

What you need to know to apply to graduate programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology

Clinical vs. Counseling Psychology

- **More similar than different.** The distinctions between them have steadily faded in recent years. Both programs generally eligible for the same professional benefits, such as psychology licensure, independent practice, and insurance reimbursement. The American Psychological Association (APA) ceased distinguishing many years ago between clinical and counseling psychology internships: there is one list of accredited internships for both clinical and counseling psychology students. The professional daily activities are similar - both devote the bulk of their day to psychotherapy, teaching, research, and supervision.
- **There are some salient differences.**
 - Clinical psychology programs produce approximately 2,000 doctoral degrees per year (1,300 PhD and 600-700 PsyD), while counseling psychology programs graduate approximately 500 new psychologists per year.
 - **Professional Activities:** Clinical psychologists tend to work with more seriously disturbed populations and are more trained in assessment, whereas counseling psychology graduates work with healthier, less pathological populations and conduct more career and vocational assessment.
 - **Theoretical orientations:** Clinical psychologists more frequently favored the behavioral and psychoanalytic (but not psychodynamic) persuasions, and counseling psychologists the client-centered and humanistic traditions.
 - **Employment Setting:** Counseling psychologists are more frequently employed in university counseling centers, whereas clinical psychologists are more frequently employed in hospital settings.
 - **Research Areas:** Counseling psychology programs more frequently provided research training and mentorship in human diversity (e.g., gender differences, homosexuality, minority/cross-culture, women's studies), and professional issues (e.g., ethics, professional training). Conversely, clinical psychology programs offered, as a group, more research opportunities in psychopathological populations (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, affective disorders, chronic mental illness, personality disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia) and in activities traditionally associated with medical and hospital settings (e.g., pediatric, neuropsychology, pain management, psychophysiology).

Types of Degrees

- **Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology)**
 - More research oriented, but also focused on teaching and practice
 - Dissertation required
 - Have options to teach, research, or engage in practice
 - Typically 5+ years (depending on research)
 - Will need to complete applied internship
- **Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology)**
 - Greater emphasis on practice-related knowledge through internships and clinical training
 - Generally become clinical psychologists who work directly with patients, but options to teach and conduct research may be present
 - Still take a number of research courses – focused on helping you become a consumer of research and to apply research findings to your work
 - May still have to complete a dissertation or a doctoral project
 - 4-5 years (including internship)

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- **MA/MS (Master of Arts/Science)**
 - General or experimental (Ph.D. prep, IO psych, school psych, clinical, counseling, Marriage & Family Therapy, etc.)
 - 2-3 years (including internship)
- **MSW (Master's in social work)**
 - Greater emphasis on social systems and psychosocial variables
- **MD (Medical doctor – specializing in mental disorders – such as psychiatrist)**
 - 4 years (including rotation and residency)

Accredited vs. Non-Accredited

- In essence, accreditation provides some assurance of a program's quality.
- Accreditation is a process that assures the educational community and the general public that an institution or a program has clearly defined and appropriate objectives and maintains conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected. It encourages improvement through continuous self-study and review. It fosters excellence in postsecondary education through the development of principles and guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness. – APA
- If you are studying something other than clinical or counseling psychology (such as neuroscience or cognitive science) than you may not need an accredited program
- Risks for Non-accredited sites:
 - May not qualify for state or federal financial aid in some states
 - May not be eligible for psychology licensure in some states
 - May not qualify for certain internships or job (e.g., VA) – narrows your options
 - Overall, can be a costly mistake if you are not careful and do your research

Admission Requirements: What will graduate programs evaluate you on?

- Generally the same requirements for both clinical or counseling programs
- **Evidence of Ability**
 - Pre-doctorate education
 - Get to know your professors!
 - GPA scores/ Transcripts
 - Take your grades seriously: they matter! Not just Psychology, your overall GPA matters.
 - Typical requirements:
 - 3.5 GPA for Doctorate
 - 3.0 GPA for Master's
 - If you have a “blemish” grade-wise
 - Try to balance out with other courses/training so it does not look like a systemic problem
 - Think of how to frame it within your “narrative” (personal statements) of how you have grown. Stress your stronger GPA in upper-level or psychology classes
 - Take courses that will strengthen your application
 - Graduate Records Exam (GRE) scores (www.ets.org)
 - General required; Subject as needed or required (both have a fee to sit for the exam)
 - General test includes 3 sections: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Analytical Writing
 - Scores good for 5 years post-test date
 - Most graduate programs have cutoff scores
 - Take it seriously – it matters more than it should

- It's not the kind of test you're used to – study months in advance. Don't cram!
- Make an advanced plan of when to take it – consider a training course, schedule studying in advance, and plan to take a second time if needed
- **Fit with the program (“match”)**
 - Previous research &/or professional experiences
 - Detailed in your Curriculum Vitae (CV), Personal statement, and letters
 - CV: a detailed document highlighting your professional and academic history
 - Applicable Sections: Education, Awards & Honors Research Experience, Presentations/Publications, Clinical or Volunteer work, Relevant Work Experience, Teach Experience, Professional Affiliations and Service, Relevant coursework
 - Personal Statement:
 - Serves to indicate how well the student's future interests coincide with the program's goals
 - Develop your narrative. Graduate programs are looking for people with a sustained interest and specific passion.
 - Discuss who did you get on your path? What was your “ah-ha” moment? What skills have you developed? Even if you have experiences that seem disparate, there is always a story that can fit together.
 - Avoid revealing personal struggles, family struggles, or mental health problems in these statements. Or if you do, do it eloquently.
 - If you have a weak spot in your application, you can address it here. Note the issue and reframe into a strength.
 - Get help, revise, and customize! Stand out amongst the crowd!
 - **For research (particularly for PhD programs):**
 - Depth is better than breadth (i.e., better to have less experience with more depth) – look for opportunities that fit with your graduate school plan
 - It's okay to change paths but be thoughtful about selecting labs that are a good fit.
 - Best to have designed or contributed to a project in a meaningful way – take initiative. Don't just be a lab worker – find ways to take ownership of a project. Grunt work is expected!
 - The more experience you have doing what your graduate program expects, the better!
 - Research methods and topics for Ph.D. topic working with a faculty member
 - Understand the research concepts and questions
 - Publications are golden. Aim for 1-3 prior to graduate school (do not have to be first author but write should comment on your specific role in the publication production).
- **For Fit:**
 - Figure out what questions/areas you're interested in – narrow down
 - Research potential programs like crazy – what programs fit your interests? Who are good advisors in the field?
 - Learn more about your field – reach papers, journal articles, keep notes, consults advisors/mentors, attend a conference in the field, and send emails to potential advisors before applying

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- Choosing a school – consider size of study body in relation to the size of faculty, facilities (library, housing, study space, etc.), demographics of student body, and enrollment and class size. Make a site visit (research professors before visit)
- **Evidence of motivation to succeed**
 - Previous research &/or professional experiences
 - Any relevant experience helps!
 - Choice of undergraduate electives
 - Challenge yourself with more advanced elective that compliment your graduate school interests (vs. easy courses that do not enhance your application)
 - Extracurricular involvement
 - Extracurricular research/professional experiences show an intrinsic motivation to learn more
 - Involvement in extracurricular clubs (e.g., Psi Chi, Psychology Club, etc.) shows further interest in pursuing psychological goals
 - Affiliations good for networking! This will serve you well long-term!
- **Letters of recommendation**
 - Ideally from three faculty members who know you well and are in related fields; a fourth letter can sometimes be submitted
 - Get to know your professors well
 - Should be someone in your academic/research context who can comment on your academic accomplishments and interpersonal style
 - Best bet – work with someone closely on a project or research setting
 - Talk to them before/after class, go to office hours/set up meetings. Go in with an agenda and be prepared – professors are busy people - make sure you use your time wisely.
 - Be curious – Ask questions!
 - Discuss specifics you want addressed in your letters.
 - Make it easy for your professor:
 - Be well organized (order by deadline)
 - Provide pre-addressed stamped envelopes
 - Give them plenty of time to complete by the deadline
 - Allow at least one month for your letter writers to prepare your recommendation letter. Keep them up to date. Give them a specific deadline, don't be surprised if they use the entire timeline, and provide reminders.
 - Include CV and Statement of Purpose
 - Use Reference Letter Checklist
- **Other assessments** (e.g. interviews, essays, Statement of Purpose, etc.)
 - Convey your long-and short-range goals, including plans after graduation.
 - Present your personal abilities, educational background.
 - Describe the significance of your experience.
 - Give concrete evidence of your knowledge, competence, and motivation in your field.
 - Demonstrate your writing ability and communication skills.
 - Provide your reasons for pursuing a graduate degree in your field and in that particular university.
 - Answer the application questions completely.
 - Acknowledge a faculty member you want to work with.
 - Describe accomplishments.
 - Choose words carefully.

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- Get to know your instructors. Building a good relationship with faculty is important for obtaining strong recommendations later on.
- Get involved in extracurricular or volunteering experiences.
- **Sophomore Year**
 - Start planning elective coursework
 - Be mindful of your GPA
 - Find more psychology topics that interest you
 - Identify graduate programs that train in these areas
 - Contact these programs to learn more about their requirements
 - Become involved in a lab/research or clinical experience or volunteering
- **Junior Year**
 - Keep watching GPA
 - Join lab/research project or set up professional experiences/internships
 - Begin preparing for GRE and other required tests
 - Register for and take GRE in the spring semester.
- **Summer between Junior & Senior Year**
 - Continue gaining research or professional experience (develop independent research project with your faculty member, if possible)
 - Contact graduate programs for more detailed information (e.g., application, packets, financial aid forms, etc.).
 - Research faculty members in potential graduate programs to identify complementary interests
 - Make contact with faculty you may be interested in working with.
 - Plan visits to programs you are interested in (if possible)
 - Begin preparing CV
 - Identify who you will ask to write your reference letters
- **Senior Year**
 - Continue research/professional experience (conduct independent research if possible)
 - Narrow list of schools to apply to
 - Take GRE if you haven't done so already
 - Ask faculty members to write your letters of reference
 - Request official transcripts from all undergraduate institutions (do early as registrar office typically get overloaded with requests in the fall semester)
 - Request GRE scores are sent to program - it can take up to 6 weeks for ETS to get them to the schools; allow enough time before the deadline to have them resent if needed
 - Write your personal statement
 - Complete and submit applications
 - Most deadlines are between December 15 and January 15, so start preparing early!
 - Apply for ~10 programs to increase chances

The takeaway

- **“When you’re gathering information about particular programs, it is important you understand what training and education the program provides so you are aware of what skills and abilities you will acquire and how those prepare you for a career after you get your doctorate. There is no “best” doctoral degree in psychology: There are, however, “best-fits” for your academic and professional goals.”** (Michalski & Fowler, 2016)
- Use all resources as your disposal!

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- Focus on your strengths.
- Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite!
- Sell yourself! Ask a professor to read and provide feedback!
- **AVOID:** Being modest, Typos, Slang, References to childhood, Attempts at the profound, Humor or cleverness, Mentions of problems, and Being plain or cliché (e.g., the reason I want to go to graduate school is...I am a people person)
- **Remember there are MANY extraneous factors that you cannot know about our control!**
 - Don't take it personally. Keep moving forward and find your niche!

The competition is fierce!

- <10% of psych majors enter doctoral programs. Master's programs are a little less competitive.
- **Acceptance Rate:** There is a 40-41 % acceptance rate of students who apply to PsyD programs while only 11-15% is admitted to PhD programs.
 - Ph.D. programs typically get 300-600 applications in a year and take 6-8 applicants
 - Professional Psychology programs less competitive, but may be costlier due to less access to funding, which mean higher loans for you
- **Financial Assistance:** 84% of PhD students receive full financial assistance in comparison to 20 % of PsyD students.
 - Other forms of financial aid:
 - Grants/scholarships which do not require repayment
 - Scholarships: check out www.fastweb.monster.com
 - Wages, which are provided in return for work
 - Loans, which require repayment
 - 75% students finance education with loans
- **Cost to apply** – varies, generally \$50/application
- **Some people have to apply to graduate school multiple years in a row.** That's okay don't take it personally.
- **It is more and more common to have to take 1-3 years off in between undergrad and grad school.** If this is the case, work in a lab or on a project that fits with your ultimate academic interests.
 - **Potential benefits of waiting:** Work in related profession and decide if field is right for you. Earn money to help pay for education. Gain work experience which may assist admissions chances. Relax before the rigors of Graduate school. Mature
 - **Potential costs of waiting:** May lose some reading, writing, and analytical skills. May be difficult to motivate yourself to go back to school (may indicate your desire was not as strong as you had thought). The longer you wait, the longer it will take to finish. Some schools have a deferment policy. May lose contact with references: Go ahead and secure letters of recommendation before you leave undergraduate institution.
- **Will you get rich going to graduate school?** Likely not, but you can earn a decent salary. See APA.org for salary surveys.

Broad Timetable

- Overall, be organized and plan ahead. Start early!
- **Freshman Year**
 - Develop strong learning habits. Take your coursework seriously. Prepare for every class and be active in discussions. Build strong study habits.
 - Make notes on psychology topics that interest you.

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CV: <http://www.socialpsychology.org/vitatemplate.htm>

<http://psych.hanover.edu/handbook/vita2.html>

Michalski, D.S. & Fowler, G. (2016). Doctoral degrees in psychology: How are they different, or not so different? Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psn/2016/01/doctoral-degrees.aspx>

Norcross, J. C., (2000). Clinical Versus Counseling Psychology: What's the Diff? *Eye on Psi Chi*, 5(1), 20-22.

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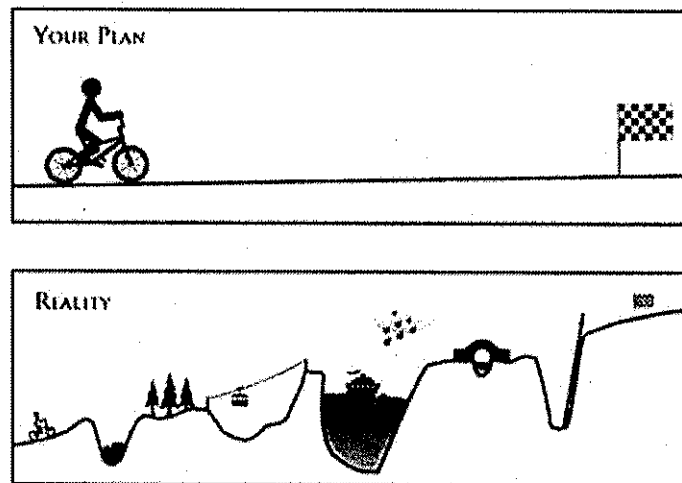
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- Learn from the people around you – do not go into this process alone!
- It is important to consider your interests, strengths, and career goals.
- **You may ask yourself the following questions:**
 - What are my career goals? What do you envision doing for a long time?
 - What areas do I enjoy the most (Social, Cognitive, Developmental, Clinical Science (PhD), Neuropsychology, etc.)?
 - Do I enjoy doing research, conducting interventions and therapies, or both?
 - Do I plan to teach in the academe or go into clinical practice?
 - What were the subjects and courses that I took in preparation for my doctorate degree?
 - Which subjects did I feel good about and excelled at the most?
 - What are the PsyD/ PhD graduates doing? Am I interested in their jobs?
 - What are my financial needs? Which program can I afford the most?
 - Is the program APA-accredited?

REACHING GOALS



Resources

<https://www.apa.org/education/grad/applying.aspx>

<https://www.apa.org/education/grad/faqs.aspx>

<https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psn/2016/01/doctoral-degrees.aspx>

<https://www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/about/program-choice.aspx>

<https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psn/2016/09/graduate-school-applications.aspx>

<http://www.psychgrad.org/>