online I-O education. All of these questions are intended to supplement (not replace) other questions concerning program structure, culture, and fit. Prospective students are advised to locate as much of this information as possible online or through other avenues prior to asking program faculty or staff, as it can be frustrating and time consuming for such individuals to respond with information that is readily accessible elsewhere. (See Tett et al., 2014, for a commentary about choosing graduate education in I-O psychology.)

## Questions for the program

*What are the application requirements?/How competitive are admissions?* Comparing the application requirements of an online program with those of other programs, including in-person programs, may provide information about the program's accessibility and rigor. Moreover, this information may serve as a proxy for how potential employers will perceive the quality of graduates from this program.

*What is the typical class format like?* For example, are courses purely online or blended? What proportion of courses (or a given course) is synchronous versus asynchronous? This information can reveal the extent of social interaction that prospective students can expect as well as whether the classes will match their individual preferences for learning environments.

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We would like to thank the reviewers for their feedback that contributed to improving this commentary.

*What applied experiences are integrated within the program/Is there a required internship?* For example, are there internship possibilities? What proportion of students obtain an internship? What other applied developmental opportunities exist through this program? Given that potential employers favor I-O job applicants with internships over those without, in conjunction with the presumable social and networking benefits of internship participation, students that seek graduate education as an avenue to obtaining competitive jobs may be advised to prefer online programs with applied practice components.

*What university or program resources exist to aid professional networking and job placement opportunities?* Students in online graduate programs may need more structured networking opportunities given the absence of “water cooler” or spontaneous connections that students attending in-person programs typically enjoy. Online programs would do well to structure opportunities for student to engage in professional networking within the broader I-O community (e.g., the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology). However, good online programs will also provide structure to aid students in gaining networking opportunities in their specific markets (e.g., local associations of applied psychologists, Society for Human Resources Management chapters).

*Does the program have connections with businesses that serve as employment pipelines for post-graduates? What businesses?* For any program, online or otherwise, prospective applicants are advised to review the most typical placements of past graduates, as this represents the best guess for where they too will end up. A strong placement record in the industries or sectors that interest the individual applicant may make up for perceived deficits in other areas.

*What are the average cohort sizes and faculty-to-student ratio?* Given the discussion around the potential for online programs to spread their resources too thinly, we recommend students inquire about cohort sizes and the faculty–student ratio to better understand the breadth of resources available to students specifically coming from faculty. Cohort size alone may not be an accurate indicator of the support students may receive. For example, the experience of support in a cohort of 10 students with four I-O faculty would likely be starkly different from that of a cohort of 10 students with eight faculty.

*What opportunities exist for funding graduate education?* One point not discussed by Kraiger et al. (2022) is the difference in opportunities for funding graduate students between in-person and online programs. Without the opportunities to work for the university as research or teaching assistants, funding for online graduate students may be limited to scholarships. We see this as a primary barrier to students pursuing online graduate education. Online graduate programs may want to explore potential co-ops with companies to identify internships, funding for graduate students, and future job opportunities.

*How does the program facilitate social connections among students across the virtual divide?* Because peers represent potential collaborators, coworkers, and friends, it is valuable to know whether or not and how the graduate school experience will foster such connections. Creating structure within the program that will enable students to make professional connections among their peers, such as group projects or program networking events, would help bridge any potential gap in networking benefits between online and in-person graduate programs.

*What structure exists within the program to ensure effective mentorship?* The previous questions will help prospective students gauge the potential of the program to provide mentorship and resources for effective professional development. However, asking specifically about mentorship will help students gauge the commitment of faculty to building professional relationships with students in an online format. Ideally, the program will have structure to ensure individual mentorship, such as through assigned advising/mentorship relationships. Questions for potential mentors are addressed in the next section.

### Questions for specific faculty

*What is your approach to virtual mentorship?* For example, how frequently do you typically meet with students virtually? How are typical aspects of mentorship, such as unscheduled informal meetings, handled in a remote format? Because online education was foisted on many faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no reason to assume that any one individual will be comfortable navigating technologies such as videoconferencing software or accustomed to regular meetings via such means. Applicants should inquire as to the responsiveness of prospective advisors to assess whether they should expect ongoing informal engagement versus periodic scheduled check-ins.

*How do you attend to students' well-being across the virtual divide?* As fewer social cues are detectable through online communication and remote individuals primarily interact only during scheduled meeting times, there is danger of student well-being deteriorating without faculty or staff noticing. For most students, it will be beneficial to pursue a program that intentionally integrates some form of check-ins or monitoring to prevent this from occurring unnoticed.

*What is your educational background?* Educational backgrounds of I-O faculty members can vary widely. Students can expect to encounter instructors with Doctorates of Philosophy (PhDs) in I-O psychology, business psychology, and experimental psychology, with emphases in I-O psychology; Doctorates of Business Education (DBAs); Doctorates of Education (EdDs) in educational and organizational leadership; and various others. We suggest that students ask about instructors' educational backgrounds and prefer faculty with PhDs in I-O psychology or experimental psychology with an I-O emphasis, as such educators will likely be the most knowledgeable concerning I-O domains, rigorous in their design of I-O curricula, and reputable in the eyes of employers who are looking to hire I-O psychologists.

*What is your experience with research and practice?* Students may enter graduate school with vastly differing interests or goals. Some may desire to become the best practitioner or consultant. Others may want to keep the option of action research or further academic pursuits available. As discussed in the following section about goals for postgraduation, assessing the degree to which faculty have experience in both research and practice can help student align their own personal goals with the resources and experience that the faculty member provides.

### Questions for students to ask themselves

*What stage of life am I in? What stage of my career?* Some applicants may be in professional career positions, looking to increase ability, whereas others may be exploring potential career options. Applicants already in established positions may be advised to pursue online education options that afford more flexibility, whereas those with fewer existing commitments may more easily relocate and accept positions in programs requiring time during the standard working week.

*Do I have prior experience with online education, and have I been successful in managing a learner-controlled education environment?* Online education, whether undergraduate or graduate, requires a good degree of self-discipline to maintain progress and complete program milestones. Students interested in online graduate education would benefit from being able to rely on their previous success at maintaining a schedule and completing online classes during their undergraduate education. Furthermore, students should consider how they felt and dealt with any potential increased ambiguity from the lack of in-person interactions with the professor during their previous online learning experiences.

*What goals do I have for postgraduation?* Kraiger et al. (2022) observed that a vast majority of online graduate programs in I-O psychology are masters-granting programs, with only a few doctoral programs. Students whose goal is to enter the workforce in entry-level master's degree positions are less likely to be impeded by online graduate education. For students who desire to work in a research-focused area or even prepare for a life in academia, potential barriers to

research production in online education may present an insurmountable obstacle. However, as we mentioned previously, students can assess the degree to which the program has the resources necessary to support successful student development. Additionally, another consideration that Kraiger et al. did not discuss concerns students who may complete a masters in I-O psychology online and then apply to in-person doctoral programs. Students with such a possible trajectory should consider the resources that particular online programs have and whether adequate mentorship will be available to prepare them for and enable them to be well recommended to in-person doctoral programs. As online programs become more available and accessible, we speculate that students transitioning from online masters to in-person doctoral programs will become ever more increasingly prevalent.

*How am I funding graduate school?* Beyond the career opportunities, a major draw for many students to graduate school is the availability of funded education. Students need to consider ways they can fund their online graduate education considering the fewer structured funding opportunities that may be provided by the school (i.e., research and teaching assistantships). Working professionals considering online graduate education may have tuition reimbursement programs incorporated in their current employee benefits. Student considering an online graduate program immediately following their undergraduate studies can seek out available scholarships at universities and inquire about possible research or teaching assistantships. Proactive students may wish to seek out potential employers willing to participate in a co-op where the student works for the employer during summers or concurrently with their online graduate education, followed by employment at the firm for some specified term following degree completion.

*How strong are my professional network and/or my own networking abilities?* Finally, as we mentioned previously, understanding the networking opportunities and exposure to potential employers afforded by online programs is a necessity. However, it is also very important for the student to consider whether they have the disposition to take their professional development and networking efforts into their own hands. Online programs should have the structure to ensure the possibility of good networking and professional development, but students will need to be proactive enough to seize such opportunities and make the most of the resources provided.

## Conclusion

Online education brings many advantages and conveniences; however, online education may not be the best fit for all students and presents various challenges centered on the lack of in-person interaction throughout the duration of the program. Hopefully, the benefits of online education do not come at the expense of employability, another primary concern of Kraiger et al. (2022). We created this information-seeking guide to support students in their evaluation of potential I-O graduate programs, especially those online such that they can determine the academic rigor an online program has to ensure their employment and other future prospects are bright and full of opportunities. We hope these questions and the rationale behind them inspired by Kraiger et al. will aid prospective students in gathering the information they need to make well-informed application decisions for online I-O graduate programs.

## References

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## Appendix A Online I-O graduate program information-seeking guide

- What are the application requirements? How competitive are admissions?
- What is the class format like?
  - Are courses purely online or blended?
  - What proportion of courses (or a given course) is synchronous versus asynchronous?
- What applied experiences are integrated within the program?
  - Are there internship possibilities? What proportion of students obtain an internship?
  - What other applied developmental opportunities exist through this program?
- What university or program resources exist to aid professional networking and job placement opportunities?
- Does the program have connections with businesses that serves as employment pipelines for postgraduates? What businesses?
- What are the average cohort sizes and faculty-to-student ratio?
- What opportunities exist for funding graduate education?
- How does the program facilitate social connections among students across the virtual divide?
- What structure exists within the program to ensure effective mentorship?
- What is your approach to virtual mentorship?
  - How frequently do you typically meet with students virtually?
  - How are typical aspects of mentorship, such as unscheduled informal meetings, handled in a remote format?
- How do you attend to students' well-being across the virtual divide?
- What is the faculty's educational background?
- What is the faculty's experience with research and practice?
- What stage of life am I in? What phase of my career?
- Do I have prior experience with online education and have I been successful in managing a learner-controlled education environment?
- What goals do I have for postgraduation?
- How am I funding graduate school?
- How strong are my professional network and/or my own networking abilities?