

# Graduate Education in Clinical Psychology

## *Facts and Hints for Interested Students*

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There are many misconceptions about the training of mental health professionals that lead people who are interested in the field astray, costing them significant amounts of time and financial resources. This article will provide useful information concerning the training of clinical psychologists. Subsequent papers in this series will address similar concerns involving other types of mental health professionals.

To begin with, if you are interested in becoming a psychologist in order to work with mental health patients or to provide psychotherapy and assessment services, you must decide what type of psychologist you want to be. In general, *clinical* psychologists are those who provide such services. There are many other types of psychologists, and some of them are able to do essentially the same work as clinical psychologists. These would include counseling and school psychologists who obtain degrees from psychology programs. However, all other types of psychologists are not generally able to provide psychotherapy or assessment. Thus, obtaining degrees in areas of psychology such as social, child, developmental, physiological, educational, experimental, or industrial psychology would likely not lead to an ability to work with patients. Many schools with programs in these non-clinical areas do not understand this and will give incorrect information to applicants to their programs. I have personally seen heartbreaking cases of students who spent large amounts of money and several years of their lives obtaining a degree in fields such as educational psychology, only to discover that they were not able to work as a clinician.

The best advice I can give somebody interested in working with patients as a psychologist is to obtain a doctoral degree in clinical psychology from a program approved by the American Psychological Association. You can then work in any area of psychology, including child, industrial, school, etc. While obtaining a degree from a non-APA approved program could possibly allow you to become licensed as a psychologist in your state, something that is necessary to work as a psychologist, the process of licensure would be much more tenuous and difficult. A list of APA approved programs can be found on the APA website.

In order to enter into a doctoral clinical psychology program, one must have a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited undergraduate school. The undergraduate major is not necessarily of importance, as long as a number of psychology courses are taken. Different doctoral programs have various requirements for undergraduate courses, and the prospective

student should check with schools they are applying to in order to ensure that they have the proper course credits. Obtaining a master's degree before applying to a doctoral program is not necessary, and in some cases actually hurts one's chances of admission. Many college advisers tell students that they should obtain a master's degree to enhance their application, but the time spent in such a program frequently turns out to be of no benefit. Actually, particularly in Ph.D. programs, students who apply with MA degrees are not chosen specifically because the doctoral program would prefer to have full control over training of the student, and does not want to give credit for courses taken in another school.

The issue of professional schools that typically award Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) degrees as opposed to Universities that award the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree has caused a great deal of confusion for many prospective students. The Psy.D. degree has been around since the 60's, and was started by the University of Illinois. These programs are typically referred to as professional schools, because they have a major focus of training practitioners. Usually in such a program the various faculty have extensive clinical experience and tailor many courses to help students develop clinical skills. Research training is a part of these programs, but the goal is not to produce graduates who specialize in teaching and/or research. The dissertation in these programs can take many forms, and does not necessarily involve collecting and analyzing data.

Ph.D. programs in psychology typically aim to produce graduates who enter research and/or teaching careers. Many courses may be taught by faculty who do not have extensive clinical experience, and in these programs it is often assumed that students are not primarily interested in developing clinical skills in order to practice as a clinician.

There are many variations in the training approaches used by various psychology doctoral programs, and there are some Ph.D. programs that have extensive clinical training segments. There are also many Psy.D. programs that have a significant research component to their training. Many programs have specialty training components, such as child clinical, neuropsychology, or health psychology. However, in all APA approved programs there is a core of clinical and research training that must be covered. Thus, it is very important that the prospective student look into the specific nature of any school they intend to apply to before submitting an application.

Following the doctoral degree training, which typically takes 4-6 years and includes a dissertation, the student must apply for a year-long internship. This usually is not attached to the doctoral program, and the application process is lengthy and very competitive. A number of doctoral students each year do not obtain an internship because of the insufficient number of them available. Having a good internship is very important for the psychologist in training, as this will be a part of their resume that will lead to many opportunities during their career. Some internships are more valued than others, such as those approved by APA or another

organization, APPIC. Thus, it is important for the prospective student to investigate the percentage of graduates from the program they intend to apply to who obtain APA or APPIC approved internships.

The cost of graduate education in clinical psychology can be daunting. There are sources of funding for this, but many students, particularly those in professional schools, are faced with obtaining their own financial resources. While most Ph.D. programs provide some type of assistance to their students, they also typically require about 20 hours a week of work as a teaching or research assistant for this funding. Students in professional schools can, on the other hand, work part time, often in a psychology field as an assistant, and cover many or all of the costs of their education. It is also the case that Ph.D. programs take, on average, about a year longer to complete, so this must be factored into one's analysis of the overall cost of the education. In any case, it is important for the prospective student to be fully aware of the costs of their education and plan ahead.

Of course, there are many other issues involved in graduate training in clinical psychology. In my opinion, one of the best ways to obtain information about this is to talk to practicing professional psychologists. They are the ones who have gone through the process of training and eventual licensure, and have probably kept current with trends in the field.

*A note about the author: Dr Nick DeFilippis has over 25 years of graduate teaching experience in the field of clinical psychology. Since 1990 he has held a half time position as Professor at the Georgia School of Professional Psychology, an APA approved clinical psychology doctoral training program. He can be reached through the link on this website for comments and/or questions about the topic discussed in this article.*