

Preparing for Graduate School I: Options and Time Lines

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Questions to Ask Yourself

- Where do I want to be in 5-10 years?
- Do I want to be teaching? If so, where? A college/university or a high-school?
Do I want to be conducting research?
- Do I want to have a private practice?
Do I want to work with a certain group of people?
How long am I willing to stay in graduate school?

Graduate Degrees

M.S. Master of Science

1 -2 year program after the bachelors degree
usually require a thesis

M.A. Master of Arts

- 1-2 year program
usually do not require a thesis

Psy.S. Specialist in Psychology

- 3 year program, last year usually spent in internship
- unusual in psychology, except in school psychology programs

Ph.D. Doctor of Philosophy

- 4-6 year program
- emphasize research, require more courses in statistics and research design
 - requires a dissertation—your own, year-long empirical research study
 - offers more money, more responsibility, more independence
harder to get into than masters programs

Psy.D. Doctor of Psychology

- awarded only in the areas of clinical and counseling psychology
- emphasis on practice, consuming research rather than conducting research
may or may not require an empirical dissertation

M.D. Medical Doctor

necessary to become a psychiatrist

Types of Graduate Programs

Clinical Psychology

- assess and treat individuals with psychological problems
- may specialize in certain issues or problems
- may work with individuals or groups
- work in hospitals, clinics, private practice, and in academia
- Ph.D. program would require a dissertation and an internship
- Psy.D. program would place less emphasis on research and the dissertation and more emphasis on internships with a Ph.D., you can call yourself a "psychologist," practice independently, own your own practice, and teach at the college level
- with a masters, you are not able to call yourself a "psychologists" but rather a "psychological associate" or "psychological assistant." You would also have to be supervised by a licensed, Ph.D. level clinician. (Please note: These laws vary from state to state!)

Counseling Psychology

- similar to clinical psychologists, but have traditionally dealt with less severe problems
- place less emphasis on research than clinical programs
- distinction between counseling psychologists and clinical psychologists is fading
- may work in a variety of settings including private practice, group counseling, schools as guidance counselors, and health care institutions
- Ph.D. program would require a dissertation and internship
- Psy.D. program would require more extensive internship
- with a Ph.D. or Psy.D., you can be licensed and practice independently
- with a masters, you can be licensed and practice independently in some states, but you cannot refer to yourself as a "psychologist"

Psychiatry

- work with clients with more severe psychological disorders (e.g., schizophrenia)
- have medical degrees and can prescribe medication to treat psychological problems
- after completing medical school, they specialize in mental health during their residency
- work in hospitals, clinics, and private practice

Industrial/Organizational Psychology

- study the relationship between people and work
- with a Ph.D., you can become an organization's in-house I/O psychologist, own your own consulting firm, or teach at the college level
- with a Masters, you could work for a Ph.D. level I/O psychologist in a business or a consulting firm

School Psychology

- assess and treat school children with special needs
- work with students, parents, teachers, and administrators to facilitate student learning
- usually work in school systems but may also have a private practice with a Ph.D., you can practice independently in the school system and to teach at the college level
- with a Psy.S., you can practice independently as a school psychologist
- with an M.S., you can practice independently as a school psychologist in some states

Academic Teaching/Research Psychology

Other areas of psychology are just as important as these five, but they are not considered applied psychology. We're going to call those areas "academic teaching/research psychology." After completing programs in these areas, these psychologists would most likely work in academic settings such as colleges and universities, and they would spend their time teaching courses related to their areas of expertise, meeting with students, conducting research, collecting and analyzing data, writing papers, making presentations at conferences, and serving on various university committees.

Experimental Psychology

- study many behavioral and physiological topics, including learning, memory, language, and sensation and perception

Educational Psychology

- study how people learn best and create learning materials to facilitate learning among all age groups
- work in academic settings conducting research on learning, training teachers, and developing instructional materials

Social Psychology

study how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the presence of other people. They study issues such as attraction, love, attitudes, prejudice, and groups.

Environmental Psychology

- study the relationship between people and their environments. They are interested in how aspects of the social environment (such as density, social relationships) and the physical environment (such as lighting, temperature, office design) affect individuals behavior and health.

Developmental Psychology

study human development across the lifespan, particularly age-related changes in behavior and mental processes

Biopsychology

- study the relationships between human behavior and the body of an individual

Health Psychology

- study the psychological factors related to health and illness. They aim to prevent, diagnose, and treat medical problems caused by psychological factors, such as thoughts, emotions, and the ability to manage stress.

WHICH GRADUATE PROGRAM IS RIGHT FOR ME?

The following are criteria you should consider when determining if a graduate program is right for you. These are in order from most to least important.

1. Will they accept you?

A program is not right for you if they will not accept you. Here are some criteria to help you determine the likelihood that you will be accepted into a program and increase your chances of acceptance:

- **Do your GRE scores, GPA, course work, and outside activities match those required by the program?**

Check the mean GRE scores and GPAs of students who were accepted by the program last year. These scores are found in the APA Guide to Graduate Study in Psychology. If your scores are close to or higher than the mean, your chances of being accepted are better.

- **Is there a faculty member whose interests match your interests?**

Faculty want to train students with similar interests. Find out the faculty interests from the department's web site and explain in your personal statement how your interests match those of specific faculty in the department.

- **Is there a faculty member who wants you to become a part of his or her research program?**

If you enter a Ph.D. program you will have a faculty mentor. You will be a part of their research program, and your work will extend their work. Visit faculty at different schools and ask them if you could join their research program if you are accepted. When students are being selected, faculty with whom you have spoken will probably put in a good word for you if they want you to join their research program.

2. Accreditation

All Ph.D. and Psy.D. programs in Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychology, as well as, Psy.S. and Master's programs in School Psychology and Master's programs in Counseling' Psychology should be accredited. Do not attend one of these programs if they are not accredited. Master's programs in Clinical Psychology have just begun to receive accreditation. Ask if the program is seeking accreditation. Industrial/Organization Psychology programs have not yet begun to be accredited. Ask these programs if they follow the guidelines of their professional society. The accrediting bodies and I/O professional society are listed below:

- Clinical, School, and Counseling Ph.D. and Psy.D. programs must be accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA).
- School Psychology Masters and Specialists programs must be accredited by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP).
- Clinical and Counseling Psychology programs may be accredited by Master's in Psychology Accreditation Counsel (MPAC).
- The professional society for Industrial/Organizational Psychology is the Society for Industrial/Organizational Psychology (SIOP).

3. Quality of the Faculty Mentor

The more prestigious your faculty mentor, the more options you will have following graduation. Ask your undergraduate faculty who the well-known researchers are in your field of interest. Contact these individuals regarding joining their lab. Also, remember that individual prestige is not always linked to the prestige of the University.

4. Quality of Opportunities within the Graduate Program

Your degree will not get you a job following graduation. Instead, you will be hired based upon the skills you have accumulated during graduate school and the level at which you perform those skills. Therefore, you will need to be sure that your graduate program will allow you to build the skills that you need to have the job that you want. Ask about the following:

- **Teaching Opportunities**

Will I be able to teach classes? When in my graduate program can I teach? Will I be the instructor or a teaching assistant? Can I teach several types of classes?

- **Quality of Practicum Sites and In-House Clinics**

If you are interested in a clinical, counseling, or school program you should work with clients during your graduate training. Ask: What types of clients will I be able to work with during my graduate training? How often can I see clients? How soon in my training will I begin to get experience with clients?

- **Nearby Businesses**
If you are interested in an I/O program there should be businesses nearby with which you can consult. Ask: What types of consulting experiences will I have during my training? How often will I be able to do consulting work? How soon in my training will I begin to get experience consulting?
- **Research Opportunities**
What types of research opportunities are available? How involved will I be in the research process? Can I investigate my own ideas?
- **Opportunities for Awards**
Does the Department or University present awards for superior performance? (These can be used as an indication of the quality of the skills that you have learned.)
- **Enrichment Opportunities within the University**
Are there additional opportunities outside of the Department that can be used to build skills? For example: Is there an Office of Instructional Development that provides enrichment opportunities for individuals interested in teaching careers? Are there research programs in other Departments that students can become involved with to gain experience and skills?

5. Level of Funding Available

You may be provided with funding to attend graduate school. All Ph.D. programs should provide some level of funding. Many Psy.S. and Master's programs should also have funding available. The APA Guide to Graduate Study in Psychology provides some information on the availability of funding in a department. Ask the following questions about funding:

- How many hours per week are required for the award?
- Does the award include a tuition waiver? Is the waiver partial or full?
- Will I have to renew the award each year on a competitive basis?
- Is Summer funding included? (Do not assume that it is!)

6. Quality of the Program

Some Programs in each specific field of Psychology are known as more prestigious programs. Ask your undergraduate faculty about the well-respected Programs for your field of interest. You will want to attend the highest quality Program possible.

7. Quality of the Department

Some Departments are known as more prestigious. Ask your faculty about the well-respected Departments for your field of interests. You will want your program to be in the highest quality Department possible.

8. Interest in Living in the Area

You are going to be living close to your graduate institution for a while, so it is best that you like the area. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Can I handle the weather?
- Are there recreational/cultural opportunities for me in the area?
- Are there Churches/Synagogues or other opportunities for community/spiritual involvement?
- What is the cost of living? Will my assistantship pay my rent?

IDEAL TIME LINE FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL PREPARATION

- This timetable is labeled "ideal" because in an ideal world this is the order in which you would prepare for graduate school. However, few of us do everything in an ideal manner. Regardless of your current status, you should go through the list and mark off everything that you have completed and start working on the rest. You should try to catch up where you can. Portions of it will be helpful for planning.
- Always try to get employment (including any part-time work and Summer) that is related to your career goals.

Freshman Year

- Begin thinking about your career interests and begin narrowing down your list of possible careers.
- Begin researching potential career options to learn about requirements for entry into that field, salary, usual locations of positions, etc.
- Investigate the career counseling center and any resources for career development in the department (For example: career/graduate school courses, Co-Op, Volunteer opportunities, research with faculty, etc.)
- Sign up to participate in several psychological experiments.
- Keep your Introductory Psychology text. You will need it to study for the GRE subject test.
- Create an outline of the courses you will take for the remainder of your undergraduate career.
- Focus on taking your General Education courses
Concentrate on earning good grades.

Sophomore Year

- Decide upon 2-3 career options and focus your course work on these choices
- Join Psi Chi (or a related student group).

- Become active in the department by attending department activities and getting to know professors and asking about their research interests.
- Consider a minor. It should be in a rigorous field and related to your job interests.
- Begin taking required courses in Statistics, Research Methods, and Experimental Psychology the second semester of your Sophomore year.
- Start a file and keep notes of all accomplishments that could be put on your vita. These items can include: papers that received good grades, work experiences, research experiences, activities in classes that built job-related skills, etc.
- Meet with graduate students to find out about life in graduate school.
- Finish General Education requirements.
- Begin to learn about professional meetings or conferences (state psychological associations or regional meetings) you could attend. Try to attend two to three meetings before you graduate.
- Read relevant literature about careers or professions related to Psychology.

Junior Year

- Continue to narrow career goals and continue to take relevant course work.
- Continue to take Statistics, Research Methods, and/or Experimental Psychology first semester.
- Look for opportunities for research experience during the second semester.
- Ask a Professor if you can be a research assistant on a current project and sign up for appropriate credit, if available, in order to receive credit for this work.
- Specifically, ask if this work will likely become a conference publication within the next year and a half.
- Take upper division courses.
 - Obtain work experience related to your career goals, (e.g., Co-Op, internship, Practicum). If you are interested in clinical or counseling, look for clinically-related experience.
 - Meet with your advisor and discuss your career choices and your undergraduate progress. Ask for advice and feedback on your likelihood of success in your chosen career.
 - Join a professional organization as a student affiliate (e.g., APS, APA, SEPA MWPA, SIOP).
 - Continue to get to know your professors (you will need good sources of recommendation letters).
 - Create a first draft of your vita or resume.
 - If your department has a Senior Honors or Thesis program, see if you are eligible.

Summer between Junior and Senior Year

- Gather information and applications from prospective schools.
- Learn about the faculty at the schools and what types of jobs their students are trained to move onto. Call or e-mail Program Chairs for additional information about each program.

- Decide upon schools to which you want to apply.
- Study for the GRE-including the subject portion.
- If you are interested in a Ph.D. program, contact by phone or e-mail faculty with whom you are interested in working.
- Consider making a visit to see their research facilities.
- Submit your Senior Thesis project or other research projects to an undergraduate or regional conference. For details on how to do this see your advisor.
- Continue to work on your vita or resume.
- Thoroughly research graduate programs that are of interest to you.

Senior Year

- Create drafts of your vita/resume and personal statement. Ask your advisor or other trusted professors for feedback.
- Check transcripts for errors (e.g., incorrect grades, incorrect degree, etc.)
- Check packet of materials to be distributed to your references and request letters of recommendation.
- Take the GRE and Subject Test.
- Send applications well before deadline dates. Check several weeks prior to each deadline to determine if your file is complete at each school. If it is not complete remedy the problem.
- Get your resume on file in the Career Placement Office at your University in the event that you will need employment.
- Attend a professional meeting.
- Take advantage of opportunities offered by the department or university to assist students in the process of completing graduate school applications.
- Obtain information about financial assistance.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU DO NOT GET WHAT YOU WANT

Possible Reasons for Not Being Selected to Graduate School

- Credentials (GPA, GRE) were lower than significant number of applicants.
- Personal statement indicated interest that was unavailable in the program.
- Did not fill out application correctly.
- Application was incomplete.
- Balance factors: geographical area, gender, race, interest

What to Do if You Do Not Get into Graduate School

- Writing a letter and asking why you were rejected will probably not be answered. You can try if you feel that you were close and could possibly get in the next year.
- Schedule a meeting with your advisor to go over your application packet.
 - Was your personal statement appropriate for each school?
 - Are your grades and GPA marginal or close to the minimums required?