My first violin lesson at the age of five came with a simple message: “practice makes perfect.” Over time, I have learned that perfection is seldom achieved in any domain. My conceptualization of accomplishment has always revolved around the fact that a thorough understanding of any subject is acquired by first mastering the foundations and subsequently expanding knowledge through practice. However, while hard work certainly is an imperative ingredient in success, it is not the only necessary element. Passion and an openness to take advantage of new opportunities that stretch beyond comfort are equally crucial in expanding one’s education. This mentality ultimately led me to pursue my two passions: Psychology research and Baroque violin performance. As an undergraduate and since graduation, I have persevered in continuing my development as a pre-professional psychology researcher and as a violinist. My determination to excel in two domains led me to not only work full-time at Massachusetts General Hospital, but to practice consistently and seize every musical opportunity possible, resulting in my membership in two renowned Baroque orchestras: Boston Baroque and The Handel and Haydn Society. My resolve recently resulted in my debut performance at Symphony Hall with The Handel and Haydn Society. While this was an enormous milestone, I am aware that education is a lifelong process and that each achievement needs to follow with even more determination to succeed. I apply this same mentality to psychology research, particularly to my investment in better understanding the development, treatment, and risk factors for depression and psychopathology. My desire to continually educate myself in this area comes from my dedication to serving those whose functioning is impaired by these disorders.

Before starting the Vanderbilt Honors Program, I wanted to attain as much research experience as possible, leading me to pursue my preliminary studies in the construction of emotion with Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett in her Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory. I was fortunate to perform daily lab tasks like data entry and cleaning while also acquiring more specialized experience, such as preparing and administering EKG and EEG. This position allowed me to appreciate the use of multidisciplinary approaches in research. Subsequently, I elected to conduct my Honors research in Dr. Bruce Compas’s Stress and Coping Laboratory. Dr. Compas’s inspiring work on the prevention of depression in an at-risk sample encouraged me to view depression and psychopathology as multi-faceted and complicated disorders with genetic, environmental, and physiological influences. My desire to devote myself fully to Dr. Compas’s research led me to work well beyond the ten hour-per-week requirements of the Honors Program. Even as my Violin Performance major became increasingly demanding, I consistently worked fifteen to twenty hours per week in the Compas lab for four semesters. My dedication rewarded me with extra responsibilities and opportunities, such as working on multiple projects simultaneously, taking on data management tasks, and ultimately being chosen for a coveted position in the Vanderbilt University Summer Research Program (VUSRP). As a result of my efforts, I was encouraged to expand my knowledge to other domains. I was granted the opportunity to work on a neuroimaging study in which I led participants through mock fMRI scans, received training in Brain Voyager, and assisted with scans. My interest in multidimensional approaches to research and my awareness that the major weakness in my psychology background was the lack of sufficient experience in biologically- and genetically- driven research led me to my current position as Clinical Research Coordinator for Dr. Alysa Doyle in the Psychiatric and Neurodevelopmental Genetics Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital. This research position has granted me the greatest opportunity and responsibility yet. As the sole coordinator working for Dr. Doyle, I must demonstrate responsibility and possess a thorough and focused understanding of every aspect of our study. I began as a Research Assistant, and after a year of dedication to mastering the skills needed for assessment and leadership on the study, I was promoted to a Coordinator position. My duties are extensive and range from data entry and management to recruiting, consenting, and administering neuropsychological tests to patients in our study. I also collect DNA samples from our participants and have gained valuable experience in understanding genetic influences on cognition. I now appreciate the vast potential that genetic information holds in aiding our understanding of risk mechanisms and potentially even personalized treatment for depression and psychopathology. Research is the basis for clinical work and theory, and I am greatly driven by this mindset as I continue to build the skills necessary to become an accomplished researcher on the biological and environmental influences on depression and psychopathology in at-risk samples.

In addition to significant research experience, I have been fortunate to begin developing clinical skills in the past three years. My introduction to clinical work was in Dr. Compas’s lab working on a study exploring neurocognitive effects in pediatric brain tumor patients. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to accompany the post-doctoral fellow in charge of the study for an entire summer. We interacted with and administered neuropsychology tests to infants, toddlers, and children in hospital settings and in Ronald McDonald houses. The study involved post-operative time points, which meant baseline functioning needed to be obtained quickly after diagnosis so patients could undergo surgery. Through the unique experience of visiting families within a few days of a cancer diagnosis, I acquired important clinical skills and a sense of how to interact with patients and families in a compassionate and professional way during sensitive periods in their lives. This introduction to clinical interaction was especially important when I began to work for Dr. Doyle. A primary responsibility in my first year was to administer a variety of neuropsychological tests, as patients range from having learning disorders to presenting with severe psychopathology. The diverse patient population requires me to show flexibility in my approach to patient interactions while still communicating with them in a standardized manner.

I have become deeply committed to the idea that research is the foundation for improving clinical care in patients. The personality traits and skills that allow me to excel in high levels of music performance and psychology research make me the type of candidate who would not only excel in your program academically but who would also take advantage of every opportunity available. My qualifications, experience, and dedication to the field of psychology research indicate that I will be successful as a graduate student and as a clinical psychologist. My eventual goals are to conduct research and teach at a university level. I am fully prepared and excited to invest my time and energy towards earning a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. I hope to be granted the opportunity to accomplish this at The University of Vermont.