

# **Applying for Graduate School in a Mental Health Field**

## **A Guide for All Students Interested in Future Careers in Clinical or Counseling Psychology**



**Prepared by Dr. Lisa Platt  
Pre-Clinical and Counseling Resource Coordinator  
Department of Psychology  
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University**

# Applying for Graduate School in a Mental Health Field

## What type of graduate degrees can a person pursue in mental health?

A person can pursue either a doctoral degree or a master's degree in a variety of mental health disciplines. There are pros and cons for pursuing either type of degree.

Types of Doctoral degrees:

- Ph.D.
- Psy.D.
  - These degrees are typically in three fields: Clinical, Counseling, or School psychology.

Types of Master's degrees:

- Clinical mental health counseling
- Social work
- Marriage and Family therapy
- Rehabilitation counseling
- Drug and Alcohol counseling
- School counseling

## What is the difference between getting a master's degree versus a Ph.D.?

The differences between pursuing a master's degree versus a Ph.D. include:

- Focus of training
- Long term career options
- Time commitment
- Cost
- Level of competitiveness
- Amount of training
- Level of long term prestige

## Master's vs. Doctoral

### Master's Degree

- 2-3 year terminal degree
- Wide range of fields
- Pros:
  - Less time
  - Good job opportunity
  - Less competitive programs
  - Wide range of options
- Cons:
  - Not funded
  - Less training
  - Less prestige

### Doctoral Degree

- 5-6 year advanced degree
- Clinical, counseling, school
- Pros:
  - Longer training
  - Funded
  - Wider range of job options
  - More prestige
- Cons:
  - Competitive programs
  - More time commitment

Students should be aware that Ph.D. programs are highly competitive. A typical clinical psychology Ph.D. program will receive between 150-400 applications a year and only accept 6-10 students. A typical counseling psychology program will receive between 70-200 applications a year and only accept 6-10 students. This means only the very top students will have a realistic chance at gaining admission. Due to the highly competitive nature of doctoral programs, applying to master's degree programs may be a more realistic option for many students.

### **What about Psy.D. degrees?**

Psy.D. programs offer a doctorate of psychology degree. This type of degree is most often offered at professional schools of psychology (Argosy, Adler School of Professional Psychology, Alliant University, Chicago School of Professional Psychology and others).

A student considering a Psy.D. program must carefully consider the disadvantages of such programs. Professional schools of psychology are typically "for-profit" companies instead of traditional universities. Therefore, the main consideration is profit, often at the expense of quality and student training, especially in terms of individual attention and supervision. While these programs are often easier to get accepted into, the long term cost and quality of training are serious considerations.

- Typical cost: Over \$100,000. Any financial aid beyond loans is almost never available.
- Typical cohort size: 20-40 students. For a doctoral level of training, this is much too large to ensure quality supervision and other one-to-one attention.
- Other problems: A large number of Psy.D. students are unable to secure a pre-doctoral internship at the end of their training, which is required to graduate and obtain licensure later. They simply are not competitive for these internships as compared to Ph.D. students. Also, a Psy.D. is not well respected in the field, so a person will likely not be able to pursue an academic career (teaching at a college).
- In short: You may not get what you pay for.

## Doctoral Degrees

### **Ph.D.**

- Doctor of Philosophy
- Pros:
  - More accepted
  - More science oriented
  - Better Training/Quality
  - More job opportunity
- Cons:
  - Competitive Admissions
  - Time commitment

### **Psy.D.**

- Doctor of Psychology
- Pros:
  - Less time commitment
  - Less research focus
- Cons:
  - Cost
  - Less Job opportunity
  - Quality concerns

### **What can I do with each type of degree?**

There are a wide variety of career opportunities with a graduate degree:

Ph.D.: Working as a psychologist in a mental health agency or private practice  
Doing research in a wide range of settings  
Academic career, being a college professor

Psy.D.: Working as a psychologist in a mental health agency or private practice

Master's Degrees: Working as a mental health counselor in a mental health agency or private practice

Other job options: Consultation, government work, jobs in the corporate world, military psychologists

### **How much money will I make with each type of degree?**

Doctoral level: Between \$50,000-100,000 per year is average

Master's level: Between \$35,000-60,000 per year is average

### **Debt**

Many students worry about the additional financial debt involved in pursuing a graduate degree.

Some things to take into consideration:

- If you want to be a counselor/psychologist who provides mental health care, a graduate degree is required.
- You will almost always have to pay for a master's degree. Most master's programs are two years and vary tremendously in price. You can realistically expect to pay at least \$10,000-20,000 total and sometimes more if the university is not a public institution.
- Good doctoral (Ph.D.) programs offer partial to full funding for tuition. Most also offer an assistantship for some living expenses as well. However, as stated previously, Ph.D. programs are very competitive and are difficult to gain admission into.
- Psy.D. programs are almost never funded and will realistically cost \$60,000-\$100,000 to complete the degree.

For practicing counselors and psychologists there are a number of government loan repayment programs available if after graduation you agree to work in underserved areas. Also, many loan companies are willing to work with new graduates to develop realistic payment plans.

### **What is the difference between clinical and counseling psychology?**

First, this question is most relevant to doctoral level training. In general, the fields are more similar than different. Both offer the same job opportunities and overall similar training opportunities. At the doctoral level, both fields are qualified to become licensed psychologists. The differences involve what each type of program will focus on in training.

### Clinical Psychology

- Medical Model
- Severe Pathology
  
- Pros:
  - More well known
  - More science oriented
  
- Cons:
  - Less Humanistic

### Counseling Psychology

- Strength Based Model
- Normative, Developmental
  
- Pros:
  - Multicultural Emphasis
  - More Humanistic
  
- Cons:
  - Less well known

### **What is the timeline I should follow?**

The long term goal is to have your graduate application be as strong as possible. The areas that schools look for are: clinical experience, research experience, GRE scores, GPA, strong letters of recommendation and overall excellent fit.

The recommended time line for achieving a strong application is as follows:

#### 1. First and Second year:

- Get to know your professors
- Become involved in a research lab
- Look into volunteer and internship experiences within a mental health setting
- Get good grades in your classes

#### 2. Third year:

- Consider doing an honor's thesis or senior research project; start looking for an advisor for this
- Consider applying for the teaching instructor practicum (teaching lab sections of introduction to psychology). The applications are typically due in the spring.
- Consider applying to be a summer research fellow in the department. Applications are typically due in the spring
- Complete or arrange to complete an internship
- Continue to be involved in a faculty member's research lab
- Continue to get good grades in your classes

#### 3. Summer before senior year:

- Study and take the GRE
- Prepare a list of schools you plan to attend
- Prepare to complete your thesis or senior research project
- Complete an internship or volunteer experience

#### 4. Fall of senior year:

- Prepare to apply to your list of schools. Be aware that the application process takes a lot of time and you will need to be very organized.
- Continue to get good grades in your classes
- Continue to be involved or complete an internship
- Continue to be involved in research

5. Spring of senior year:

- Depending on deadlines, continue to apply to schools
- Interview at schools
- Make a decision!
- Continue with research, clinical experiences, and getting good grades.

The book, “*Getting In: A Step-By-Step Plan For Gaining Admission To Graduate School In Psychology*” which is available in the library or from APA is a very valuable resource to assist you in planning.

**What steps do I need to take to get into graduate school for Ph.D.? Master’s?**

The steps outlined above apply for students interested in either a Ph.D. program or a master’s program. The main difference is how much research fit and interest will be emphasized in a Ph.D. program. These issues are less important for a master’s program. However, master’s programs will be especially interested in your relevant experiences (i.e.: internship and volunteer experiences in mental health or non-profit settings). It is in your best interest to develop all areas of your application as much as possible prior to applying.

**What are some of the courses at CSB/SJU that would be helpful to prepare for a counseling career?**

Along with the required courses for the major, there are a number of courses in the psychology department that would be helpful in preparing for a counseling career. They include:

- PSYC 370: Clinical and Counseling Psychology
- PSYC 381: Abnormal Psychology
- PSYC 360: Developmental Psychology
- PSYC 310: Community Psychology
- PSYC 342: Psychopharmacology
- PSYC 382: Neuropsychology

**Accreditation**

Going to an accredited graduate program is critical to your long term career success. Accreditation means the program has met some basic training criteria. It is a contract between you and the program that you will receive what you are paying for in terms of quality of training. Also, in order to obtain a professional license in your chosen field, most states require you to attend an accredited program. Usually a professional license is required to practice, so accreditation of your program is extremely important.

At the doctoral level (both Ph.D. and Psy.D.) the American Psychological Association handles accreditation.

- A list of APA accredited doctoral programs in clinical, counseling and school psychology can be found on the APA website:  
<http://www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/programs/index.aspx>

At the master's level, a wider range of professional organizations handle accreditation. Here are some examples:

- **MFT:** Accreditation through the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy
- [http://www.aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/Directories/MFT\\_Training\\_Programs/Content/Directories/MFT\\_Training\\_Programs.aspx?hkey=7ae12d01-323a-4a36-9542-65ff4fb88b47](http://www.aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/Directories/MFT_Training_Programs/Content/Directories/MFT_Training_Programs.aspx?hkey=7ae12d01-323a-4a36-9542-65ff4fb88b47)
- **Counseling, Mental Health Counseling, Counselor Education etc.:** CACREP accreditation through the American Counseling Association  
<http://www.cacrep.org/directory/directory.cfm>
- **Social Work:** Accreditation through the Council on Social Work Education
- <http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/organizations.aspx>

If you are not sure a certain program is accredited, it is acceptable to email the program and ask.

### **I want to stay near Minnesota for graduate school. What are the accredited programs in this area?**

This is a list of programs in Minnesota and neighboring states. These programs are Clinical Mental Health Counseling programs that offer master's degrees. These programs are CACREP accredited. You can also use the searchable links above for more information.

- Andrews University – MI
  - <http://www.andrews.edu/sed/gpc/programs/index.html>
  - Minimum GPA: 2.6
- Ashland University – OH
  - <http://seminary.ashland.edu/>
  - Minimum GPA: 2.75
- Ball State University – IN
  - <http://cms.bsu.edu/>
  - Minimum GPA: 2.75
  - Average GPA: 3.57
  - Average GRE-V: 156
  - Average GRE-Q: 149
  - Average GRE-Analytic Writing: 4.75
- Chicago State University
  - <http://www.csu.edu/cas/psychology/graduate/communityconseling.htm>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
- Cleveland State University
  - <http://www.csuohio.edu/sciences/dept/psychology/graduate/clinical/index.html>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
  - Average GRE: 500 each subscale

- Concordia University Chicago
  - <http://www.cuchicago.edu/>
  - Minimum GPA: 2.85
- Eastern Illinois University
  - <http://www.eiu.edu/counseling/community.php>
  - Minimum GPA: 2.75
- Eastern Michigan University
  - <http://www.emich.edu/coe/lc/>
  - Minimum GPA: 2.75
  - Minimum GRE-V: 450
  - Minimum GRE-Q: 450
  - Minimum GRE Writing: 3.5
- Indiana State University
  - <http://coe.indstate.edu/cdcsep/counseling/mentalhealth.htm>
  - Minimum GPA: 2.75
  - Minimum GRE-V: 450
  - Minimum GRE-Q: 450
- Indiana Wesleyan University
  - <http://www.indwes.edu/Adult-Graduate/MA-Counseling/>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
  - Minimum GRE-V: 146
- John Carroll University – OH
  - <http://sites.jcu.edu/graduatestudies/>
- Kent State University – OH
  - <http://www.kent.edu/ehhs/chds/index.cfm>
- Malone University – OH
  - <http://www.kent.edu/ehhs/chds/index.cfm>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
- MidAmerica Nazarene University – KS
  - <http://www.mnu.edu/graduate/master-of-arts-in-counseling-program.html>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
- North Dakota State University
  - [http://www.ndsu.edu/education/counselor\\_education/](http://www.ndsu.edu/education/counselor_education/)
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
- Northern Illinois University
  - <http://cedu.niu.edu/cahe/counseling/>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
  - Average GPA: 3.76
  - Median GRE: 1145

- Ohio University
  - <http://www.cehs.ohio.edu/academics/che/ce/>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
  - Accepts 30-40 M.Ed. students per year
- Pittsburg State University
  - <http://www.pittstate.edu/department/psychology/graduate-degree-programs.dot#CMH>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
  - Minimum GRE-V: 146
  - Minimum GRE-Q: 141
  - Minimum GRE Writing: 3.5
- Southeastern Oklahoma State University
  - <http://homepages.se.edu/cmhc/>
- University of Iowa
  - <http://www.education.uiowa.edu/>
  - Minimum GPA: 3.0
  - Accepts 15 students per year
- University of Toledo
  - <http://www.utoledo.edu/>
  - Minimum GPA: 2.7
- University of Wisconsin, Stout
  - <http://www.uwstout.edu/programs/msmhc/index.cfm>
- Wright State University – OH
  - [http://www.cehs.wright.edu/academic/human\\_services/mentalhealth/](http://www.cehs.wright.edu/academic/human_services/mentalhealth/)

### **Can I take a year off and then apply?**

Yes, many people choose to take a year off and then apply to graduate school. However, it is quite important that during your time off you are doing everything you can to strengthen your resume. For example, get a mental health oriented job or internship. Work for a volunteer organization like the Peace Corps or Americorps. Teach abroad for a year. Or get involved in a psychology research program at your local university. Study and intensively prepare to take or retake the GRE. Stay in touch with the professors who will write your letters of recommendation. The main disadvantages of taking a year off are losing motivation to go back to school (it is easy to not be in school!) and not making good use of your time. The main advantages are avoiding school burnout and strengthening your resume.

**Can a person get a master's first and then pursue a Ph.D.?**

Yes, this is a fairly typical path. However, most master's programs are "terminal"- meaning you are only there to earn a master's. You will have to apply and get accepted into a doctoral program at the end of your master's degree if you want to pursue more education. If your long term goal is eventually a doctoral degree, it is recommended you find a master's degree in which research is also emphasized, particularly through completion of a master's thesis.

**Can I have a career in psychology without a graduate degree?**

Yes, but if you want a sustainable, high paying career you will have to be highly motivated and actively seek creative job opportunities, usually in the corporate world. Some of our graduates have gone on to work in management and executive positions at corporations such as Target or Delta airlines. Others have branched into areas such as human resources, working in staff positions at various colleges and universities etc. Direct mental health jobs at the bachelor's level are typically low paying and "in the trenches" such as working as floor staff at a psychiatric facility. Such jobs are good starter positions, but they are hard work in the long run. Also, if your long term goal is to conduct counseling (such as one-to-one psychotherapy or group therapy) you will need a graduate degree.

**What is the GRE?**

The GRE is the "Graduate Records Examination." All students, in most fields, who are applying to graduate school must take the GRE to gain admission. It is a standardized test that is similar to the ACT or SAT. It contains three sections, verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing. It is recommended that a student take the GRE at the end of the summer prior to senior year. The GRE requires considerable preparation and practice to achieve high scores. While most graduate schools in psychology take into consideration a number of factors (grades, experiences etc.) a low GRE score will seriously impact one's ability to gain acceptance, so it is important to do as well as possible. Some students choose to take a preparation course, such as those offered by Kaplan. This can be a useful way to get organized and learn more about the GRE. However, many students have been successful without taking a prep course.

**What is the GRE Subject Test and do I need to take it?**

The GRE Psychology Subject test is a separate GRE test designed to specifically measure your expertise on the subject of psychology. While the general GRE is required for almost all graduate programs, the subject test is rarely required. If you find a program that requires the subject test, and the program is high quality and a good fit, then it is worth taking the subject test. Otherwise, many students do not end up needing to take it. This is why it is important to start early in your process of selecting schools you want to apply to.

### **How much do (Grades, research experience, internship experience, GRE, strong letters of recommendation) matter?**

It all matters to some extent. Admission committees will look at all aspects of your application in their decision process. In order to be the best candidate, it is important to be strong in as many areas as you can. However, especially for master's programs, there may be flexibility if one area of your application is not as strong as others. For example, if you have strong research and internship experience and a solid GPA (above 3.5), then a less than stellar GRE score may not be as harmful. This is why it is very important to do everything you can to have a strong application in as many areas as possible. If you know your GPA is not as strong, it places more pressure on your GRE scores and outside experiences. If you know you do not test well on GRE type exams, then your GPA and outside experiences are going to matter more. If you are weak in all areas, it may be difficult to gain admission into quality graduate programs at any level and you may want to consider a year off to strengthen your application.

### **What is graduate school like?**

Graduate education is for students who are serious about receiving training and specialized expertise in their chosen mental health field. To that end, the classes are rigorous and the expectations of students are high. Graduate course work is typically more independent than in undergraduate courses and it is assumed you will be prepared each class. You can expect more papers, more discussion, smaller class sizes, and more in-depth critical thinking. Also, you will be in training to be a mental health professional. This means having practicum and internships seeing clients, receiving one-to-one clinical supervision, and other hands on classes to prepare for this type of specialized work.

### **How should I decide which program is best for me?**

You need to take into consideration a number of factors:

- Program fit for your long term goals
- Cost
- Time commitment
- Location
- Quality of training
- Quality and fit of research program in doctoral programs
- Cohort size (the smaller the better)
- Accreditation

If you have multiple options, this is often a difficult decision. If you can, go visit the campuses and see the programs in person. Remember that this may be your only training that will serve as the basis for your entire future career, so do your best to get a high quality training program.

Hopefully this information is helpful as you begin to plan your future career! If you have further questions, feel free to make an appointment with Dr. Lisa Platt or your advisor.