

Planning for Graduate School in Psychology

Undergraduate training in psychology teaches you about psychology, but does not qualify you to be a psychologist. In order to become a psychologist, you must obtain an advanced degree, at either the masters or doctoral level. Doctoral programs, regardless of specialty, are very selective; clinical PhD programs accept 10% or fewer of applicants, as a national average, for example. PhD programs prepare students for service delivery (Clinical), research and/or scholarship careers. Masters programs, usually in counseling/educational psychology or social work, accept a broader range of applicants and usually prepare students for careers in service delivery. Keep in mind that graduate school will demand much more of you academically and personally than college.

Psychologist or psychiatrist?

Psychiatrists are medical doctors (MD's) who have completed at least a three-year residency in psychiatry after finishing medical school. They are licensed to prescribe medication and usually work in clinical settings, often treating patients with major mental illnesses, although a minority may do research on psychiatric disorders or teach in medical schools. If your goal is to become a psychiatrist, you will need to follow a pre-med curriculum and get a degree from medical school. Psychologists are usually PhD's (see below for exceptions) with extensive training in scholarly research. There are many academic subspecialties in psychology graduate study, some of which focus exclusively on scholarship and some of which include training in service delivery (for example, clinical or counseling psychology). If your ultimate goal is to become a psychotherapist, be sure to choose a program that offers training for this career (see next section.)

Which clinical degree?

There are two graduate degree levels (masters and doctoral) and several specific degrees available at each level (MEd, MA, MSSW, EdD, PhD, PsyD, etc.) One of the first decisions you will need to make is whether to apply to a masters or doctoral program. **Masters** programs tend to focus on clinical (as opposed to research) training, are shorter in duration (two years, generally), prepare you for applied (service) careers (as opposed to university teaching and scholarship). and typically offer less financial support. They are also much less selective. Usually, graduates of these programs have titles like counselor, social worker, marriage and family therapist, etc. and work under the supervision of a doctoral level psychologist or psychiatrist (MD). Doctoral degrees, on the other hand, are the terminal (highest) degrees offered. These degrees may be offered in a university department of psychology (PhD, sometimes PsyD), school of education (EdD) or social work (DSW) or a free-standing professional school (PsyD). There is some degree of overlap in curriculum and career choices between doctoral degrees in clinical and counseling psychology. Historically, it has been the case that clinical psychology programs place more emphasis on research and train students to work with a wider range of clients and settings, including the severely impaired. Counseling psychology programs have historically been focused on providing services in non-medical settings, including schools, to individuals who are having problems in living and personal

development. For students who wish to become clinical psychologists, the degrees to consider are the PhD (academic and clinical training in the "scholar-professional" model) and the PsyD (professional practice degree with less emphasis on research training and more emphasis on clinical training, often in proprietary and/or professional schools). Typically, universities prefer to hire PhDs rather than PsyDs and PhD students are more commonly offered financial support while pursuing the degree. PsyD programs are often less selective in admissions than clinical PhD programs.

Non-clinical graduate degrees:

These programs are designed at the masters level to train teachers at the secondary school or community college level and university teachers and researchers at the doctoral level. While most graduates of these PhD programs intend to pursue careers in academic settings, there are large numbers of experimental psychologists employed in business, industry, government and the military. For example, industrial/organizational (I/O) psychologists consult to business regarding compensation, team-building, hiring practices and performance assessment. Psychologists with degrees in sensation/perception (S&P) might work in the military on weapons ergonomics or in the food industry researching taste. Cognitive/mathematical psychologists might design information technology software or work with engineers on artificial intelligence robotics projects.

Choosing programs:

One of the primary criteria determining likelihood of acceptance is the fit between your background and aspirations and the particular program. For example, you will need to consider whether you are looking for a clinical degree or a research degree, whether your career goal is practice or professorship, in what sort of setting you intend to work, and what sub-specialty interests you. These decisions will require you to spend considerable amounts of time finding information about graduate programs and opportunities. In many cases, this process will take the same effort as taking an extra course, so allow plenty of time prior to the semester in which you will be writing your applications. Much of this work can be done on the internet, but you should also engage faculty members in conversation about their areas of interest and ask their advice about programs. In fact, this can be an excellent way to continue the relationship outside of class. The following links can be useful places to begin your search:

- [National rankings of all Psychology PhD programs across all subdisciplines](#)
- [National rankings using another database](#)
- [Rankings of clinical PhD programs by EPP scores](#)
- [Rankings of clinical PhD programs by number of publications](#)
- [National rankings of PhD programs by subject area](#)
- [Rankings of top undergraduate psychology programs](#)
- [Rankings of counseling programs by number of publications](#)
- psychologyschoolssearch.com/index.php
- grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/grad/psy/search
- graduateschool.com

- psyccareers.apa.org

Factors to consider include: research interests of faculty (read abstracts of their articles), faculty credentials, selectivity (percentage of applicants admitted), program size (larger is often better), financial assistance, ratio of faculty:students, courses offered, clinical settings available in the community (if relevant), average years to degree, location, university reputation, program reputation, careers pursued by program graduates, etc. Some students recommend using Excel spreadsheets to summarize information from a number of programs.

The more selective the programs, the more applications you will need to send. It is not unusual for applicants to clinical PhD programs to send 8 or more applications, even when their credentials are strong.

GPA:

Since graduate programs are interested in students with outstanding academic records and potential, your GPA is a very important credential for admission. Each program will have its own standards for admission and all credentials are usually considered together as a package, but it is generally the case that successful applicants to clinical PhD programs have GPA's in the 3.5-4.0 range. Non-clinical doctoral programs vary more widely in GPA expectation, but tend to accept students with minimum GPA's of 3.2 and above. Applicants to masters programs are generally expected to have GPA's at or above 3.0, depending on the program. If you have found yourself struggling with classes at the undergraduate level, it might be wise to think carefully about graduate school and consider other options.

Research Experience:

Experience in conducting research at the undergraduate level is expected for admission to PhD programs, even if it is not mentioned as a requirement. Successful applicants to doctoral programs will have several semesters of research experience in a faculty lab and some will have presented papers or posters at professional events. These research opportunities are competitive and most faculty will expect a two-semester commitment and prefer students who have taken both statistics (Psyc 301) and research methods (Psyc 302). Many labs will request that applicants have at least a 3.0 GPA, as well. See [link to Research Opportunities] for more information.

The Psychology Honors program can also provide significant research experience, as well as a finished product: the undergraduate thesis. Most admitted applicants to PhD programs will have completed an Honors project at their undergraduate institution. See [link to Honors] for information.

Masters degree programs will often give preference to candidates who have research experience, but it is not as often expected. Most masters programs prepare students primarily for clinical service as opposed to research scholarship and so give more weight to clinical or social service experience than do doctoral programs.

The Graduate Record Examination (GRE):

Most graduate programs in psychology and related fields will require that you take the General GRE test (consisting of Verbal, Quantitative and Analytical sections). This test is similar to the SAT, taken for admission to college. In order to have competitive scores, it is wise to plan to study for the GRE and, especially, to review basic algebra and geometry. There are commercial organizations that offer test preparation classes [link to Kaplan] and the University of Louisville Delphi Center offers fall and spring prep classes at reasonable prices [link to Delphi]. REACH may also offer review sessions taught by current graduate students who scored well on the GRE. Many students prepare their own review plan using books like those published by Princeton Review, Kaplan and Barron's, available in most bookstores. It is wise to allow sufficient time to take the GRE more than once, should you wish to try again for better scores. To register for the GRE, go to www.ets.org/gre. Testing is available on campus with online registration.

Letters of Recommendation:

You will need to submit two-three letters from faculty members who are familiar with your academic work. Usually, these relationships with faculty develop through taking smaller classes (seminars at the 400-500 level), WR classes, internships or research apprenticeships (Psyc 401). It is up to you to cultivate relationships with faculty and to maintain contact through the application period so that specific details and anecdotes can be included in the letters. In general, letters written by instructors who know you only as a student who did well in a large lecture class will not be very useful. Graduate school is intended for a select subset of students who care passionately about ideas, learning and the field of psychology and who have considerable academic commitment, potential and discipline. Letters of reference will need to address these issues and so it is wise to make sure there are at least two faculty members (preferably in Psychology) who can attest to this on your behalf. For masters programs in clinical areas, it is often acceptable for one of the letters to be from someone who is familiar with your work with clinical populations and your social/clinical skills. Referees should be given 4-6 weeks to send a letter and you should supply those who agree to do so with a packet containing your resume, personal statement, transcript and complete addresses for the programs. It is wise to arrange a meeting with your referees to discuss the characteristics of each program, your career goals and why these programs are a good fit for you at the time you provide them with the packet.

Personal statement:

This is the document that will make or break your application with respect to your fit with the program. It needs to be original, individual and should distinguish you from other applicants in some way, as well as providing evidence of your academic commitment. You will need to show that you've "done your homework" researching the program and can talk about the specific aspects that appeal to you. If there are particular faculty with whom you would like to work, explain who and why in detail. Expand on the research or clinical experience you have had and what you plan to do in graduate school to continue those themes or why you would like to do something different. Some students recommend writing the statement and setting it aside for a week or so, in order to edit with a more critical eye. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself whether other applicants will be saying the same things you have said (e.g. "I've always wanted

to be a psychologist", "I want to help people", etc.); if so, consider rewriting those statements to make them unique and personal. There are a number of books available to assist you with personal statements; visit your bookstore or borrow one to read on-site from the Psychology Advising Office, Life Sciences 124.

Resume:

It is wise to construct a resume and keep it up to date during your final semesters. It should not duplicate the transcript, but academic honors, experiential programs (internships, study abroad, service learning, research activities), co-curricular activities (especially leadership roles) and paid work should be included. For resume help, consult the Career Development Center for resume workshops [link] or request an appointment with Ms Debra Mayberry (852-6701) for resume feedback. There are dozens of books available to assist you in resume construction; consult Ekstrom Library, the Louisville Free Public Library or a bookstore.

Deadlines:

Applications to doctoral programs are usually due in late fall of the year before matriculation (by December for the following August). Masters programs usually have later deadlines and may also admit students in both spring and fall semesters. Once you know your deadline, work backwards to determine when you need to take the GRE, request transcripts and letters of reference. Allow plenty of time for errors or lost mail. If possible, have your applications arrive a week prior to the deadline.

Useful publications:

- American Psychological Association (2007). *Getting in: A step-by-step plan for gaining admission to graduate school in psychology*(2nd ed.). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- American Psychological Association (2008). *Graduate study in psychology 2008*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Asher, D. (2008). *Graduate admissions essays: Write your way into the graduate school of your choice*(3rd ed.). Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Keith-Speigel, P., & Wiederman, M.W. (2000). *The complete guide to graduate school admission: Psychology, counseling, and related professions*(2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Kuther, T.L. (2003). *The psychology major's handbook: Career options and strategies for success*(3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Walfish, S. & Hess, A.K. (Eds.). (2001). *Succeeding in graduate school: The career guide for psychology students*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.