

Graduate school in psychology: Information and experiences from EPAGS

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This hand-out is designed to offer attendees some of the information that was covered by the members of the Eastern Psychological Association of Graduate Students (EPAGS). Our goal was to make available our personal knowledge and advice for those interested in pursuing graduate training in psychology. We hope that this document can provide a reference about the areas of specialization in psychology, graduate program selection, the application process, issues to consider before enrolling, and details about degree completion.

Area of Specialization

One of the first decisions that a student will make regarding graduate school in psychology is the area in which he or she would like to specialize. There is a great variety of programs. Each has a different program design and career outcome.

- Examples (from *The Insider's Guide to the Psychology Major*): Biopsychology, Clinical*, Cognitive, Counseling*, Developmental, Educational, Human factors, Evolutionary, Experimental, Forensic, Health, Industrial Organizational*, Neuroscience, Psychometrics, Quantitative/Measurement, Rehabilitation, School*, Social, and Sports

*Typically more applied professional positions

Many online sites explain the differences between these types of psychology. In addition, both the APA Careers in Psychology (<http://www.apa.org/careers/resources/guides/careers.aspx>) and the Occupational Outlook Handbook (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/>) offer information about various jobs in psychology and the training and education needed to pursue those jobs. Other useful guides include the book referenced above as well as *Psychology as a Major: Is It Right for Me and What Can I Do with My Degree?* and *Career Paths in Psychology: Where Your Degree Can Take You*.

Selecting a Program of Interest

Once you have decided the area of psychology that you would like to study during your graduate career, it's time to determine the programs to which you will apply.

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

- Typically 5-7 years to completion.
- Emphasis on research training integrated with applied or practice training.
- Expected to complete a Master's degree research project AND doctoral dissertation.
- Better choice for those considering teaching or doing research at some point in their career.
- Typically offer more funding opportunities than PsyD or MA/MS.

Doctor of Psychology (PsyD)

- Emphasis on preparation for professional practice as practitioner-scholars.
- Places importance on clinical training rather than research training.
- Typically begins clinical experience earlier in the academic degree program.
- Often takes less time to complete than PhD.
- Note: In the academic world, the PhD programs are preferable to PsyD programs; however, in the world of clinical practice, both degrees have about the same status and functionality.

Master of Arts (MA)/Science (MS)

- Typically 2-3 years to completion.
- Entails coursework and exams.
- Some require master's thesis; some require internship or other applied experience.
- Often do not offer as much financial aid (especially if school has a doctoral program).
- Value of master's varies by field (e.g., a master's in social work or school psychology may be all you need for the job you wish to pursue).

The Application Process

Most applications require the following and each piece should be carefully reviewed for clarity, errors, and organization:

- Application form and application fee
- Curriculum Vitae: Ask to see the CVs of other students; have it reviewed by your mentor or adviser as well as your university career services/development center.
- Personal statement/letter of intent: Important to modify each one for each program to which you apply.
- Transcripts: GPA average for doctoral students: Overall (3.55), last 2 years (3.70), psychology (3.80). Typically, PhD programs will also look to ensure that you have taken statistics and research methods.
- Letters of recommendation: 2-4 typically requested; important to ask early and prepare materials for faculty.
- GRE scores (sign up at <http://www.ets.org/>): Average for doctoral students: Verbal (570), Quantitative (630), Psychology-Subject Test (645); Can study with practice tests and manuals (e.g., Barron's, ETS) or take preparation course (e.g., Kaplan, Princeton Review).

Useful Resources: *Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology*, the APA Guide to *Graduate Study in Psychology 2011*, and APA “A guide to Getting into Graduate School” (<http://www.apa.org/ed/getin.html>).

Issues to Consider

- Financial Aid and Loans – Options include, but are not limited to, departmental or university assistantships (which typically cover tuition and provide a small stipend), scholarships, fellowships, grants, and Stafford and private loans. Students need to consider how their student status (i.e., full or part time) will affect repayment and eligibility. Also, aid packages may require students to become state residents within a particular time frame.
- Fit between you and the program – It's important to research the faculty at the university to which you are applying to make sure you will be doing work that you are interested in doing. In addition, look at the departmental mission statement and the typical job placement of graduates to determine if the school is right for you.
- Time Constraints – Because graduate degrees take substantial time (i.e., from 2-8+ years), students need to consider whether or not graduate school fits with their overall life plans. In addition, course work, research, and applied practice responsibilities often take a greater amount of one's time than a typical 9-5 job.
- Geographical Location – Each individual should really think through the places to which he or she will apply, asking questions such as whether or not there is access to public transportation (if needed), how much distance away you are willing to move from family and friends, and if there exists the opportunity to engage in relevant interests within the community (if desired).
- Post-graduation job prospects – Ask schools to put you in touch with students who are further along in the program to get their thoughts on the job market; if there is a graduate school at your current university, seek out graduate students with whom you might speak. You can also research jobs to determine whether or not post-doctoral work or internships are required to secure positions.

Degree Completion

Each degree program will differ in the time it takes and what needs to be completed to finish. When researching schools, carefully examine what “milestones” graduate students need to achieve. Students should also review the coursework, research, and applied experience that is required to determine that they will receive the training and preparation they seek for the job market. Remember graduate school is only the beginning of your career!