

Personal Statement as Part of X's Application to the Master's of Arts Degree Program In Behavior Analysis at Western Michigan University, as of Jan. 15, 2002

Dear Reader: You will find that I have separated my statement into three parts. These sections correspond to the suggested topics in the application form. Also, a note about the content: Jerry Mertens told me that during a Psychology Tour, Dale Brethower mentioned the dull and boring nature of most of these essays. I'm afraid that mine too, tends toward the dull and boring. However, I do not view myself as a dull and boring person. In fact, people who know me have often described me as animated. I hope that a little bit of Animated X has come through in this essay. So, without further ado, here it is.

What are my interests?

When I walked into Jerry Mertens' Psychology of Learning class in January of 2000, I knew nothing of behavior analysis. I did not need the class for any specific requirement, I did not have any real interest in the course content, and I was lost in the labyrinth of varied and competing psychological theories. I decided to major in psychology because I was interested in human behavior. I wanted to know why people did what they did. I wanted to know how to change human behavior. I wanted to know how cultural systems could be changed to make society better and life more fulfilling for its members. But I was lost. I became disenchanted with psychology. I was learning about things that didn't seem relevant, that didn't seem to work. So, I didn't have many expectations when I registered for Jerry Mertens' class. My reason for signing up for the class was simple: I had heard too much about Jerry Mertens not to take a class from him.

After a few weeks of studying behavior analysis with Jerry and a text he was using, Elementary Principles of Behavior, I was captivated. Finally, something worked. Real changes in behavior were being made. My interest in human behavior increased and I became committed to behavior analysis, eventually choosing it as a career goal.

How about my goals? (or, I want your job)

If I were to fantasize about my future twenty years from now, I would be a professor at a leading behavioral university. The young, idealistic college student also wants to change the world, or at least some tiny part of it. Teaching would allow me to influence students the way I was influenced. Conducting research would allow me to explore my wide and varied interests in human behavior.

I always thought I would enjoy teaching, but this idea was abstract. However, last semester I had the opportunity to teach as an undergraduate teaching assistant, and my enjoyment of teaching became more than just an idea. One specific incident stands out: I was teaching a class and I asked a student to give an example of a discriminative stimulus. This student wasn't a particularly good student, and I had little hope of a correct answer. However, after staring at his desktop for some time, he lifted his head with a gigantic grin and gave an example from a popular movie I had recently seen.

Surprised by this answer, I asked him to explain. His explanation wasn't perfect, but he understood the basic principle and demonstrated that he could take a principle and apply it to a real life example. I think my grin probably matched his at that moment, and I thought that I could probably do this for the rest of my life. Subsequent teaching experiences have been equally reinforcing. Thus, following a few retirements at Western Michigan, this section's subtitle "I want your job" may be quite relevant.

Although I fantasize about a university career, I do live in reality and realize that I may find my niche in another, more specific area of behavior analysis. By focusing on a specific applied area I might also be better prepared to find a job when I graduate

Why Western Michigan University?

I believe that Western Michigan University's general Master's program in Behavior Analysis will help me to reach my ultimate goal of teaching and conducting research while at the same time preparing me for work in applied settings, such as working with children with autism. The program will allow me to sample the wide variety of opportunities available in the field of behavior analysis while providing an opportunity to conduct research and gain experience working in applied settings. At Western Michigan I look forward to learning from and working with some of the most experienced professionals in the field, and I expect to be challenged by both my professors and fellow students.