

Getting into a graduate program in psychology can be rather complex and confusing. There are many different paths you can take and a variety of hurdles. **BUT DON'T PANIC YET!** Take it one step at a time. Read over this handout a few times. Write down any questions you may have and bring those questions to your faculty advisor, or any other faculty member. We'd be happy to help.

## **THE DIFFERENT AREAS OF GRADUATE STUDY**

There are several types of graduate programs in psychology, the most common ones being: experimental, developmental, social, biopsychology, cognitive, clinical, counseling, school, and organizational psychology (also known as industrial-organizational psychology, or simply "IO").

Other more specialized graduate programs might be devoted to sports psychology, psychology and law, or behavioral medicine. Large psychology departments at large universities may include many of the most common programs, but most universities will only have a few of them.

The best source of information about these various programs is the book **Graduate Study in Psychology** published by the American Psychological Association. It lists, by state, most of the graduate psychology programs in this country. It includes information about admission criteria, how many students are accepted each year, number of faculty members, and where to get more information and an application.

The library also has a copy as well as other books about graduate school. You can order *Graduate Study in Psychology* directly from: American Psychological Association, Order Department, P.O. Box 2710, Hyattsville, MD, 20784 (800) 374 2721

---

## **WHAT TO DO TO GET IN**

Generally speaking, getting into graduate school is a game of chance. Many programs are very competitive. There's no guarantee that you will get into the exact program at the exact university that you want. But there are some things you can do to optimize that possibility:

### **--- GPA**

Grade point average is one index that many graduate schools take very seriously. Obviously, the higher your GPA the better your chances of getting in. Very competitive programs may look for GPAs at 3.5 or higher. Less competitive programs may accept 3.0 or a bit lower.

### **-- Letters of Recommendation**

Many graduate schools weigh letters very highly. Strong letters of recommendation can compensate for GPAs and GREs that are a bit weak. Your letters of recommendation could become one of your greatest assets! At Lock Haven, especially in our Psychology Department, you have the unique opportunity to get to know the faculty. Get involved in Psi Chi or the LHU Psychological Association (Psychology Club). Talk to the faculty. The better they know you, the more likely they can write a convincing letter. When you ask a professor to write a letter for you, be sure to give the professor some written information about yourself, the courses you took with him/her, your grades, any activities you undertook in our department or on campus, etc. And here's one way you can work towards getting a truly excellent letter....

### **-- Research With Our Faculty**

In our department you have the unique opportunity to work closely with professors on research projects. Take advantage of this! Volunteer your time to work with a professor. Also, find out if there is a faculty member who will be your advisor on an *Independent Study* project (PSY 499). This is a project in which you work one on one with a faculty on a topic of mutual interest. When professors get to know you in this capacity, they can write a very strong letter of recommendation (assuming you didn't screw up on the project!). Successfully completing these projects also demonstrates to graduate schools that you are a motivated person who can work independently.

In the past students have presented papers at conferences or published articles with the faculty based on such projects. Many graduate programs will be impressed by this! It is unusual for undergraduates to do this sort of thing. Graduate programs that emphasize experimental research may be very impressed by your having been actively involved in research, especially if the research led to a conference presentation or a publication. Programs that emphasize training in counseling (and not experimental research) may be impressed by projects involving case studies, literature reviews, and experiential learning even if these projects did not lead to a publication or conference presentation.

### **-- GREs**

Many graduate schools will require you to take the Graduate Record Exam. That's right! It's the SATs all over again, but on a slightly bigger scale! The GREs consist of three sections: verbal, math (quantitative), and analytic (which measures abstract thinking). Some schools will also require you to take the "advanced" portion of the test, which for you would be in psychology (it consists of multiple choice questions pertaining to all the different fields within psychology).

Usually programs will use a cut off. If you don't get above a certain score, they may not even look at your application. *Graduate Study in Psychology* lists the average GRE scores for students who are accepted into a program. A few less competitive graduate schools may not have a cut off score or may not require you to take the GREs at all.

It is very unwise to take the GREs cold. Prepare for it. Bookstores sell manuals that describe strategies for taking the test and provide sample exams. There also are classes you can take, such as the Stanley Kaplan preparatory courses. A good way to study for the Advanced test in psychology is to get a good intro psychology textbook and memorize as much of it as you can. Another way is to serve as a tutor for students in Introduction to Psychology (you can be an "official" tutor and get paid for it through the Tutorial Center based on a recommendation from one of the PSYC 100 professors).

Some schools also may require you to take additional standardized tests such as the Miller Analogies Test, alias the "MAT" (and you thought the GREs were hard!). There are books that can help you prepare for these exams.

You can call the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton for an application and information about the GREs. The Dean's office also has applications.

### **-- Your Personal Statement**

There probably is wide variation in how graduate schools react to your written personal statement in

which you describe yourself and your reasons for going to graduate school. Some might take it quite seriously; others may not pay much attention. Play it safe. Spend some time on it and prepare a well thought out letter. Avoid platitudes like "I'm really interested in psychology" or, for a counseling or clinical program, "I want to work with people." Would you be applying for graduate school if you didn't feel that way?

If you really want to do it right, TAILOR your letter for each program you apply to. Say something about your background, your accomplishments, what exactly about psychology interests you, what you plan to do in the future BUT ALSO STATE EXACTLY WHY IT IS YOU ARE APPLYING TO THAT PROGRAM. What is it about the program that attracts you? How will it benefit you, and what do you have to offer it? Be as specific as possible. If you are interested in one or more of their faculty member's work, say so! If you are interested in a particular program, say so! And explain why you are interested!

Keep the letter short - maybe two or three pages, TYPED. Experiment with being both creative and informative. Ask friends and professors for comments on what you have written.

### **-- Field Work and Other Practical Experiences**

Some graduate programs may be impressed by your having had some substantial practical experience in a setting related to their program. For example, experimental programs may find it appealing that a student helped out with a professor's research project. A developmental program may be impressed by someone who worked with developmentally handicapped children. Clinical and counseling psychology may think it is important that a student worked in a mental health setting.

Our department offers field work courses where you can get such practical experience. You also can volunteer on your own or look for part time/summer jobs. However, there is no guarantee that a graduate program will highly value this experience. Those programs that emphasize research training (including clinical psychology programs) may be more concerned about your academic achievements than your practical experiences.

### **--- Required courses**

Many programs will require that you have taken undergraduate courses in psychology and a certain amount of credits in psychology. Courses such as statistics and experimental psychology often are required. If you will be completing the major in our department, you probably will have no problem with this. But specialized programs may require specialized courses. Check *Graduate Study in Psychology* which will list the requirements for each graduate program.

### **-- Using the Shot gun Method**

To maximize the possibility of getting in, apply to many schools - maybe twelve or more. Apply to a few really outstanding programs: who knows, you may get lucky! Also apply to a few programs that are less competitive, so you'll be guaranteed of receiving at least one or two offers! And don't be too upset if you do get rejected, because the odds are that some programs WILL reject your application.

If you're willing to go to another part of the country, you will have a wider selection of schools to apply to, and a better chance of being accepted. There are very good programs in parts of the country that people perceive to be less desirable areas to live.

### **-- Going for a Visit and Interviewing**

If possible, go see the school even before you know whether or not you are accepted. Talk to the faculty and students. It may help you decide whether or not you want to be there. It also may help you make an impression on them. Making a personal contact can be very effective (even on the phone) as long as you are not pressuring people or being a pest in some way!

Definitely try to visit the programs that accept you! Talk to the faculty, find out everything you can about the program. Do they feel like people you could work with? Are they friendly and helpful or cold and obnoxious? Make a point of talking to beginning and advanced students - they will tell you things that the faculty may not.

---

## **APPLYING NOW OR APPLYING LATER**

Many students think that they should apply to graduate school immediately after they finish their undergraduate work. If you are the type of person who will lose steam (i.e., motivation) after taking a year or two off, then maybe you should apply right away. But it's not critical that you apply immediately. If you take a year or two off to work, in order to make money for graduate school or to get some experience in psychology, it could look good in the eyes of the graduate program. They like motivated, determined people. But if you drift from job to job, or if you aren't working at all and just amble about with no rhyme or reason, that might look bad.

Older students who have been working a number of years or raising a family sometimes think they are in a one down position. Again, this is not necessarily true. If there is evidence that you are a conscientious and motivated person, then those are points in your favor. Some counseling and clinical psychology programs prefer older students. They believe they are more mature, responsible people. Many counseling psychology programs are specifically designed for older people who may be working full time and/or have families.

---

## **MONEY**

Education costs money. Graduate school is no exception. Many programs may offer you some financial support. Some programs, usually those at state universities, will support students for the first few years in the form of "stipends." Others may offer a "Research Assistantship" in which you help a professor conduct his or her research in return for pay. For a "Teaching Assistantship" you would help a professor teach a course, or perhaps teach a section yourself, in return for pay. You may not get as much money as you want but, as Jagger might say, you'll get what you need (just enough to live on). Also, some universities may waive tuition. Find out about stipends, teaching and research assistantships, and tuition remission before you decide to go to a program.

---

## **TIMETABLE**

If you intend to go to graduate school right after you finish your undergraduate work, here's a rough timetable for preparing your applications:

### **Spring semester of your junior year:**

- think about what type of program you're interested in
- start talking to the faculty
- if you haven't already done so, find out if you can get involved in faculty research or an Independent Study project; consider taking a fieldwork course

### **Summer before your senior year:**

- look over *Graduate Study in Psychology*
- make a rough list of schools you might apply to
- start writing your personal statement
- begin studying for the GREs

### **Fall semester of your senior year:**

- near the start of the semester, write to schools for information about their programs
- as you receive this information, start making your final list of schools you will apply to
- continue studying for the GREs
- **IN OCTOBER TAKE THE GREs**
- near the end of the semester, ask professors to write letters of recommendation

### **After the fall semester:**

- complete your applications and send them off
- deadlines may be in January, February, or March, depending on the school
- if possible, visit the schools
- pray for acceptances

---

## **CAREERS IN COUNSELING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

If you think you are interested in clinical or counseling psychology, you first should ask yourself a few questions. For how many years am I willing to go to graduate school? Do I want to work in a hospital, clinic, or program somewhere? Do I want to have a private practice? Is there any particular type of client or problem I would like to work with? Am I interested in doing research?

It's not easy answering these questions now, but trying to form a clear vision of what you would like to be doing someday will help you make decisions about graduate school.

The mental health field is complex. There are several types of professionals with different types of training. There are many different paths you can take to get to a career in which you "counsel" people. What follows is a description of the various doctorate and masters level programs. But remember this: You do not necessarily have to get a Ph.D. in order to be a counselor or psychotherapist.

---

### **MASTERS PROGRAMS** (may be full or part time)

There are a variety of Master's levels programs in fields related to clinical and counseling psychology. Usually these programs train people in basic counseling skills. Some programs may have specialized areas of training such as marriage and family counseling, drug addiction counseling, group counseling, vocational counseling, family therapy, child therapy, divorce mediation, prison counseling, etc. When it comes time to apply for jobs, it's very advantageous to have an area of specialization.

People with masters degrees usually work in group counseling practices, clinics, program for specific populations (drug abusers, battered wives, chronic psychiatric patients, etc.), and employee assistance programs. In many states people with Master's degrees CANNOT have their own private practice.

A Ph.D. may enable you to make more money and may open up different doors for you, but it is not absolutely necessary to have one. In many cases a Master's degree may be ideal! In fact, with the current rise of managed care systems in the field of mental health, insurance companies may only pay for psychotherapy provided by clinicians who are part of a group practice. While Ph.D.'s may be in charge of the group, they may very well hire clinicians with Master's degrees to do therapy with the clients who are referred to the group. It is very possible that psychotherapists with Master's degrees will be in greater demand in the future than they have been in the past.

If you are determined to get a Ph.D., you can sometimes get a masters degree from one school and then transfer to Ph.D. program at another school. But you might lose credits. Some Ph.D. programs also prefer to train students right from the start.

---

### **COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY** (Ed.D. or Ph.D., usually 4 -5 years full time, longer if part time; sometimes less difficult to get into than clinical psychology programs)

Counseling psychology programs usually emphasize training in counseling/psychotherapy methods. These programs also include some training in research methods (stat and experimental courses), but usually are not as rigorous as in clinical psychology programs. However, counseling programs that offer a Ph.D. rather than the traditional Ed.D. often have intensified their research training. Similar to clinical psychology programs, counseling programs require internship experiences and a dissertation. In many cases, the distinction between counseling and clinical psychology programs is disappearing. A counseling program often is completely separate from the psychology department at the university.

Some counseling programs are part time and tend to attract people who are older, working, and/or have families. Counseling psychology programs tend to be perceived as less prestigious than Ph.D. and Psy.D. clinical psychology programs, although these perceptions are based on bias rather than fact.

Counseling psychologists tend to work in group counseling practices, private practice, and programs for special populations (mental retardation, drug addicted, prison settings, battered wives, etc.). Some counseling psychologists may teach at universities - usually in graduate counseling psychology programs and less often at the undergraduate level or in psychology departments.

---

**Ph.D. CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY** (5 years minimum, usually longer; full time; difficult to get into)

These programs educate students about issues related to mental health and mental health treatment. Many programs emphasize research and will require you to take courses in statistics and experimental design. You will be expected to conduct experimental research, which will culminate in your dissertation. A dissertation is a year long research project that you design and conduct on your own (with help from a committee of faculty members).

Most programs are behavioral, cognitive, biological, or psychoanalytic in their approach. Some programs mix all of the above. A few are humanistic/existential. During the first few years in a clinical program you will get some training in psychotherapy and psychological testing, but the most intense clinical training usually comes later during an internship. A few Ph.D. clinical psychology programs underplay the research component and spend more time on training you to do psychotherapy. But most programs weigh heavily on the research.

All clinical programs require you to do an **internship**, usually in your fifth or sixth year. During that year you work full time in a hospital, clinic, or mental health center. The internship usually is separate from your graduate program. It may be in a different part of the country. Usually it is up to you to apply for an internship. Yes, it's another application and interviewing process all over again!

Clinical psychologists usually end up teaching at universities, working in hospitals and clinics, or in private practice.

---

**PSY.D. CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY** (4-5 years; full or part time; difficult to get into)

These programs lead to the degree "Doctor of Psychology" rather than the traditional Ph.D. ("Doctor of Philosophy"). They were created as an alternative to Ph.D. clinical psychology programs. They are designed for people who specifically want to practice psychology and are not interested in quantitative research. There is some research training, but much more time is spent on learning the various aspects of clinical work (individual and group psychotherapy, testing, marriage and family counseling, etc.). Usually more internship type experiences in a wider variety of settings is required than in Ph.D. programs.

Psy.D. clinical psychologists usually work in hospitals, clinics, and private practice.

Psy.D. programs tend to have more students per class than Ph.D. programs as many as 30 or 40, as compared to 5 or 10 in the Ph.D. programs. The Psy.D. degree tends to be perceived as less prestigious than the Ph.D., although this perception is based more on bias than fact. California has an extensive Psy.D. system.

---

### **CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK** (MSW, 2-3 years full time, longer if part time)

Social work programs are an alternative to psychology training. "Clinical" social work programs teach students about working in the mental health and social welfare systems. Training in counseling and psychotherapy sometimes is not as extensive as in psychology programs, especially Psy.D. programs. Research usually is not emphasized. Many clinical social workers do individual and group psychotherapy. Social work programs may be easy or difficult to get into depending on the reputation of the university.

Clinical social workers work in hospitals, clinics, specialized programs, and private practice. An MSW degree tends to be perceived as less prestigious than a doctorate degree in psychology.

---

### **SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY** (approx. 4-5 years for Ph.D. or Ed.D., 2-3 years for masters degree)

School psychologists are training to do counseling and psychological testing in a school setting. Their strength, therefore, is their understanding of school systems and education. They may work with the children in the school or the staff. Some school psychologists may also have a private practice. Some school psychology programs offer the Ed.D. Others, which may place more emphasis on research training, will offer the Ph.D.

---

### **APA APPROVAL**

Some counseling, school, and clinical psychology programs (Ph.D. or Psy.D.) have been approved by the American Psychological Association. This means that the program meets the APA guidelines for "good" training. The APA book *Graduate Study in Psychology* will tell you if a program is approved or not. It is much more difficult to get into these programs. Graduating from them may open more doors for you later on. But people from non APA approved programs can still have productive, fulfilling careers.

If a program is not approved, it could mean several things. The program may have lost its approval or has been unable to attain it - which is a bad sign. Or the program may be in the process of applying for approval - which is a good sign since it may be an up and coming program. Or the program may not care about applying for APA approval - which usually is a bad sign, although there are a few excellent training facilities which aren't concerned about APA approval.

Internships in clinical and counseling psychology also will be APA approved or not. Usually APA approved internships prefer students from APA approved graduate programs. Jobs in the mental health field sometimes require that a person had an APA approved internship.

---

## **WORKING IN BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY (Industrial/Organizational Psychology)**

Some psychologists work in the business world doing psychological assessments, testing, interpersonal mediation, group dynamic assessments, and workshops (on stress, depression, communication skills, etc.). These psychologists may be employed by a specific company or may offer their services "free lance." Many of these psychologists graduate from clinical and counseling psychological programs. Others have Master's degrees. Some graduate programs specialize in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, although there are not many of them.

---

## **LICENSING TO PRACTICE PSYCHOLOGY (and having a "private" practice)**

In order to practice psychology (and have your own practice) you must be licensed by the state. Most states require approximately two years of supervised experience AFTER you get your Ph.D., Psy.D., or Ed.D. You must also pass a national multiple choice exam and, in many states, present a case study to a board of psychologists. You cannot advertise yourself as a "psychologist" or say that you offer "psychological" services unless you are licensed. These terms are protected by law. Being licensed also enables you to receive payment from your clients' insurance companies.

The A.P.A. recognizes four major specialties in applied psychology: clinical, counseling, school, and industrial/organizational. All professionals, regardless of their specialty, take the same state licensing exam. If they pass the exam, all carry the same legal title in the eyes of the state: "Psychologist"

Clinical social workers also are permitted to have private practices as long as they have been licensed by the state.

In many states (but not all) people with masters degrees are not permitted to have their own private practice.