Becoming a Counseling or Clinical Psychologist: Tips for Admission to Graduate School

STUDENT AFFILIATES SEVENTEEN (SAS)
HTTP://WWW.DIV17.ORG/SAS/
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY

NOVEMBER, 2011
Graduate School: Today’s Topics

- How to choose the type of degree to seek
  - Master’s degree vs. doctoral level degree
    - Very brief comparison of each
- How to prepare to apply for graduate school in psychology
  - Materials you will need
  - Steps you will need to take
Master’s Level or Doctoral Program?

- **Master’s**
  - About 1.5 to 2 years full-time
  - May be able to complete part-time, but usually full-time
  - Scope of practice is more focused (e.g., you may be trained in therapy but not research or assessment).
  - Admission rates are much higher than for doctoral programs
    - GRE (Graduate Record Examination) and GPA do not need to be as high
  - Some master’s programs are designed to prepare you for doctoral-level programs, whereas others are designed to prepare you to work immediately upon graduation.
    - Make sure the goals of the program fit your goals!

Source: Gelso & Fretz (2001)
Master’s Level or Doctoral Program?

- Doctoral-Level
  - Usually at least 5-6 years (Ph.D.) or 4-5 years (Psy.D.)
  - Need higher GPA and GRE scores for admission than for master’s programs
  - More independence and opportunities
    - e.g., assessment, teaching, research, consulting
  - More opportunity for leadership positions
  - Higher salary post-degree
  - Need doctoral-level degree to become a licensed psychologist
    - Can conduct therapy with an appropriate master’s degree (and licensure). Will be credentialed as a “counselor” or “therapist” rather than a psychologist.

Source: Gelso & Fretz (2001)
Types of Doctoral Degrees

- For Counseling Psychology, a Ph.D. is most typical
  - A few programs offer the Ed.D. (Doctorate of Education) or Psy.D.
- For Clinical Psychology, Ph.D. or Psy.D. (Doctorate of Psychology) is most typical
  - Psy. D. is not common in Counseling Psychology

Source: Gelso & Fretz, 2001
Types of Doctoral Degrees

- What is a Psy.D.?
  - Practice-oriented → Unlike in most Ph.D. programs, learning to conduct research is not typically a focus
  - Usually about a year less to complete than a Ph.D.
  - Because there is less research, you are less likely to get funded as a graduate student
    - Consequentially, the average debt upon graduation is much higher
  - If you want to eventually be a faculty member or conduct research, a Ph.D. may be a better option. However, if you are interested solely in practice, you may want to consider a Psy.D. degree.
Average number of applications to clinical doctoral programs (270) is higher than counseling psychology doctoral programs (130), but acceptance rates are similar:

- 6 to 8% (Norcross, 2000)
- Clinical – 9%; Counseling -10% (APA, 2010a)

Of those accepted (Norcross, 2000):

- Two thirds are women
- Ethnic minorities: Counseling - 25% vs. Clinical – 18%
- Two thirds baccalaureate level and one third masters level
Admissions

• It helps to have majored in psychology as an undergraduate
  ○ You may gain admission to a graduate program without having majored in psychology, but you typically still need to have taken a substantial number of psychology credits
    ▪ Depends on each particular program

• If you earn a Master’s degree, some of the credits can be used to fulfill the prerequisites of a doctoral degree
  ○ “Advanced Standing”
  ○ Practicum and internship credits typically will not be waived
What You Need to Apply to Graduate School in Psychology

• Each of the following is needed to apply to graduate school and will be discussed in the following slides ...
  ◦ GRE Score Report
  ◦ Copies of Academic Transcripts
  ◦ Research Experience
  ◦ Curriculum Vitae
  ◦ Letters of Recommendation
  ◦ Personal Statement
  ◦ Extracurricular/Leadership Activities
  ◦ Application for Admission
Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

- GRE General Test
  - Test of general ability
  - Computer based
  - Kind of like the SAT or ACT, but for graduate school
  - Required virtually all doctoral programs and many Master’s programs
  - Three Sections: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Analytical Writing
  - Be sure to take the GRE as early as possible, long before your graduate school applications are due
    - Can take several weeks to receive GRE results
  - Visit the [GRE webpage](#) for more Information
Major Changes for GRE General Test

• Test underwent major changes in August 2011
• Still has same three sections: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Analytical Writing
• New types of questions
• Scores are not on the same scale as the previous GRE test
  ○ Verbal Reasoning and Quantitative Reasoning scores now range from 130-170 (one point increments) instead of 200-800 (10 point increments)
  ○ Analytical Writing scores still range from 0 to 6
  ○ Score conversion charts are available on GRE website: http://www.ets.org/s/gre/pdf/concordance_information.pdf
Major Changes for GRE General Test

- Be sure to buy a study guide that reflects the new format!
- If you recently took the old test, it will still be valid (schools will be provided with conversion tables by ETS).
- For more information about the changes, visit http://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/know
- Bear in mind that many of the numbers provided in this presentation are based on the old version of the GRE
  - Sufficient data is not yet available on the new GRE
Scores Needed For Doctoral Program:
- Depends on each program, but typically a combined score (verbal + quantitative) of at least 1100-1200 is required. Higher for some programs.
- GRE scores of students in clinical and counseling psychology doctoral programs
  - Mean \( \rightarrow \) 1248 (Norcross, 2000)
    - Average GRE Score in clinical psychology is *slightly* higher than in counseling psychology
  - Median \( \rightarrow \) 1219 (APA, 2010b)

Scores Needed for Master’s Program:
- May need combined verbal/quantitative score of at least 1000
- For some programs, not required
GRE General Test

- **Cost:** ~$160
- **Preparation:**
  - Classes (check with your school, search online)
  - Buy a preparation book
    - Kaplan, Princeton Review, and Barron’s all offer GRE study guides
  - Hire a tutor
  - Take practice exams
  - Be sure to begin studying early!
GRE Subject Test

- GRE Psychology Subject Test
  - Separate from the GRE General Test
  - Tests knowledge specific to psychology
  - Cost: ~$140
  - Unlike the GRE General Tests, the subject test is only offered a few times throughout the year
    - Be sure to plan in advance!
  - Many programs do not require the psychology subject test
    - Check the admission requirements for each program to which you are applying
  - For more information, visit the Subject Test section of the GRE website:
    http://www.ets.org/gre/subject/about/content/psychology
• **Doctoral Programs:**
  - Need undergraduate GPA of at least around 3.5 to be competitive (Gelso & Fretz, 2001).
  - Average minimum undergraduate GPA needed to be considered for admission to a psychology doctoral program, as rated by doctoral programs (APA, 2010b):
    - Overall GPA: 3.06; Psychology GPA: 3.13
  - Average undergraduate GPA of students in clinical and counseling psychology doctoral programs (Norcross, 2000):
    - Overall GPA: 3.5; Psychology GPA: 3.7
  - Median undergraduate GPA of students in psychology doctoral programs (APA, 2010b):
    - Overall GPA: 3.56; Psychology GPA: 3.69
Academic Transcripts & GPA

- **Master’s Programs:**
  - Undergraduate GPA: Minimum of at least approximately 3.0 (Gelso & Fretz, 2001).
  - Average undergraduate GPA of students in Master’s programs (APA, 2010b):
    - Overall GPA: 3.4; Psychology GPA: 3.48

- **Academic Transcripts (cont.)**
  - Visit registrar’s office of your undergraduate school to have official transcripts sent to each graduate program to which you are applying
  - Prepare to pay a fee for each transcript sent
Research Experience

- Research Experience
  - Important for admission to many Ph.D. programs
    - Some programs value research experience more than others
  - Get involved with professors on their research as early as you can
  - Work on your own research projects, if possible
  - Try to present at national, regional, and local conferences
  - Any publications are very helpful
Curriculum Vitae (CV)

- Detailed, autobiographical summary
- Like a résumé, but typically much much longer
- Commonly used when applying for academic or research positions
- Very important, as this is where your qualifications are conveyed
- Typical sections for a psychology CV may include...
  - Educational history
  - Clinical experience
  - Teaching experience
  - Research experience
  - Publications/presentations
  - Awards, honors, and memberships
Want your CV to be neat and well-organized, but not “flashy”

Be sure to proofread your CV many times over
- Spelling or grammatical mistakes create a bad impression

Can take on many different forms
- People have differing opinions as to what makes a good CV

Be sure to be truthful and not to “pad” your CV

Search the web for resources on constructing a CV
- Have faculty members help you as well

Helpful Guides:
- D. Gard, “Writing Your CV”
Letters of Recommendation

- Doctoral programs will typically require 3-4 letters of recommendation
  - Usually written by your professors (preferred by many programs)
  - May also be able to include a letter from a supervisor in a clinical setting
  - Check the application requirements for each program to which you are applying in order to ensure that you are requesting letters of recommendation from appropriate individuals

- One of the most important aspects of your application!
  - Graduate programs typically place a greater emphasis on letters of recommendation than any other part of your application (Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2006).
Letters of Recommendation

- The best way to earn a good letter of recommendation is to be a good student.
- Try to form relationships with faculty members:
  - e.g., work with professors on research, show an investment in your training.
- Be sure to ask for the letters of recommendation weeks (or even months) in advance:
  - Asking for a letter at the last minute may result in a poorly-written letter.
- Do not be afraid to ask professors if they believe they can write you a “good” letter of recommendation!
Letters of Recommendation

- Make the process **as easy as possible** for the letter writers
  - Otherwise, your letter writers may decline to write the letter, or the quality of the letter may be compromised
  - Keep in mind that professors are not *required* to write you a letter of recommendation
  - Be sure you are courteous and thankful
  - Provide information such as relevant classes taken, career goals, clinical and research experience, etc.
    - Can be helpful to provide the writers with a copy of your CV

- **Waive your right to see the letter**
  - Graduate programs will hold these letters in higher regard
Letters of Recommendation

- Be organized and provide explicit written instructions for each letter of recommendation
  - e.g., How is each letter to be submitted? Should they be mailed or is electronic submission used? Should the letters be directly mailed to the school or returned to you? What is the name of each school and program to which you are applying? By when does each letter need to be completed?
  - Be sure to provide the name, title, and mailing address of the person to whom each letter should be addressed
  - If letters need to be mailed, you may want to provide a self-addressed stamped envelope for each letter.

- Check with each letter writer to learn his/her preferences
- Check with each school to be sure your letters of recommendation have been received
Personal Statement

- Personal Statement
  - Also known as the admissions essay or statement of purpose
  - One of the most important aspects of your application (Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2006).
  - May cover your background information, reasons for applying to graduate school in psychology, why you are applying to a particular program, your career goals ...
  - Relatively short: typically 1-3 pages maximum (check admission requirements for each school to see if there is a required length)
Personal Statement

• The following information is derived from:
    • Visit this site for an excellent guide on preparing your personal statement

• Your personal statement should include:
  ○ Academic Accomplishments
  ○ Research Experience
  ○ Employment/Volunteer Work/Clinical Experience
  ○ Future Plans/Goodness of Fit
There are many good resources on the web providing advice and guidance on preparing personal statements.

- **General Guidelines:**
  - Go through several drafts ... continually work to improve your personal statement.
  - Proofread!
  - Avoid cliché statements.
  - Your interests and goals should relate to those of the program.
  - Cater each essay to the particular program to which you are applying.
    - May also want to cater essay to the faculty member with whom you would like to work.
Personal Statement

- **General Guidelines (cont.):**
  - Be sure to explain why the field is a good fit for you, as well as why the particular program is a good fit.
  - For more guidelines on writing personal statements, visit the OWL at Purdue’s Website:
    - [Section on Writing Personal Statements](#)
  - Advice from SUNY Plattsburgh on writing personal statements:
    - [Personal Statements](#)
Clinical Experience and Extracurricular Activities

- **Work Experience or Clinically-related Experience**
  - Importance depends on the program
  - For doctoral programs, other application components may be more important

- **Extracurricular and Leadership Activities**
  - These can help build your vitae, but are usually not as important as other factors in gaining acceptance to a program (Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2006).
    - GPA, Personal Statement, Letters of Recommendation, GRE scores, and Research Experience (for a Ph.D. program) should be more of a focus
Other Considerations

- Complete graduate school application for each program
  - Can expect to pay at least $35-75 per application
- “Hidden Requirements” and Recommendations
  - Search the websites for each program
- Be sure to set aside funds for travel costs for interviews
  - Better to interview in-person if possible, as opposed to phone interviews
- Be prepared for the interviews!
Additional Tips

- Apply to as many programs as possible
  - Personally, I would recommend 12-15 programs
- Have a back-up plan
  - If you are applying to Ph.D. programs, and do not gain admission, then what?
  - May want to apply to Master’s programs as well
- The application process can be grueling ...
  - Try not to overload yourself during your senior year, as you will be busy applying and interviewing
Additional Tips

- Do not forget to schedule in self-care
  - Still need to have fun!
- Make sure programs are APA-accredited!
- Due to the internship crisis, it is essential to consider a program’s internship match rate before deciding to attend!
Additional Tips

• **Consider:**
  - What do you do if you are not accepted?
  - What do you do if you get an interview?

• **Take the time to decide which programs truly match your interests and goals**
  - Educate yourself

• **Enjoy the journey 😊**
Additional Resources

• Books:
  - *Graduate Study in Psychology*, by the APA
  - *Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology*, by the APA.
Additional Resources

- **Articles:**
  - *Graduate Admissions in Psychology: I. The Application Process*, by Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski
  - *Graduate Admissions in Psychology: II. Acceptance Rates and Financial Considerations*, by Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski
  - APA’s 2009 Doctorate Employment Survey
    - Has average salaries, level of debt upon graduation, and a plethora of other great information.
  - Search for other articles in *Eye on Psi Chi* or elsewhere on the web
References


