

## Guide to Applying to Graduate School in Psychology

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This guide is my attempt to answer many of the questions that are often asked about getting into graduate school. If you are reading this it is likely you are getting ready to graduate with an undergraduate degree in psychology and trying to decide what to do with the rest of your life. Naturally, you are having thoughts of graduate school. It seems easy – apply to grad school, get in, finish your program and then start your career as a psychologist. Unfortunately, the road to graduate school in psychology is a bit more complicated than this. This guide is intended to make the path to psychology graduate school a bit less complicated and mysterious.

### Career Prospects in Psychology

Given the current economic situation it is sometimes hard to find something positive to say about a career in psychology except that at some point things will have to get better. Academic psychologists are having a much harder time finding tenure track positions, while clinicians are seeing less people coming to their offices for psychotherapy and other services. That said, it is rare to find a psychologist who is altogether unemployed. There are jobs available but they will be harder to find.

### Clinical Careers

With regard to clinical work, Dr. Neil Rocklin, an experienced psychologist who has been in the field for 35+ years has this to say:

*“Focusing only on careers in psychology applied to clinical settings, I think that the future is bright but unpredictable. Gazing into my crystal ball, mental health service six to ten years from now will be in great demand. Changes to access as a consequence of legislation regarding parity and awareness of mental illness will push the demand. Most providers will be masters trained clinicians. Those with doctorates will have superior training and will perform roles other than providers. Specialists, those trained in forensics, neuropsych, artificial intelligence (and something else that I have no way of visualizing but which will occur as we journey further into the 21st century) will have more income potential. Generally, the income will remain comparable to today’s standards. Masters clinicians will be under six figures with doctors having the potential to be in excess of six figures. The income isn’t comparable to business and will never be, but the motivation for working in the field must be fueled by one’s passion for understanding human behavior and extending that knowledge as well as helping others. Success was, is, and will be a consequence of skill obtained through training, motivation and flexibility. If you want to work hard you can make more money. If you choose to work less, it will still be a rewarding profession. Affordability becomes a decision for the individual.”*

## Research Careers

If you are thinking of going to graduate school in order to be a research psychologist it will also be helpful to think of a general specialty in psychology as well as specific and unique lines of work. This may mean doing work on something that is of particular interest to business or government or working with a specific population of people. Future psychologists will have to be much smarter about directing their careers rather than just accidentally falling into areas like so many of us in the past. Research on the brain and behavior is exploding now with the advent of technologies like magnetic resonance imaging. There will continue to be good jobs for psychologists involved in human factors research as well as cognitive science areas that intersect with the computer and information technology industries.

## Return on Investment

It is important to be somewhat hard-nosed about your career choices and to consider the return on your investment in graduate school. You will invest a significant amount of time and money to gain your graduate degree and this needs to make sense from a financial point of view. You will have to ask yourself some hard questions. For instance is it worth spending over \$100,000 to get a doctorate in Clinical Psychology in order to get a job that pays \$50,000 a year? Are you willing to go to graduate school for 4 years and then complete a major dissertation research project only to find out that you have to take 5 part time teaching positions to barely scrape together enough to live on? Is it worthwhile spending \$60,000 to get a counseling masters degree, knowing that it will be at least 2 years before your practice will break even? Would you be better off going to law school, working for a corporation, or becoming a dentist? What kind of lifestyle do you want – a 9-5 job with stable hours and benefits, working for yourself in private practice but with no job security? Do you want to get married, start a family, travel? While it is difficult it is important to think through all of these things BEFORE you apply to graduate school. Do your best to make sure that graduate school is something you want to do before you commit your heart, soul, and bank account. You don't have to be perfectly sure or know exactly what you want to do. But thinking through these questions will make the necessary leap of faith a little less daunting.

## What Area of Psychology Do I Choose?

Undergraduate psychology programs tend to be generalized in that you learn something about the main fields of psychology. Graduate school is different. Most graduate programs are focused in a specialized field. Some of the main specialty areas are typically – Clinical, Counseling, Cognition, Developmental, Educational, Experimental, Industrial, Neuroscience, Organizational, and Social. However, there are many sub-specialties within these areas and a number of cross-specialty programs. Hopefully at this point in your psychology training you will have some idea of which main specialty you are interested in pursuing and possibly even which sub-specialty.

## Research vs. Professional Psychology

If you don't know which area of psychology you want to pursue in grad school then you have some homework to do. Perhaps the largest distinction among psychology graduate programs is whether they are preparing you for a career as a researcher or a professional psychologist, or both. Research psychologists typically hold positions in universities, corporations or the government and spend most of their time engaged in psychological research. They may also teach at the university level, or even do some consulting, but by and large conducting research is the most important aspect of their job. If you go to graduate school in fields like Developmental, Educational, Experimental, Industrial, Neuroscience, or Social Psychology you are more than likely preparing for a career as a researcher.

Professional Psychology involves some sort of psychological practice where you interact with others in a way that utilizes your expertise to affect them constructively. Professional psychologists may work for the government, academic institutions, health care facilities, corporations, or be in private practice. Professional psychologists usually have graduate training in Clinical, Counseling, School, or Organizational Psychology.

There are also careers in psychology where you might be both a researcher and professional psychologist. And in fact, a career in psychology allows for a lot of flexibility in this. For instance, you sometimes find social psychologists that make a living primarily by consulting, or clinicians who spend all their time doing research.

While all things are possible with a career in psychology it is possible to make some generalizations for the sake of simplicity. The first is that if you want to have a career doing both research and professional service an academic career is a good choice. Most of your professors who have trained in Clinical, School, or Organizational Psychology have made this choice. They have likely had some experience providing psychological services but have decided to also teach and conduct research. Most tenure track academic positions (i.e. positions that carry the promise of security of employment) require faculty members to publish their research. So even if a faculty member was trained in an area of professional psychology he or she is required to conduct research to keep their position. Other clinicians or organizational psychologists may conduct research part time because they enjoy it, or even because their institution requires them to participate in research projects. This is true for many psychologists working in hospital or other health care settings.

It is very important to have some idea of whether or not you want to a research or professional career in psychology before you choose a graduate program, as each type of program emphasizes and trains different skill sets. Research psychology programs require a great deal of advanced statistics, research methods courses, and applied experience conducting research under supervision. This applied experience typically entails working with one or more faculty members to conduct research, write papers, apply for grants, etc. Professional psychology programs will emphasize training in psychological interaction such as conducting psychotherapy or organizational consultation. You will be required to

complete many thousands of hours of psychological interaction under close supervision. Two excellent ways you can get a sense of whether you want to go into a research or professional area of psychology is to work on a research project with a professor as an undergraduate and to do an undergraduate clinical internship. You should ask your professors about opportunities to gain these types of experiences.

If you are thinking about going into a research area of psychology you should ask your professors in that area for advice about getting into graduate school. Some of what I say about applying to professional programs will not apply for research programs.

### Masters vs. Doctoral Degree Programs

Once you have decided on an area of psychology the next step is to decide whether to pursue a doctorate or masters degree. In general, it is my opinion that it is better to pursue a doctorate. Most (but not all) research jobs will require the PhD, and the better professional psychology careers will go to those with a doctoral degree. Some of my colleagues disagree with me and see a masters degree as a good option. This is because they see a lack of significant difference in job opportunities between masters and PhD holders. This is especially true for jobs that provide direct counseling or social work services. It does seem likely that most jobs that directly provide counseling or social work services will not require a doctorate in the future. In my opinion, however, these jobs are likely to be low paying and without much opportunity for career advancement.

There are, of course, some instances when getting a masters degree makes sense. The first and most common scenario is when you want to pursue a doctorate in some area of psychology, but you will be hindered from getting into a graduate program because your grade point average and/or GRE scores are too low. In this case it makes sense to go to a masters program that can better prepare you to enter a doctoral program. You will have a chance to bring up your grades and hopefully study harder for the GREs. The risk with this strategy is that even after getting a masters degree you still might not get into a doctoral program in your chosen area. It is important, therefore, if you choose this strategy to make sure the masters program you are entering has a good track record of getting its graduates into doctoral programs.

A common question is what grade point average (gpa) and GRE scores are needed to successfully apply for a doctoral program. Unfortunately there is no set answer to this question. It depends on the specialty area sought, the status of school you want to get into, the status of your undergraduate program, and (perhaps the most intangible thing) how interesting you are as a person to a specific program. It is possible, however, to make some sweeping generalizations about the probability of getting into a doctoral program based on gpa and GRE scores. These are a bit different depending on whether or not you are seeking entrance to a university or a professional school based doctoral program.

University-based doctoral programs will provide you with some kind of support for your doctoral study. This support can range from student loans all the way to a full ride

scholarship that also covers living expenses (Since university systems have been suffering financially over the past few years the level of support for doctoral students has decreased and students have had to rely more of loans than in the past.). As might be expected, university doctoral programs are typically harder to get in to than professional school doctoral programs. Universities tend to want to train researchers, even in areas of professional psychology such as Clinical Psychology. They take far fewer students per year and, as mentioned, usually offer some sort of support for their doctoral students. This results in a lot of competition for a small number of positions in doctoral programs. Again, this is different among the different psychological specialties. For instance a PhD in Social Psychology make accept 10 students out of 100 applicants, while a PhD in Clinical Psychology may take 5 out of 700 (the university-based clinical programs are now harder to get into than medical school even though they seek to primarily produce clinical researchers).

### GPA and GRE Scores Needed for Doctoral Programs

For a research doctorate a rule of thumb is that an applicant should have at least a gpa of at least 3.4 and decent GRE scores (80<sup>th</sup> percentile or above) – especially in the quantitative test. It is possible that an excellent GRE score can mitigate a lower gpa. The reverse is not true, as the GRE scores are seen as a more objective measure of intellectual performance than the gpa which might be subject to grade inflation at a particular campus.

For freestanding professional schools (which I address in detail below), which tend to train students in Clinical, Counseling, or Organizational Psychology, the minimum gpa might drop to a 3.2 for fully accredited APA approved schools and perhaps even a 3.0 for non APA approved programs. Likewise GRE score expectations are not as high and there is less emphasis on the quantitative scores.

### Masters Programs

Many students want to apply only to masters programs. This may be due to low gpa, lack of preparation to take the GRE, fear of the GRE, lack of confidence in their ability to complete a doctoral program etc. Some students want the quickest route to a practitioner license, usually a Marriage & Family Therapy license. In my opinion these are not great reasons to enter a masters program. As mentioned above a good reason to pursue a masters is to be better prepared to enter a doctoral program. Hopefully, by planning in advance, students can be prepared as undergraduates to go directly to a doctoral program. However, if you choose to complete a masters degree as preparation for getting into a doctoral program there are some things to consider:

1. Make sure the program you enter has a good track record of getting its students into doctoral programs. Many doctoral programs only accept students with a bachelor's degree. They don't like to accept students half-trained by another institution into their programs. Some masters granting programs have good

reputations for turning out well-prepared students. Many of these programs are known to doctoral granting programs. Make sure you go to one of these programs.

2. Make sure your program is clearly understood as a terminal masters. What this means is that your program only gives a masters or is clearly separate from any doctoral programs at your institution. This is important most doctoral programs will give failing doctoral students a masters when they are kicking them out of the program. You don't want to be applying for doctoral programs and be thought of as someone who flunked out of another doctoral program. This is the 'kiss of death' and your chances of getting into a quality doctoral program will be very low. (If you have been kicked out of a doctoral program but still want to complete your doctorate you need some counseling and advice on strategy. Your situation is not impossible and there is still hope! One of the best and smartest psychologists I know survived being driven out of his first doctoral program. He was able to get into another program where he did exceedingly well.)
3. If possible choose the thesis option to complete your masters degree. Some programs will give you a choice between writing a thesis and taking a comprehensive exam. Writing a thesis is a great opportunity to work on your writing skills. Not only will you get to improve this valuable skill, you will have a long written piece of work that might be publishable in some form. Having a written thesis and/or some published work will make you look good to doctoral programs.

A personal anecdote: I did a terminal masters in psychology at Sonoma State University in California. The reason I chose to do a masters was that my undergraduate degree was in biology. I had taken only one class in psychology as an undergraduate and wanted to do the masters as a bridge between disciplines. This is a good option for those who have non-psychology undergraduate degrees but who want to go to graduate schools in psychology. Many psychology masters degree programs, like the one I attended at Sonoma, require very little in the way of undergraduate psychology prerequisites.

The masters program at Sonoma was very good. Nevertheless when I was done, I found many doctoral programs did not want to accept me because they only took students with a bachelor's degree not a masters. I tried to get a job with my psychology masters and ended up painting houses for a living. This was a clear demonstration of the employment options for psychology masters degree holders – a situation that unfortunately has not likely changed over the years. However, I had written a thesis, published a conference paper, and graduated from a known terminal masters program with a good reputation. I persevered applying to doctoral programs and eventually made it into a decent program. I can still remember the day I climbed down from the ladder on the side of the house I was painting to check on my doctoral application status. I made my way to a pay phone in my grungy overalls and called the program office. When the secretary told me I had been accepted into the doctoral program I could have floated back up my ladder!

Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT) Programs

There are any number of counseling psychology programs that lead to qualification as a marriage family therapist. We have a lot of students who go into these programs each year. Many students come back and tell me that they are getting a lot out of their training in these programs and that they are looking forward to careers as counselors.

For a small number of students these programs are very good. However, for others, they will find on graduation that they are ill prepared to enter private practice without more training and/or the very few jobs available for MFTs are very low paying and have little security. In general, MFT programs may be better suited for older students who already have some life or career experience in the helping professions. The MFT license serves to formalize to some degree what they are already doing. I have had students who previously had careers in mental health/social work, law enforcement, law, and nursing do quite well as MFTs. Still, it is my belief that even these students would have been better served by pursuing a doctorate and a clinical psychology license.

#### Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC) License

Another wrinkle to the situation is the introduction of the new Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC) license in California. This is California's attempt to bring its qualifications for counselors in line with the other states. Programs aimed at producing LPCCs are new. The qualifications look very promising in that they are quite oriented to the treatment of mental pathology. However, the masters programs leading to the LPCC will have high unit requirements and are long. This begs the question of why do the masters for an LPCC when a little more work will net a doctoral degree and licensure as a psychologist?

That said, I think students who are certain they only want masters training would be well advised to enter into an LPCC program. For those with an MFT license or who are currently in school studying for an MFT, there is an upgrade path to allow them to earn the LPCC through additional education. More information about the LPCC in California can be found here: [www.bbs.ca.gov/lpcc\\_program/](http://www.bbs.ca.gov/lpcc_program/)

#### Masters in Organizational Psychology

This is an area where it may be OK to get a masters degree. Some corporate hiring managers prefer masters level practitioners for both in-house and consulting positions. The idea here is that those with doctorates are too intellectual and perhaps out of touch with corporate reality. My sense is that this attitude is fading, especially with the introduction of professional doctorates in organizational psychology. Nevertheless a masters in organizational psychology begs an important question: why didn't you pursue a MBA with a specialty in organizational management or development? The MBA is a much more salable degree with many more job opportunities. In my opinion it makes for better career opportunities and higher income potential.

#### Counseling vs. Clinical Psychology Doctorates

I am often asked what the difference is between a doctorate in Clinical versus Counseling Psychology. Truth be told is that they are practically identical depending on the program. Both types of program prepare students for a psychology license. The coursework is pretty much the same. In a perfect world a clinical psychologist would be trained to function in clinical in-patient settings like mental hospitals, prisons, and other health care facilities. But this is not the case. In my opinion the status of the school will be more important to your career than whether your doctoral degree is in clinical or counseling psychology.

### PhD vs PsyD

Many Clinical and Counseling Psychology Programs now offer doctorate in psychology (PsyD) instead of the more traditional doctorate in Philosophy (PhD). There is a lot of confusion about the difference in these degrees that I will try to clear up. The PsyD was developed by the American Psychological Association as a practitioner-oriented degree, modeled to some extent after the MD. The idea is that PsyD training would include research training but conducting research, especially basic research, would not be the focus of the degree program. Instead PsyD students would spend more time on clinical technique and focus their research efforts in more applied areas. Some believe that the APA developed the PsyD because of the proliferation of free-standing professional schools. These schools typically do not have the faculty or the resources to train students up to the research standards of university programs. Indeed, most of the professional schools clearly indicate that their mission is to train clinical practitioners. Like the MD, PsyD holders may elect to do more intensive training in research *after* they receive their degree, though this doesn't seem to happen very often.

Many psychologists – academic and clinical – still look askance at the PsyD degree and there continues to be bias against it in the profession. However, the name of the degree may be a proxy for the real issue, which is the quality of education delivered by the freestanding professional psychology schools. Since most of these schools (due to pressure from the APA) now give the PsyD, the degree has become synonymous with the perceived lower educational quality of some (but not all) professional schools of psychology.

### PhD vs EdD

The EdD is a doctorate in education. All this degree means is that your doctorate is granted by a college of education. At many universities (and some professional schools) graduate psychology programs (usually in counseling developmental, or educational/learning psychology) are housed in the college of education. Other programs that are related to psychology such as special education are also housed in colleges of education. There is generally no real difference between an EdD or other doctoral degree. However, colleges of education often have (undeserved) reputations of being academically light and this reputation influences the perception of the EdD. The primary task of colleges of education is to train teachers and unfortunately teaching is an



extremely low status occupation in the United States. This contributes to the low status of colleges of education and the EdD. If medical schools gave EdDs no doubt things would be quite different!

Many schools also award EdDs in areas such as adult education, curriculum and instruction, educational technology, and leadership, etc. These are essentially professional degrees and in many schools are geared towards working professionals in the field of education. There is some perception that these degrees are light on academic rigor. Unfortunately this perception affects the perception of EdDs in psychological subjects. Nevertheless, many EdDs are academically rigorous university degrees. How these degrees are perceived has a lot to do with the status of the university housing the EdD program. For instance, you won't have any trouble if your EdD is from Harvard. To make the situation more confusing some colleges of education give PhDs and some give PhDs and EdDs!

In general, my advice is to avoid the EdD for psychology subjects. The exception to this rule is if the program is housed in a decent university and the college of education has a good reputation. If the college of education offers both the PhD and the EdD do the PhD. The other reason to get an EdD is if you plan to work in an educational setting. This especially makes sense if you have some K-12 experience.

You can get excellent training in an EdD program, but explaining this to colleagues in the profession can be a pain. I speak from experience here since I have an EdD in Educational and Counseling Psychology from a large Midwestern state university in a college with a decent reputation. I believe I received excellent training, especially in research. Shortly after entering my program I was given a research assistantship that paid 100% of my tuition and gave me a stipend for living expenses. I was part of an interdisciplinary social science research group and received specialized instruction in the latest statistical methods.

Yet after graduating colleagues would ask me if I had been a school principal. When I asked them why they thought this they would say they thought that everyone with an EdD had been a principal. When I applied for a job in educational settings I would be turned down for lack of K-12 experience. When I applied for jobs in psychology, I would be told that I didn't have a 'real' psychology degree (even after I was licensed as a psychologist – something my EdD qualified me for). The final ignominy was that I even had my research skills questioned by PhDs who had received their degrees from professional schools!

All the above eventually led to me going back to a freestanding professional school to get a proper PhD. If I have to sign my name with my qualifications I will often just use the PhD title. It is much less confusing and causes so much less drama.

## University vs. Professional School Programs

Will you get a lower quality of education at a freestanding professional psychology school? Of course there is no easy answer and a lot depends on what you are seeking from your graduate education and the school itself. I have a somewhat unique perspective on the issue since I have doctoral degrees both from a large state university and a small regionally accredited professional school.

In general, the research training I received at the state university was light-years ahead of what was offered at the professional school (so much so that I actually was asked to teach research methods at the professional school I was attending). The clinical training in the state university program, while wider in scope, was more technique oriented and without a lot of depth. My sessions with my clinical supervisor were again almost exclusively geared toward the technical aspects of doing psychotherapy and testing/assessment.

At the professional school I attended everything was much more geared to clinical practice. All of my professors maintained professional practices and derived the majority of their income from them. The professional school I went to was highly psychoanalytic/psychodynamic in orientation. Therefore there was a strong coherence between the techniques and the theories that were taught. And, most importantly the theories drove the techniques. In the university program I felt like I was rummaging around my bag of technical tricks for something that might work with a specific client. At the professional school any technique I used needed to make sense depending on the theoretical understanding of the person I was working with. While the professional school I attended would never turn out great researchers or psychometricians, it did produce thoughtful, deeply grounded, and consistently good psychotherapists. My relationship with my supervisor was also far superior. I received very intensive 1-1 supervision that analyzed my reactions to doing psychotherapy or being a psychotherapist (counter-transference, developmental issues etc.). As a result of this I have come to believe that without this kind of supervision you cannot really properly do psychotherapy – counseling maybe, but not in depth psychotherapy.

Over the years I have thought about the issue of university versus freestanding psychology schools I have come to realize that my experience may be unique. Some university schools certainly teach psychotherapy in an in-depth way while many professional schools give their students a bag of tricks and send them out the door. Many psychologists hold the view that all freestanding professional schools are bad and all university programs are good. I do not believe that this is true and this was not my experience, BUT you will need to carefully research the schools you are thinking of attending!

## Where to Apply for Clinical Doctoral Programs

First of all the sad truth is that it is now extremely difficult to get into university-based Clinical Psychology PhD programs. I have heard that these programs are more difficult to get into than medical school (another option for graduate training that is outside the scope

of this discussion). Many, if not most, students wanting to get doctoral training in Clinical Psychology will by necessity have to go to a freestanding professional school. Given this reality I have the following advice:

1. First, if you are a straight A student who aced the GREs by all means apply to as many good university-based programs as you can afford. Your chances of getting in will also be enhanced if you are interesting to the people who are on the admissions committee for the program. This might mean being familiar with faculty research, having a clear idea of what research you would like to pursue, being bi-lingual, having a multi-cultural background etc. there are many books and websites devoted to strategies to help you get in to graduate school. For psychology perhaps the best is from the APA:  
<http://www.apa.org/education/grad/applying.aspx>
2. If you have a decent gpa and GRE scores you should at least apply to a few university clinical programs. You will increase your chances of getting into a program if you apply to programs in out of the way places. Rather than applying to UC Berkeley, University of Minnesota, Stanford, etc., think about state universities in Idaho, Montana, Alabama, Oklahoma, Iowa, etc. These are all excellent solid programs and you will get a great education. Many graduate school bound students will flock to either the East or West coasts, or major university towns. You may have less competition trying to get into lesser-known places.
3. Only apply to APA-approved programs. I am no fan of the APA, but they have a stranglehold on the profession and hold the key to entering the psychology 'guild'. Attending an APA program will help you, at least initially, with your psychology career. The only exception to this is if you are applying to a university with a stellar reputation – in the top ten for state universities, or an ivy-league campus. For a long time Stanford's PhD in counseling Psychology was not APA approved (it is now) and no one cared. That said, most Clinical Psychology PhD programs at major universities are now APA approved. This exception also applies to foreign schools. If you go to Oxford University in the UK then not having an APA approved degree will be less of a hindrance.
4. In addition to attending an APA-approved program, make sure the program participates in the internship match program and that students in the program have a good success rate for being matched to internships. The practice of psychology, like medicine, is largely learned by being apprenticed to experienced practitioners for a large chunk of time. Internships function like apprenticeships and you will only be as good as the experience you gain during this crucial aspect of your training.
5. Many smaller universities have Clinical Psychology doctorate programs set up almost like professional school programs. However, those attending these

programs will still be getting a university degree. Some of these programs are quite good and only have a small number of students in the program. This may be an opportunity to get intensive personal training. Some of these programs give the PhD but more and more are awarding the PsyD. These university based PsyD programs in general are better thought of than PsyDs from freestanding professional schools. Here is a list of some of the better PsyD programs (I am sure there are others out there I haven't listed):

Baylor University (Waco, TX)

Florida Institute of Technology (Melbourne, FL)

Hofstra University (Hempstead, NY)

Indiana University of Pennsylvania (Indiana, PA)

Indiana State University (Terre Haute, IN)

James Madison University (Harrisonburg, VA)

Loyola University (Baltimore, MD)

Pacific University (Forest Grove, OR)

Pepperdine University (Malibu, CA)

Rutgers University (New Brunswick, NJ)

Wright State University (Dayton, OH)

Xavier University (Cincinnati, OH)

(California Lutheran University also now has a PsyD program but they will have another 4 or so years before the APA can accredit them. However, if the program gains accreditation candidacy it is a safe bet that they will be fully accredited by the time you finish.) In general, I would worry less about the name of the degree and more about the status of the school.

6. Next down the list should be the better freestanding professional schools. You should consider those that are APA accredited and participate in the internship match program. You may want to look here to find programs that fit these criterion: <http://www.ncspp.info/schools.htm> (note that there are some university-based programs here as well)
7. I would be careful about going to a school where a particular religion drives the curriculum and culture, unless I was heavily involved in the specific religion of the school. A number of the programs on the above lists are at schools that are identified as being based in a particular religion or even sect of a religion. A degree from one of these schools, while possibly providing great training, will mark you as an adherent to a specific religion. This might cause others in the profession to wonder if your clinical reasoning is faith rather than scientifically based. You must look beyond the name of the school to tell how religious it is. For instance California Lutheran University does not have a curriculum driven by religion, while the Fuller Theological Seminary does. It is hard to tell in the case

of some schools. Pepperdine University is a good case in point. The undergraduate program is strongly driven by religion, but supposedly the graduate programs are not. Caveat emptor!

8. If you are not able to get into a decent freestanding professional doctoral program it must be the case that
  - a. Your gpa is 3.0 or below
  - b. Very bad or non-existent GRE scores
  - c. You cannot qualify for student loans and/or can't otherwise pay for your tuition
  - d. You have some personality issue that is being picked up by the people interviewing you for the programs. (In this case you might want to re-consider going into a clinical area until after you have completed some psychotherapy of your own).
  - e. Lack of letters of recommendation or non-committal / poor letters of recommendation.

For a, b, and e the solution is to try and get into some kind of doctoral preparation masters program. Even still you might have difficulties. It might be worth your while to take some more undergraduate classes (you can take classes as a post baccalaureate student or do a double major) to bring your gpa up. Another good idea is to get some research experience working with one of your professors. It would be even better if you can get your name on something published. These activities should also help you get some decent letters of recommendation from your professors.

You can always work on your GRE scores. I recommend that students take either the Kaplan (or Princeton Review ([www.princetonreview.com/graduate-school.aspx](http://www.princetonreview.com/graduate-school.aspx)) courses and to devote themselves exclusively to studying for the GRE for a specific period of time (at least a month).

With regard to c applying to a masters program may not be the answer. Most masters programs are cash cows for their schools. It is rare (though not unheard of) for students to get support beyond loans for masters programs. If finances are the major issue for you then following the advice above and then applying for a doctoral program might be a better strategy. It is rare to not qualify for some kind of student loan. Make sure to talk with a financial aid advisor about all the options available.

Still, financial realities can prevent you from going to graduate school. I was accepted into the clinical psychology program at University of San Francisco after finishing my masters program. At the time I had absolutely no money or support from my family. I had been living and paying tuition from whatever school loans I could get. During this period the maximum in students loans available was \$2500/year. When I found out that tuition to USF was \$13000/year I realized that

I had no way to obtain the additional 10,500 year for tuition, not to mention money I would need to live on. Sadly I was forced to turn down acceptance to a fine doctoral program.

With regard to d it is beyond our scope here to delve deeply into whatever issues may plague you. However, if your issue is a disability you may want to talk to the disability officer at the school where you are applying. If you have some sort of personality disorder then you may not realize the part you play in alienating interviewing committees. This is where I will reiterate my advice on getting some professional psychological help. Many people want to go into psychology so they can either deal with their own issues, or, not deal with their own issues by dealing with other people's problems. It would be highly worthwhile for you to sort through these issues before committing to a clinical career.

### The Application Process

You should start thinking about applying to graduate school around the Winter/Spring semester of your junior year. I usually tell students to spend some time this semester researching what specialty they would be interested in pursuing in graduate school. I also ask them to start thinking about which schools they would like to apply to and to create a list of at least ten schools. Hopefully some of the reasoning outlined above will help students to choose programs that would be a good fit for their specific situations. The APA produces two books which I think are helpful at this stage of the application process: *Getting In: A Step-By-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology* and *Graduate Study in Psychology*. Both of these books are available cheaply from Amazon.com. Check to make sure you are getting the newest editions because some of the information is subject to change. The former book outlines successful strategies for applying to graduate programs in psychology while the latter contains information for most psychology graduate programs in the U.S.

### The Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

For a majority of my students, taking the GRE is the most formidable obstacle to applying to graduate school. This examination serves as a barrier wall that can weed out some of the less committed from graduate school in psychology. It is a high stakes exam. Doing well will go a long way to helping you get into a great program with financial support and an excellent career trajectory. Doing poorly will relegate you to a professional doctoral program at best and not going beyond the masters level in the field. Therefore, it is well worth putting forth the effort to do well on the GRE.

Yet this is easier said than done. The test process is confusing and has been changing recently. There are also two tests to consider – a general test and a subject test. The subject exam is more straightforward and tests your general knowledge of psychology. This test is relatively easy to prepare for. The general test is more problematic. The general test of the GRE purports to measure verbal and quantitative reasoning as well as analytical writing. Maybe it measures these things and maybe it doesn't. Regardless it is a

difficult test to study for. My understanding is that the best predictor for success on the general GRE is having taken the general GRE. In other words you need to practice taking this test – a lot. However, you don't want to keep taking the test over and over and this is where the idea of taking practice tests comes in. There are a number of books of practice tests that you can do on your own. My opinion is that a better strategy is to sign up for either the Kaplan ([www.kaptest.com/GRE/](http://www.kaptest.com/GRE/)) or Princeton Review ([www.princetonreview.com/graduate-school.aspx](http://www.princetonreview.com/graduate-school.aspx)) course to prepare for the GRE. These courses will include a lot of practice tests as well as test-taking strategies specifically geared toward the GRE. Taking a course doesn't guarantee success but will at least give you a good shot at doing well.

From your review of *Graduate Study in Psychology* you should have a good idea of whether the programs you are interested in require the general or subject GRE, or both. My suggestion is that students block out some time in the summer to take a review course. You should plan on devoting at least 4-6 weeks where you do nothing but eat and breath GRE. At the end of the summer you should be ready to take the official exam, typically in late August or early September. This should give you time to adjust the schools you are applying to based on your test results.

You can take the GRE multiple times but many schools look down on extra attempts at the exam. Most schools will give your first score more weight or average your scores. **It is important to give the GRE your best shot the first time you take it!**

## Applications

The typical graduate school application has a couple of parts: forms, a personal statement, and letters of recommendations. The forms are the easy part. But make sure they are filled out carefully and legibly, and that you do not forget any pages, they are in order, etc. A messy application does not speak well on your behalf.

## The Statement of Purpose

The statement of purpose is very important. This should outline your motivation and interest in attending a specific graduate program. There has been a lot written about statements of purpose and you should read through the various takes on these both on the web and in *Getting In: A Step-By-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology*. I won't repeat what has been said about statements of purpose here. I will reiterate that your statement should be well written. Nothing will sink your application faster than a poorly written statement of purpose. Be sure to have someone knowledgeable edit your statement – maybe even more than one person. The other piece of advice I have about the statement of purpose is to be yourself. The more open and honest, i.e. authentic your statement the better chance you have of finding a program that is a good match to your skills and interests. Be sure to tell the interesting story of your life and why you want to make psychology your profession. Graduate schools like interesting people. They also like people who have overcome adversity, have experience in the profession, and who have multicultural backgrounds and experience.

## Letters of Recommendation

I write a lot of letters of recommendation and can unequivocally state that the better I know the student, the better the letter. Due to the overwhelming number of letters I am asked to write (which increases every year) I have now instituted some rules regarding who I will write letters for:

1. You need to have had at least two lecture courses, or one seminar course, or an independent study and one other regular course with me.
2. You need to have received no less than a B+ in any of these courses.
3. If I do not know you well (i.e. we have not previously spoken about your career aspirations) you will need to have a chat with me about why you are applying to graduate school.
4. You need to make your request for a letter of recommendation 3 weeks in advance at a minimum.
5. You must let me know if there are additional forms that need to be attached to your letter, whether or not the finished letter is returned to you or sent directly to the graduate program, or whether the letter is to be completed online.
6. You must provide me with any required forms that need to accompany your letter. You must write in your information on these forms and sign them. You should check the box that waives your right to see the letter – I will send you a copy of the letter before it is sent regardless, so you will see what I write about you.
7. You must give me a copy of your statement of purpose. This can be a draft.
8. You should remind me which classes you have taken with me and when you took them, and what grades you received from me.

If you do not know me very well and/or do not meet the above criterion but still need a letter, you should ask professors that you do know and/or the program chair.

In a typical letter I will state how long I have known you and in what capacity. I will say something about the general high quality of our psychology program. Then I will comment on the classes you took from me and your performance in those classes. If you have some interesting and distinguishing experience – academic or otherwise – I will mention it. Finally I will close the letter by saying something nice about you as a person and give my recommendations as to how I think you will fare in graduate school.

I will NOT write a letter for you if:

1. You have not met the above criteria
2. I have nothing nice to say about you and do not support your application to graduate school. Such a letter will not help you and is very unpleasant for me to write.



3. You are applying to a graduate program in clinical/counseling psychology and I do not think you will be a good clinician for whatever reason. This is not a judgment on you as a person, but my realistic assessment of how well I think you will be able to serve your clients and/or be happy with your career choice.

If I feel that I cannot write you a letter I will tell you directly.

#### Out of the Box – Or Programs Outside of Psychology You Might Want to Consider

Here are some other types of graduate programs that you may want to consider:

1. Law School – The legal profession has been hit by the recession and good jobs are harder to come by, but the law is still a good career choice. Your BA in psychology is good preparation for law school though you will learn a different way to research legal issues.
2. Business School – I mentioned the MBA above already. Another option to consider is a doctorate in business. You will use a lot of your psychological knowledge in this field and people with doctorates in business are in short supply. This may be the best degree you could get if you want to get a tenure track academic position.
3. Public Health – your training in psychology – especially statistics and research methods is good preparation for graduate school in public health. With an MPH or doctorate in Public Health you can even specialize in psychological health issues in large populations as well as social justice issues related to health. The job outlook for Public Health graduate degree holders is good.
4. Medicine – You will need to do pre-med science requirements in addition to your psychology BA requirements to qualify. Every year I am asked whether it is better to become a psychiatrist or psychologist and I never hesitate to say psychiatrist. While career quality has decreased for MDs, it is even worse for psychologists. And MDs still rule the roost when it comes to any kind of health care profession. Medical schools have a lot of money and they treat their students well. MD training is a long haul but in the end you will be better paid, command more respect and status, and have more flexibility with regard to career options.
5. Interdisciplinary Programs – There are a whole range of these from Family Studies to Behavioral Health. One of these programs may be a great fit to your interests. A lot of these programs are housed in big universities in out of the way departments. As a result they get few applicants and they may have money to support graduate students. This is definitely something worth researching.
6. Cognate Disciplines – This might include Social Work, Sociology, Artificial Intelligence, Political Science – really almost any social or behavioral science.

Again, if what you are interested in studying is in one of these areas it is worth thinking about.

7. **Alternative Medicine** – If you want to provide clinical services but are not enamored of the dominant medical model that is more and more coming to pervade clinical psychology you might want to consider going into alternative medicine. There are few choices here, all of which have a more holistic philosophy than western medicine and clinical psychology. If you are interested in the relationship of the structure of the body to mental and physical health you might want to consider a Doctor of Osteopathy (DO) or doctor of Chiropractic (DC) degree. DOs have essentially the same training and medical license as MDs, but tend to be a bit more holistic with some getting training in structural alignment techniques. Chiropractors have their own license and provide treatment focused primarily on the structural alignment of the spine. Naturopathic doctors (ND) provide holistic care based on natural remedies like herbs and nutrition to treat patients. In some states both chiropractors and naturopaths can perform minor surgery and prescribe western medications (they cannot do these things in California). Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) doctors (who have either a masters in TCM, or an Oriental Medicine Doctor degree) treat patients with acupuncture and herbs. They have their own license and are generally well respected by western MDs (which can't be said for DCs and NDs). TCM practitioners are trained in a 5000-year-old tradition that is especially good at preventing disease. Most practitioners of these alternative medicine modalities have great career opportunities. They typically have thriving private practices.

**It is September (or October, or November) and You have Just Realized that You Want to Go to Graduate School!**

Maybe you have put off thinking about your future or perhaps have been concentrating so hard on graduating that you have given little thought as to what happens afterwards? Whatever the reason you have now decided that you want to go to graduate school next year. The problem is that you are late to the game and the bus is already leaving the station. Mixed metaphors aside you will be playing catch up and have limited your options. What you will need to consider will depend on a few things. Consider the scenarios below:

1. You have taken the GRE and have received a good score (or expect to receive a good score – You are in a good position. All you really need to do is to follow the advice given above in an accelerated fashion. If you are diligent you should be able to identify and apply to the schools you are interested in before their deadlines. Your biggest obstacles will be writing a good statement of purpose and getting letters of recommendation from your professors.
2. You have not taken the GRE – This is by far the most common situation I see during fall semester. You really have two options – rapidly prepare for the GRE or apply to programs that do not require this test. Some students are able to get up to speed quickly for the GRE. Their fall semester course load may be light, they

may be good at taking tests, or they may just be able to knuckle down and do the hard test preparation work necessary in addition to everything else going on in their lives. I recommend taking a preparation course from Kaplan or Princeton Review (see above for details) or hiring a tutor. However you study for the GRE you will need to take lots of practice tests. The second option is to apply for programs that do not require the GRE (or don't care if you have a bad score). This essentially means Masters programs (or a lower tier professional doctorate programs that I don't usually recommend – see above). Many of my students go for this option. Master programs often do not require the GRE and the application deadlines tend to be much later. However, those students wanting to go eventually earn a doctoral degree in psychology have only put off preparing for the GRE and they will have to do this while completing their master's degree – not a fun prospect!

3. In some ways, if you are a really good student being late to the game is more difficult. As a good student you stand a chance of doing well on the GRE if you spend the time preparing properly for the test. Taking the exam hastily and doing poorly on it will sink your chances of getting into a good school. You can retake the GRE but many schools will look at your first score or average your scores. It is important to give the GRE your best shot the first time you take it! Good students might be better served by taking a year off, studying for the GRE, volunteering to do research with a professor, getting some kind of clinical experience, etc., and then applying directly to doctoral programs the following fall.
4. For poorer students, applying late is not so bad. Masters programs may already be their best options, and going to one of these programs will give them a chance to improve their gpa and study for the GRE.

### When You are Accepted

Please let us know when and where you are accepted to graduate school as well as what degree you will be pursuing. It is important for us to keep track of this information for accreditation purposes and it helps us know which schools like our graduates. Also please drop us a line after you have been in your graduate program for a bit to let us know how you like it.