

## **XII. Graduate School In Psychology**

Before discussing such topics as Applying to Graduate School, it might prove helpful to give a brief summary of just what graduate school is. Graduate school is post-graduate education, taking an average of 2 years for the master's degree and 4-5 years for the Ph.D. or Psy.D. ("doctoral") degree (5-6 years in clinical or counseling psychology).

There are a number of significant ways in which graduate school differs from your undergraduate experience. First, the credit-hour load will be lighter in graduate school. Nine or twelve credits, rather than 15-18, per semester is a typical graduate load. You can, however, presume that each course will demand a fair amount of time. Second, you will take psychology courses almost exclusively.

Third, your professors will give you more freedom, and thus increased responsibility, regarding the entire learning process -- ranging from completion of assigned work (no one will nag you!), selection of courses, and class attendance. In a phrase, you will be expected to develop into mature, independent scholars.

Fourth, class sizes will be smaller. Some seminar courses will have as few as five students, in which each is expected to master a special topic and "teach" his or her fellow students. In lecture courses, the professor will often expect you to master the textbook, while he or she talks about related material. In addition, scholarly work in the library is often expected. Finally, you will probably experience a closer bond between yourself, fellow students, and your professors due to the preceding points and also to the smaller student/faculty ratio. Many people find that the tight psychological and social bonds formed in graduate school remain throughout their lives.

### **Must I Go to Graduate School?**

No. Graduate school in psychology is not the only option when one receives a bachelor's degree in psychology. Many students have found rewarding work with a B.S. or some advanced study in a related area outside psychology. See Section XI for additional careers with a bachelor's degree.

### **Should I Go to Graduate School?**

There is no universally correct answer to this question. Each person must decide for him or herself. Here are several questions to consider when making your decision:

Do you have aspirations of a career which will allow you both vertical mobility (i.e., promotional and salary ladders) and horizontal mobility (i.e., the opportunity for one to switch from one area to another with the same career)? People with a doctorate have more career choices open to them than masters' level psychologists in the same area. They start at higher positions than those without advanced training.

Do you want a career with a higher income? People with doctorates are usually hired at a higher salary than other people.

Are you satisfied with the knowledge of psychology you have now? A B.S. gives you a foundation of knowledge. To gain further expertise and sharpen your talents, graduate school is the place to go. Of course, the benefits of an advanced degree only come after more effort and application of yourself.

## How Should I Best Prepare for Graduate School?

The obvious answer is to perform well in all your academic pursuits. Less obvious but equally important is to prepare early for your graduate school career. In fact, a leading advice book on how to apply to graduate school in psychology is subtitled "not for seniors only!"

The two most highly rated *objective* criteria for admission into graduate school are your grade point average (GPA) and your scores on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE: a glorified SAT). The implications are thus clear: maintain a high GPA and prepare thoroughly for the GREs.

The following table reflects what graduate programs look for in undergraduate psychology coursework. These percentages are underestimates because they do not include those schools that simply responded that an undergraduate degree in psychology was required for admission to their program. The message here is: get a strong background in psychology!

**Course Prerequisites for Graduate Programs (N = 1,554)  
Requiring Specific Psychology Courses**

| Course   | Required | Preferred | Required or preferred |
|--|----------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Statistics   | 56%      | 29%       | 85%                   |
| Research Methods   | 40%      | 26%       | 66%                   |
| Childhood/Developmental  | 11%      | 24%       | 35%                   |
| Abnormal/Psychopathology   | 16%      | 17%       | 33%                   |
| Learning/Conditioning  | 9%       | 20%       | 29%                   |
| Personality  | 12%      | 16%       | 28%                   |
| Physiological/Biopsychology  | 6%       | 19%       | 25%                   |
| Social   | 5%       | 19%       | 24%                   |
| Psych Testing  | 10%      | 8%        | 18%                   |
| History & Systems  | 5%       | 12%       | 17%                   |
| Cognitive  | 4%       | 9%        | 13%                   |
| Lab course   | 8%       | 4%        | 12%                   |
| Sensation & Perception   | 3%       | 8%        | 11%                   |
| <b>Source:</b> Norcross, J.C., Hanych, J.M., & Terranova, R.D. (1996). Graduate study in psychology: 1992-1993. <i>American Psychologist</i> , 51, 631-643 |          |           |                       |

Research has investigated the importance accorded to the multiple criteria used for admissions decisions. This information is summarized in the following table. The numbers are average ratings of the criterion's importance for admission into graduate programs where 3 = high importance, 2 = moderate importance, and 1 = low importance.

### Importance of Criteria in Admissions Decisions

| Criteria                          | Master's |     | Doctoral |     |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----|----------|-----|
|                                   | M        | SD  | M        | SD  |
| Letters of recommendation         | 2.74     | .49 | 2.82     | .42 |
| Personal statement/goals          | 2.63     | .55 | 2.81     | .41 |
| GPA                               | 2.75     | .43 | 2.74     | .45 |
| Interview                         | 2.30     | .76 | 2.62     | .60 |
| Research experience               | 2.04     | .74 | 2.54     | .65 |
| GRE scores                        | 2.36     | .66 | 2.50     | .55 |
| Clinically related public service | 1.94     | .70 | 1.91     | .69 |
| Work experience                   | 1.91     | .65 | 1.87     | .68 |
| Extracurricular activity          | 1.46     | .54 | 1.41     | .55 |

Means are calculated where 1 = low importance, 2 = medium importance, and 3 = high importance.

**Source:** Norcross, J. C., Kohout, J. L., & Wicherski, M. (2005). Graduate study in psychology: 1971 to 2004. *American Psychologist*, 60, 959-975.

In general, letters of recommendation and research activity are accorded high importance; work experience and clinical service are given medium importance; extracurricular activity are accorded low importance. Although research experience is weighted heavily by master's programs, doctoral programs rate it even more heavily in their admission decisions. Conversely, master's programs weigh service more heavily than doctoral programs. Field experience is accorded medium weight but extracurricular activities, such as Psi Chi membership, are given little weight.

#### Do I Need Letters of Recommendation?

Yes, usually a minimum of three recommendations are required. Students have the option to waive or not waive the right to see the recommendation. Applied research and consensus of opinion indicate that a more accurate evaluation is given when a student waives his/her right of access.

Also, a personal statement and a curriculum vitae (résumé) are usually required. It gives one the chance to distinguish oneself from the other applicants; in a sense it is an opportunity to "sell oneself."

#### What Sort of Credentials Do I Need for Graduate School?

The following tables provide some information for both doctoral and master's programs.

**Median Program Acceptance Rates in Psychology**  
(% of students who apply and are accepted to a particular program)

| Area                                 | Master's         | Doctoral |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Clinical Psychology                  | 37%              | (table)  |
| Clinical Neuropsychology             | ---              | 26%      |
| Cognitive Psychology                 | 40%              | 16%      |
| Community Psychology                 | 61%              | 24%      |
| Counseling Psychology                | 63%              | 12%      |
| Developmental Psychology             | 44%              | 20%      |
| Educational Psychology               | 57%              | 48%      |
| Experimental Psychology              | 39%              | 15%      |
| Health Psychology                    | 41%              | 16%      |
| Industrial/Organizational Psychology | 52%              | 27%      |
| Neuroscience                         | 32% <sup>a</sup> | 15%      |
| Quantitative Psychology              | 78%              | 36%      |
| School Psychology                    | 34%              | 31%      |
| Social & Personality Psychology      | 39%              | 12%      |

**Source:** American Psychological Association. (2010). *Graduate applications, acceptances, enrollments, and degrees awarded to master's- and doctoral-level students in U.S. and Canadian graduate departments of psychology: 2008-2009*.

These are median acceptance rates for individual graduate programs, *not* the acceptance rate for the entire applicant pool in any given year. For example, an average of 16% of the applicants to any one cognitive psychology doctoral program will be accepted to that *particular* program, but approximately 40% of the entire applicant pool will be accepted to *some* program.

**Average Acceptance Rates for APA-Accredited Clinical Psychology Programs**

|                        | Freestanding<br>Psy.D. | University-<br>based Psy.D. | Practice-<br>oriented Ph.D. | Equal-<br>emphasis Ph.D. | Research-<br>oriented Ph.D. |
|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Number of applications | 227                    | 163                         | 155                         | 160                      | 183                         |
| Number of acceptances  | 108                    | 58                          | 18                          | 16                       | 12                          |
| Acceptance rate        | 50%                    | 40%                         | 16%                         | 14%                      | 7%                          |

**Source:** Data from Norcross, Ellis, & Sayette (2010).

**Average GPAs and GREs of First-Year Graduate Students  
in Psychology (by Type of Department)**

| Measure                     | Master's Departments    |                       | Doctoral Departments    |                       |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
|                             | <i>Required</i><br>Mean | <i>Actual</i><br>Mean | <i>Required</i><br>Mean | <i>Actual</i><br>Mean |
| Graduate Record Examination |                         |                       |                         |                       |
| Verbal                      | 150                     | 153                   | 154                     | 158                   |
| Quantitative                | 141                     | 146                   | 145                     | 149                   |
| Verbal + Quantitative       | 290                     | 300                   | 300                     | 308                   |
| GRE Psychology Subject Test | 495                     | 577                   | 552                     | 633                   |
| Grade Point Average         |                         |                       |                         |                       |
| Overall                     | 2.92                    | 3.37                  | 3.11                    | 3.54                  |
| Psychology                  | 3.05                    | 3.48                  | 3.17                    | 3.66                  |

**Source:** Norcross, J. C. Kohout, J. L., & Wicherski, M. (2005). Graduate study in psychology: 1971 to 2004. *American Psychologist*, 60, 959-975.