

## GRADUATE SCHOOL OPTIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGY MAJORS

**This section will help you learn about graduate programs in psychology, education, and social work that will prepare you for work in psychology and psychology-related careers.**

**Note: If you want to help people with problems (do "counseling"), you are not limited to careers that require graduate degrees *in psychology*. Psychology-related graduate programs such as education and social work are typically happy to have students who majored in psychology as undergraduates. Too, in my experience, they often have less stringent admission standards than do psychology programs. Thus, if you're like most undergraduates who won't have the necessary GRE scores and GPAs to be admitted to master's or doctoral programs in clinical or counseling psychology, don't despair! You should *definitely* consider these alternative educational pathways to the counseling "mountaintop."**

At the master's and doctoral level, education becomes increasingly specialized. Thus, to do the work you want to do, it's *essential* to obtain a degree that will prepare you to do so. To ensure that you make the correct decision in this regard, you must be very clear about your career goals at this level. In addition, you need to know *for sure* that the degree you pursue will prepare you to do what you want. (If you get in the wrong degree program, you can waste time, money, and also end up unprepared to do what you had hoped.)

There are many factors to be considered as you make decisions about your graduate school options. You will probably have to review the information in this section a number of times before it begins to make sense. Nonetheless, your future happiness and income are riding on it, so stick with it. *Choose a graduate program on the basis of considerations that are important to you, not others.* Just because your faculty mentor has a PhD doesn't mean that you need to get one to be happy or for your mentor to respect you. Get the degree that meets *your* needs. Choose a program that offers the level of education you want (master's, doctorate), that is compatible with your orientation (scientific, practical; behavioral, cognitive, etc.), and that offers the coursework and training to prepare you to do what *you* want to do (individual, family, group therapy; testing; working with adults, children, etc.).

I will provide some general guidelines to help you understand some of the major degree programs and their similarities and differences. Nonetheless, because of the detailed and technical nature of this information and because so much is riding on your making informed decisions, I strongly advise you to work with a faculty member who knows about the various degree options that are relevant to the work in which you're interested. (As you may have learned, some faculty know more than others and some are more willing than others to share what they know; it's a good idea to keep your ears open and to shop around.)

### **MA, MS, MEd, MSW, PhD, PsyD, EdD: What Does It All Mean?**

To understand the various degree options, you need to know some important points about academic degrees. You're probably aware that degrees have different "names" (the technical name for this is degree nomenclature), but you probably don't know what these are or what they

can tell you. Just as there are a number of degrees offered at the undergraduate level--e.g., bachelor of arts ( BA) and bachelor of science (BS), there are a number of different types of graduate degrees;

The nomenclature for degrees contains two important pieces of information. One tells you the *educational level* of the degree: "B" for a bachelor's degree (beginning level; 4 years); "M" for a master's degree (intermediate level; 1-2 years beyond the bachelor's degree); and "D" for a doctoral degree (highest level; 3-5 years beyond the bachelor's degree). The second piece of information contained in degree nomenclature is the *discipline* in which the degree is awarded. Here things can get complicated, so I'll try to keep to the essential points. Those academic disciplines (majors) that deal with basic principles vs. the applications of knowledge are classified as the liberal arts (and sciences). These include psychology, sociology, political science, history, biology, physics, English, etc. Disciplines (majors) such as education, nursing, and business teach the applications of the basic principles of knowledge. Because the various disciplines and their educational requirements are different, it's important to distinguish among them. Thus, all *masters* degrees in the *liberal arts and sciences* disciplines give degrees titled master of *arts* (MA) and/or master of *science* (MS). Often, an MA indicates that a thesis is required, whereas an M.S. indicates that it is not; however, this is not always so. (Note the correspondence with the bachelor of arts and the bachelor of science degrees at the undergraduate level.) All *doctoral* degrees in liberal arts disciplines (psychology, biology, etc.) give the doctor of *philosophy* degree (PhD).\*

\* The PsyD degree is awarded *only* in psychology and *only* in the "professional" areas of clinical and counseling psychology--not, for example, in subfields like social or developmental psychology. The major difference between the PsyD and the PhD is the emphasis on research. The PhD degree prepares clinical psychologists to be researchers (as well as practitioners); whereas, the PsyD prepares clinicians to be consumers of research (as well as practitioners). Thus, PhD programs require students to take more courses in research design and statistics and to conduct research compared to PsyD programs. In addition, PsyD programs place considerable emphasis on the provision of psychological services. If you're interested in a detailed discussion of the differences between the PsyD and PhD degrees, read the following article:

Scheirer, C.J. (1983). Professional schools: Information for students and advisors. *Teaching of Psychology, 10*, 11-15.

To further complicate matters, more distinctions are made among the degrees in the *applied* disciplines. We'll consider only those fields of greatest interest to psychology majors. In *social work*, there is a master of social work degree (MSW) and a doctor of social work degree (DSW)--and, sometimes, a PhD In *education*, the master of education degree is either the MEd or the EdM; the doctor of education degree is the EdD. In *business*, the master's degree is the master's of business administration (MBA); the doctorate, the DBA (or, sometimes, the PhD). If you want to explore this further, you can use your college catalog to see how the degrees of your instructors match their disciplines.

## **A Master's Degree or a Doctoral Degree?**

Are there any practical reasons for choosing a master's degree or a doctoral degree? Yes! *Doctoral* degrees will enable you to earn more money, to work in positions with more responsibility (and status), and to have more independence. Of course, doctoral programs are hard to get into, and take more time and effort to complete--typically at least 4-6 years beyond the bachelor's degree. A *master's* degree gives you more occupational advantages than a bachelor's degree, but fewer than a doctoral degree. On the other hand, master's programs are easier to get into than doctoral programs; they are also less difficult and take less time to complete (typically 1-2 years beyond the bachelor's degree).

To determine the relative difficulty of the various degree programs (and departments), you need to consider several factors. First, you need to compare *admissions standards* (how hard is it to get *in?*). Second, you also need to compare the *graduation requirements* in the programs in which you're interested (how hard is it to *graduate?*). Is there a foreign language requirement? written comprehensive and/or oral exam? a thesis? a dissertation?

## **Some Useful Distinctions Between Degrees in Clinical Psychology, Education, and Clinical Social Work**

To help you understand why you might lean toward a degree in psychology, social work, or education, I'll try to make some distinctions among the graduate programs in these fields.

**Psychology.** In psychology graduate programs, you will learn a lot about research methods and statistics and specialize in a subfield of psychology: developmental, social, personality, neuropsychology, clinical, health, etc. (See "[Areas of Specialization in Psychology.](#)") If your subfield is clinical or counseling psychology, you will also get a lot of practical experience in conducting psychotherapy and psychological testing.

Typically, what distinguishes psychology from education and social work is the strong research focus--remember your courses in research methods and statistics? Thus, most master's and doctoral psychology programs in clinical psychology will require coursework in research. This research emphasis serves two primary functions. First, because psychology is an empirical discipline, psychologists must understand research methodology to keep up with developments in the field (by reading professional journals). Second, psychologists and psychology students conduct research to advance knowledge in the field. Thus, doctoral programs require a dissertation (a major research project of publishable quality), and some master's programs do as well. If you select a master's program that requires a thesis, you will need these skills to conduct the research for your thesis. (A thesis is a research project that may or may not be of publishable quality and is highly desirable if you are planning to go on for a PhD) In a non-thesis program, you will need the research skills to understand the research articles you read for your classes and papers and to keep up with developments in the discipline after you graduate.

In my experience, most psychology majors have relatively little interest in research. (I don't mean this as an indictment, only a description of reality as I see it.) If you are one of these students, you should think seriously about going on in a field other than psychology (and should

definitely rule out a PhD in psychology--although a PsyD may be an option--see Halgin (1986) below). If research is not your cup of tea, graduate programs in education and social work may be much more to your liking. For additional information on this idea, I would urge you to read the article listed below; it describes a number of alternative career and educational options to traditional clinical psychology, as well as strategies for increasing the the likelihood of being admitted to competitive doctoral programs in clinical psychology.

Halgin, R. P. (1986). Advising undergraduates who wish to become clinicians. *Teaching of Psychology*, 13(1), pp. 7-12.

An essential resource on graduate programs in psychology is the APA publication, *Graduate Study in Psychology* (see "[Books on Graduate School for Psychology Majors](#)"). At the back of the book, there is an alphabetical list of all of the subfields in psychology; under each heading, you will find listed almost all of the institutions that offer degrees (both master's and doctoral) in that subfield. Once you locate the schools you're interested in, you can read the details about admission requirements, application deadlines, degree requirements, program goals, faculty/student statistics, tuition costs, and financial aid.

Some subfields in psychology also publish their own directories. These directories include the *Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology*, *Graduate Training Programs in Industrial/Organizational Psychology and Related Fields*, and *Neuroscience Training Programs in North America* (see "[Books on Graduate School for Psychology Majors](#)").

Additional useful references on the topic of graduate programs and their admission criteria, etc. include the following:

Mayne, T. J., Norcross, J. C., & Sayette, M. A. (1994a). Admission requirements, acceptance rates, and financial assistance in clinical psychology programs. *American Psychologist*, 49, 605-611.

Norcross, J. C., Mayne, T. J., & Sayette, M. A. (1996). Graduate study in psychology: 1992-1993. *American Psychologist*, 51, 631-643.

**Education.** Graduate programs in counselor education place less emphasis on research than do psychology programs--including those in clinical and counseling psychology. At the master's level, you probably won't have to do a thesis; at the doctoral level, you may have to complete a dissertation, although some programs allow students to substitute a major theoretical review paper. (For this level of detail, you will need to review the degree requirements for individual programs.) In education programs, students also typically get less coursework and practical experience in psychological assessment than do students in psychology programs. Moreover, preparation in this area is usually limited to educational testing--e.g., occupational interest inventories. Counselor education programs will require you to take courses and have supervised experiences in the appraisal and treatment of psychological problems. Thus, if you want to do

counseling, but are not interested in doing psychological testing or research, a degree in counselor education (*agency counseling* or *school counseling*) may be just what you want.

If you're interested in learning to use a battery of psycho-educational tests to determine why a child isn't performing well in school, *school psychology* may be the career for you. Because school psychologists also usually design programs to help children perform better (based on the results of testing and interviews with the child, teacher, and parents), they take courses in counseling and behavior modification as well as in educational, intellectual, and personality assessment. My understanding is that an independent research project (thesis) is not required for this degree. A minimum of a master's degree is required to become a school psychologist, but many states require school psychologists to have training beyond a master's degree (EdS or education specialist's degree); some require the doctorate (PhD).

The APA publication, *Graduate Study in Psychology* (see "[Books on Graduate School for Psychology Majors](#)") lists *APA-accredited* programs in school psychology, educational psychology, and counseling psychology that offer *education* degrees (as well as those offering psychology degrees).

**Clinical Social Work.** Unlike graduate programs in counselor education, school psychology, and clinical/counseling psychology, social work programs will *not* prepare you to conduct psychological testing. Otherwise, clinical social workers take coursework and practica in the diagnosis and treatment of psychological problems, among other topics. Thirty years ago, social work education tended to be rather Freudian, but I don't know if this is still the case. Frankly, I think there is much to be said for a degree in social work. The training is typically good; the degree enables you to work in a variety of settings (hospitals, schools, community mental health centers, etc.); and one can obtain a *license* in clinical social work at the master's level in all states. (See next section, "What Are Licenses and Certificates?")

If you want to know what institutions offer graduate programs in social work, consult the booklet, *Summary Information on Master of Social Work Programs*, published by the National Association of Social Workers. (See "[Books on Graduate School for Psychology Majors](#)"). You can order a copy by contacting the National Association of Social Workers at the address given in the section, "[Master's- and Doctoral-level Careers in Psychology and Related Areas](#)."

### **What Are Licenses and Certificates?**

A license is a "quality control" credential awarded by the state--not an educational institution. A license gives you legal authority to work independently--i.e., you don't need to be supervised by someone else. This means that you can have a private practice--see clients on your own, receive insurance payments, and so forth. Recall that physicians, dentists, and veterinarians are licensed. The use of the title "psychologist" is regulated by state licensing boards. That is, only individuals who have met the requirements for a psychology license may put themselves forward to the public as "psychologists." Similarly, licensed "psychologists" are prohibited by law from putting themselves forth to the public as a licensed social worker and vice versa. A major reason for these regulations about the practice of psychology, social work, etc. is to protect the public from those who are not competent to treat those in need of assistance.

Although the requirements for a *psychology* license vary from state to state, they typically involve the following: (1) a doctoral degree in a field of study that is "primarily psychological in nature," (2) one year of supervised clinical work during graduate school, (3) one year of post-doctoral supervised clinical work, and (4) a passing score on a standardized examination. Some states also require an oral examination once the written exam is passed.

For many people, the fact that *clinical social workers* with only a master's degree can be licensed in all 50 states is a major advantage of the MSW degree. You should note, however, that managed health care is driving many licensed mental health workers out of private practice because they cannot compete with the health maintenance organizations (HMOs). To learn more about this, talk with a clinical psychologist in your department.

In many states, individuals with *master's* degrees in clinical psychology (MA/MS) and agency counseling (MEd) cannot be licensed. And even in those states where they are licensable, they are never licensed as a "psychologist" because they don't meet the minimum requirement of a doctoral degree. When individuals with master's degrees in psychology are licensed, they usually carry a title like "psychological associate" or "psychological assistant" to distinguish them from licensed "psychologists." Moreover, their work is limited to certain activities--psychological testing, for example. In Georgia, those with a master's degree in psychology (and agency counseling, I believe) are eligible for two licenses: a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) and a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). *Of course, individuals with master's degrees who aren't licensed are still able to work in a variety of mental health settings (community mental health centers, etc.) where supervision from licensed individuals is available.*

In some states, those with master's degrees in clinical psychology (and agency counseling, I believe) may be eligible for *certificates*. Certificates are quality-control credentials awarded by professional organizations--not a state or an educational institution. They certify that a person has had courses and supervised practical experience in *particular areas* such as drug addiction or family therapy. Although they do not grant an individual the authority to work on one's own (private practice), certificates are often necessary to get jobs where specialized skills are needed. For example, in Georgia, one has a much better chance at getting a job in the addictions area if one is a Certified Addiction Counselor (CAC).

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APA-style reference for this page:

Lloyd, M. A. (1997, August 28). Graduate school options for psychology majors. [Online]. Available: <http://www.psywww.com/careers/options.htm>.