

## **Graduate School In Psychology:** *Things Every Psychology Major Should Know*

### **DOES EVERY PSYCHOLOGY MAJOR NEED GRADUATE SCHOOL?**

No. A psychology BA is an excellent liberal arts degree, one well respected in business and public service agencies. That is because psychology majors have learned some things about behavior; and, in good programs, they have learned skills for critical thinking and methods for assessing the quality of whatever services their jobs offer the public. Therefore, psychology majors stand at least as good a chance as other majors at landing interesting jobs that are open to graduates with liberal arts degrees.

But there is a catch. If you wish to end up employed *as a psychologist*, you almost invariably will need a graduate degree. Whichever kind of *psychologist* you wish to be--for example, a counseling, school, industrial/organizational (I/O), clinical, research, or teaching psychologist, to name just a few kinds--you will need a master's or doctoral degree. The American Psychological Association (APA) considers doctoral training necessary to be considered a fully trained psychologist.

There are many BA-level jobs that are psychologically related and may carry titles such as "counselor," "psychological technician," "behavior analyst," or "case worker." These are excellent stop-overs for students who wish to stop out for a while before going on to graduate school; but they are typically low-paying jobs with little prospect of significant promotion. There are also many master's-level practitioners in counseling, school, clinical, I/O, etc., who often lead full, satisfying professional lives; but on average they earn less than doctoral-level practitioners, they practice with more supervision, and they find their ascent up the career ladder impeded or blocked at some point. As you will see below, if you have the ability to get a doctoral degree, you would be well-advised not to settle for a master's.

### **It's Never Too Early In College To Start Thinking About Graduate School**

Maybe you have just arrived in college as a freshman, or maybe you have been here a few years already, but either way it is worthwhile to start planning now for your eventual move to graduate school. There are a number of reasons for this: (1) You will want to make sure to get the right UMM background for whatever kind of graduate program you might end up applying for, which sometimes takes advance planning; and (2) timing is important to put you in the best possible position for gaining admission to the best possible graduate program. That timing is sometimes affected by what you do with your program as early as freshman year, and certainly by sophomore year.

For example, if you decide to enter graduate school right after senior year, and if you plan to try for a highly competitive field such as clinical psychology, your chances of admission to an excellent

program are greatly enhanced by having an article under your authorship accepted for publication. This is an ambitious goal, but it is by no means out of reach. Roughly a quarter of UMM psychology majors end up with their name on an article. But to have a publication credit by the time you apply for graduate school during fall of senior year, it needs to be submitted for publication by the end of junior year. This means that you needed to have started the project early in junior year, which in turn means you needed to obtain much of the upper-division background for it during sophomore year, which means you needed to get your lower-division prerequisites completed during freshman year.

None of this is to suggest that you need to make up your mind during your first quarter of college about the rest of your occupational life. Liberal education is a process of self-discovery. Large proportions of UMM students change their minds about majors and about future careers, sometimes several times over, and that is as it should be. But that does not prevent you from formulating contingency plans for the various options you now find most attractive, or from operating on a provisional plan now that you will feel free to change whenever change makes sense to you. That way you will be prepared as well as possible for your final career decision.

## **If You Go To Graduate School, When Is The Best Time? Right After Senior Year Or Wait A While?**

Apply to graduate school when you genuinely feel ready. Stopping out for a year or a few years will typically not disadvantage your application when you do later apply. The important thing for your eventual application is to use the time between undergraduate and graduate school in as constructive a fashion as possible, one that continues to build your skills and knowledge base and keeps you intellectually sharp. If you can work some published research into that interim, you will particularly help your application. Your new graduate department probably realizes that a mature decision to enter their department after stopping out will be more stable than an unreflective decision to go immediately.

## **Graduate Fields Of Psychology And Related Areas**

Before you can apply to a graduate program, you will need to know what specialization within psychology you wish to enter. Unlike undergraduate psychology, graduate programs are not in psychology as a whole but in specializations. There are many such specializations, and the way they are organized and named varies to some extent from one university to the next. Any given department may offer only a limited number of such specializations. Furthermore, some fields that seem to be part of psychology are actually taught outside departments of psychology as such.

One kind of decision that you will need to make first is whether you wish to be primarily an academic psychologist, which means you will engage in higher-education teaching and/or research, or whether you wish primarily to practice some form of applied psychology. This decision is necessary because some fields of psychology offer fewer opportunities for applied jobs than others do. However, there are applications for virtually all kinds of psychology; and, of course, all kinds of psychology,

including applied fields, are taught in colleges and universities. Furthermore, there are limited numbers of research jobs outside universities. Here are some nonexhaustive lists of possibilities:

*Mostly Academic Fields:*

- Animal experimental
- Behavior genetics
- Biological psychology/neuroscience
- Developmental
- Human experimental/perception or learning or cognition
- Personality
- Psychology of women
- Psychopharmacology (with pretty good job prospects in industry as well, including research jobs; also taught in pharmacology departments)
- Quantitative or mathematical psychology
- Social

*Mostly Applied Fields:*

- Clinical (often divided into child and adult specializations)
- Counseling
- Environmental
- Evaluation
- Forensic
- Health psychology/behavioral medicine
- Industrial/organizational (including "human factors")
- Psychometrics/psychological assessment (including research jobs)
- School (also taught in some departments of education)

*Fields Taught Mostly Outside Psychology Departments*

- Cognitive science (taught in psychology, philosophy, and computer science departments)
- Counseling or counseling & guidance (education)
- Family and marriage counseling (family social science and other such departments)
- Psychiatry (medical school plus residency)
- Psychological foundations of education/educational psychology (educational psychology departments)
- Student personnel (education departments)
- Social work (schools of social work; MSW degree)

## What Graduate School Is Like

Getting a graduate degree is not like another two or four years of undergraduate education. The first year or two may involve taking regular courses, but graduate students quickly diversify into seminars, individual research courses, and practicum experiences in applied settings. In applied fields, practicum work may begin as early as the first year and is common by the second year. Full-time internships may begin as early as the third year and are common by the fourth year. Most graduate students are employed up to half-time as teaching or research assistants from their first year of graduate school on or are receiving fellowships or scholarships. Some departments run their own clinics and employ advanced graduate students as counselors or therapists, under close supervision. In most good departments, activities such as these are part of the normal expectation of graduate students, an integral part of their training.

### *Financial Support*

In the best departments of psychology, virtually all graduate students receive support from one or another of the sources described above. Graduate assistantships commonly carry a waiver of tuition in addition to a stipend. The income of a full graduate stipend will not make you wealthy, but, with perhaps a little supplementation, it is usually possible to survive on it. Such stipends are typically in the range of \$6,000 to \$12,000 per year.

Most graduate students who receive aid are supported financially by their departments through assistantships and fellowships, for which you need to apply, usually separately. The National Institute of Mental Health still makes some research training grants available to psychology graduate students. These are administered by the departments you are applying to. The National Science Foundation offers highly competitive fellowships for which you must apply to NSF directly, in both a general category for all applicants and a special category of fellowships for members of ethnic minority groups. These are not available, however, for students in clinical programs.

### *Typical Requirements*

Master's programs typically require a certain number of courses (perhaps a full-time year's worth) plus a master's thesis, which entails an empirical research project along the lines of our UMM psychology major's requirement for an "approved project." Some UMM tutorial projects would qualify as theses, but minimum requirements for master's theses would be higher than minimum requirements of a UMM project. Many master's programs, especially in applied fields, offer alternatives to the thesis. Some master's programs may also require you to pass a general examination.

Doctoral programs typically require about three full-time years' worth of courses (which are often individual research and practicum courses, and sometimes even an internship) and passing doctoral preliminary examinations ("prelims") to qualify you as a "doctoral candidate," after which you may officially start your dissertation. The dissertation is a major original research project and write-up that may take a full-time-equivalent year to complete. After completing your dissertation, you will typically have to pass a final oral examination, which is also called "defending" your dissertation.

Some departments require that you pick up a master's degree en route to the doctoral degree, but many others let you skip it. Some departments have done away with prelims; a few have done away with the dissertation defense.

In the majority that still have the dissertation defense, it takes the form of sitting down with the faculty members on your dissertation committee for a couple of hours and fielding their questions about your dissertation. The purpose of this oral is to probe the extent and depth of your knowledge about your field. However, unless you do something to alarm your committee, the tone of a final oral is more like that of an active, friendly seminar than an examination. The overwhelming majority of candidates pass their orals.

### *Ph.D. versus Psy.D*

The Ph.D. is traditionally a research degree, but it is considered the preferred terminal degree in all branches of psychology, whether academic or applied. In recent decades, some programs have started offering the Psy.D. as a more applied alternative. Most Psy.D.'s are awarded by free-standing professional schools of psychology--i.e., accredited and APA-approved programs not affiliated with universities. Their faculty consist heavily of area practitioners rather than full-time academic faculty, though there are usually a few of those as well. Psy.D. programs have many of the requirements of Ph.D. programs, although they may allow clinical alternatives to the doctoral dissertation.

Psy.D. holders are qualified for applied jobs, as in clinical psychology. However, they are unlikely to be considered for academic employment, and even in clinical settings they may be viewed as holding a degree inferior to the Ph.D. Nevertheless, clinical employers may occasionally prefer Psy.D.'s to Ph.D.'s because of their intensive applied experiences.

### *Activity pattern*

As you go through a graduate program, your activity pattern becomes increasingly like that of the professional you are preparing to become. If you are aiming at an academic career, you will start out as a teaching and/or research assistant, but by your third or later year you may be teaching some of your own courses at instructor rank or working as a research associate or consultant. If you are aiming at, say, a clinical career, you may be holding down a part-time or even full-time clinical job between your internship and the completion of your doctoral dissertation. By the last year of graduate school, some lucky students may be earning nearly as much as their most junior faculty.

### *How Long They Take*

Most master's programs take about two years to complete, although sometimes that can be shaved by a few months. Doctoral programs take four years or more. How much more depends mostly on the student. Doctoral students get involved in such a range of activities, including jobs of various kinds, that finishing the degree can stretch out over many more years than four. The dissertation, in particular, holds some students up if they take a full-time job before they are finished with it. Nevertheless, four years is the intended amount of time for a doctoral program, and four to six years is the most likely amount of time.

### *Master's versus Doctorate*

As you can see from the activity patterns described above, most of the strictly school-like work of a doctoral program is completed in the first couple of years, with the remainder looking increasingly like professional activity. Going for a Ph.D. is therefore not just four to six more years of school. The most school-like part of this period corresponds to the master's. Therefore, if you have the ability and are in a program that offers the doctorate, you may as well go on and finish the doctorate. The long-term economics of the decision suggest that it makes financial as well as educational sense.

## **Getting In**

To get into a graduate program generally requires that you apply by late in the fall quarter or early in the winter quarter before the fall in which you hope to enroll. Few programs will let you begin their program other than in the fall term.

### *Selecting a Graduate School*

*Information resources.* Generally speaking, it is wise to start researching graduate programs during the year before you make application. In psychology, the best single source of information is the APA's *Graduate Study in Psychology*, which comes out in a new edition every two to three years. It lists and describes nearly every graduate program in psychology and related areas in North America, including application information, fees, degree programs, application requirements, admissions criteria, special facilities or orientations, etc. It also has extensive indexes to these programs. APA has also recently published *APA Getting in: A step-by-step plan for gaining admission to graduate school in psychology* (1993). Additionally, there is Mayne & Sayette's *Insider's guide to graduate programs in clinical psychology*. The first two books are available from APA, the last from Guilford. All are reasonably priced paper cover books.

However, these books are just a starting point, a basis for screening out departments that won't do and screening in those worth looking at more closely. Other resources include the information these programs will send you if you request it; your UMM faculty, who often have information about particular programs that you cannot find in published material; and, importantly, the basic journal literature in psychology. If you know the kind of research or practice that interests you, you can go to *Psychological Abstracts* or PsychINFO in the UMM Briggs Library and find out who is doing it and where they are located. Their departments may then become prime targets for your applications, assuming that the programs also meet your other criteria.

*APA approval of programs.* The American Psychological Association evaluates doctoral programs in applied fields such as clinical, counseling, and industrial/organizational psychology. If you wish to apply to a doctoral program in these fields, be sure to check whether it is "APA-approved." Employers strongly discriminate against applicants with degrees from unapproved programs.

### *How Many Applications?*

Lots, especially in highly competitive areas such as clinical or counseling psychology. Assuming your grades and test scores are competitive, a good department will still have many more good applicants like you than it can admit. It is hard for graduate admission committees to make rational decisions under those conditions. Therefore, getting admitted is something of a lottery. The more applications you make, the better your chances of winning the lottery someplace. A Penn State University study once found that their undergraduate students reached a 50-50 chance of admission in some graduate program with about a dozen applications. Applying to 15 to 20 places is therefore entirely prudent. This may seem expensive, but the long-term pay-off more than makes up for the expense.

It is a good idea to stratify your applications. That is, apply to all the places you most wish to go to, but apply also to some that, although they do not excite you, would still fit your needs, and also a few that you really would rather not attend but that, if worse came to worst, would be better than nothing. That way, you reduce your risk of "getting skunked."

### *Some Words of Advice on Applications and References*

Much of any application calls for routine information. Make sure you do a complete, neat, professional-looking job of supplying this. And, of course, be truthful. However, within the bounds of truth about yourself, you will be well-advised to tailor your application to the particular program to which you are applying.

*The personal statement.* Most applications require a **personal statement**. In writing this, bear in mind the position of the faculty on the other end who will judge it. University faculty make their reputations and, indirectly, their salary levels by virtue of research and publication. Inevitably, they will judge your application at least in part according to the likelihood that you will help them advance their research programs. Therefore, insofar as it accords with truth, be sure to mention research interests (anything from nerve membrane chemistry to the taxonomy of schizophrenia), skills, and experiences (lab, computer, statistical, bibliographic, clinical, etc.) that fit the needs of the faculty to whom you are applying. You can sharpen your statements by finding out from the department or from *Psychological Abstracts* what the faculty are researching, and then orient your essay accordingly.

If you are applying to a department with a doctoral program in your area, you are best advised to express interest in completing the doctorate. Some of these departments are prejudiced against applicants who expect to stop with a master's degree.

In stating your interests and long-term goals, keep in mind that programs vary in how much they look for interests in research or application. Programs that are in predominantly academic specializations, such as biopsychology or personality, will probably favor applicants who express strong interest in research, or perhaps in research and teaching. In research universities, the emphasis will predictably be on research interests, and applicants who express an interest in purely undergraduate teaching without significant research involvement will be disadvantaged. Even in applied areas such as clinical psychology, graduate programs in research universities see their role as mostly training the researchers and teachers of future clinicians rather than training clinicians who will themselves primarily practice clinically. On the other hand, programs in nonresearch institutions may specifically want to train clinical practitioners.

In any event, write well--you are *demonstrating* an important skill here--and sling psychological terminology in as mature and sophisticated a fashion as you can. Wanting to "help people" will typically not get you far in a personal statement. You need to state your history, interests, goals, and abilities with as much sophistication, precision, and differentiation as you can muster. Avoid empty embellishment and rhetoric. Keep your statement lean, punchy, and packed with relevant information. Your application will benefit if you give the faculty reader the impression that you are already well socialized into her/his psychological culture, as if you already were a member of the club and only needed the formality of a degree--while simultaneously giving an impression of appropriate humility and modesty, but without too much toadying, as if you can hardly wait to benefit from the program to which you are applying. It's quite a trick to do all this well!

*Letters of recommendation.* You will need letters of recommendation. Insofar as possible, get letters from your undergraduate faculty who know you best, preferably not just from class. Here is an instance where you need long advance planning. Try to get involved in faculty research or teaching assistantships early, preferably with more than one faculty member, and do an outstanding job. The most effective letters portray you in all dimensions, glow about you, and give the reader the feeling that admitting you would practically be admitting a peer. Those letters are most likely to come from faculty with whom you have worked closely and who have had positive experiences with you.

One more important piece of advice: Shore up your references' knowledge and memories of you by giving them your resumé ("curriculum vitae," in academic parlance) along with the reference blank. Put on the resumé everything bragworthy about yourself that you can think of, provided that it is relevant to your academic development and future career: GPA, test scores, extracurricular and volunteer activities, student government or other campus offices held, employment history, relevant courses and grades (you might just want to provide a transcript), special skills, publications or major research projects and papers, etc. With all that information, you will get stronger letters out of your faculty.

#### *Admissions Criteria and How Best to Meet Them*

The most basic criteria are your grade average (GPA) and test scores, usually the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). However, as indicated above, if you are applying to very competitive programs, excellent grades and GRE scores merely buy you a lottery ticket to the competition. Without them, you are sunk. With them, you have a chance.

*The best single way to pull yourself above the general lottery is to have a scientific article accepted for publication, preferably in a refereed journal* (i.e., one that sends articles to reviewers and accepts them subject to good reviews), by the time you apply. This still does not guarantee you admission, but it will substantially improve your chances. The proportion of your competitors who have publications in press is very small. However, perhaps a quarter of UMM psychology majors end up with their name on a published article or chapter. The trick is to have this happen in time for your application.

*Grade Point Average.* Aim for a GPA of at least 3.5 if you seek admission to a competitive department; but the closer you get to 4.0, the better your chances. A fine GPA based on courses that

include more difficult ones, such as those with clear scientific and mathematical content, may be more highly regarded than a GPA based on less demanding courses.

*Graduate Record Examination.* Aim for GRE scores of over 600 or 650 on each of the verbal and quantitative sections of the GRE. Lower scores will keep you out of some highly competitive programs almost no matter what else you do, especially in clinical psychology. However, you may still get admitted to a range of less competitive programs.

You can get information and application forms for the GRE at the UMM Counseling Service. It is given several times a year, and you need to apply several weeks in advance to be assured of a place. It will take Educational Testing Service (ETS, which offers the GRE) four to six weeks after you take the test to report your scores, which means you need to schedule the test at least six weeks before the earliest application deadline for which you need it. Most applicants take it during the October before they apply, but if you have serious doubts regarding your ability to do well, you may want to take it earlier to allow time for a retake. Generally, you are best off waiting as long as feasible, because additional education is likely to benefit your performance. However, if you plan to stop out of school before going on to graduate school, you may want to take it while you are still intellectually as sharp as possible. Mental abilities can deteriorate without practice.

GRE scores are supposed to measure your basic academic ability, and you should theoretically not have to study for them, but *don't believe this*. Nowadays, most of your competition is preparing specifically for the GRE. ETS makes available some materials to guide you. There are also books available. University of Minnesota Continuing Education and Extension has offered a noncredit fall course in the Twin Cities (2½ hours in each of three evening sessions) to help prepare for the GRE. But, increasingly, applicants are enrolling in courses designed to coach you for the GRE. These are typically offered by private companies such as the "Stanley H. Kaplan Educational Center Ltd.," which provide a diagnostic analysis of your strengths and weaknesses for the GRE and offer specific remedial and coaching experiences for maximizing your performance. Opinion is divided regarding how much these courses actually add to your scores, but they undoubtedly help somewhat.

The cheapest and most effective way to prepare for the GRE starts in preschool, but early in your college career is not too late: systematically build your vocabulary and mathematical skills. There are plenty of vocabulary books around, and they are worthwhile; but the best vocabulary-building comes from reading material that is written in a rich vocabulary and from *always looking up any words you read or hear that you do not understand precisely*. Then make sure you use them in speaking and writing.

Uncommon words are usually not just pretentious versions of common words. They usually carry special nuances and connotations that equip you to communicate more precisely. Just as a good carpenter would not use just any chisel or screwdriver for a given job, though they all look like chisels or screwdrivers, words that have related meanings may be best suited for rather different uses. Unfortunately, publishers since the 1960s have tended to "dumb down" textbooks, mass and trade books, newspapers and magazines, by eliminating less common words. As a result, they have linguistically impoverished much of what you read. You will need to look into the scientific, scholarly, or serious literary literature to stretch your vocabulary.

It follows, too, that you should not expect your faculty to avoid using words you do not already know. If they did, they would be communicating more sloppily than necessary, and they would be denying you opportunities to build your vocabulary. Vocabulary is best learned in context (and by looking up words!) rather than in vocabulary drills.

It is harder to work on your mathematical skills without taking courses in math, but you can help yourself additionally by not shrinking from math when you have an opportunity to use it, by making sure you really understand (in a precise way) mathematical expressions you encounter, and, in psychology, plunging into its statistical aspects.

### *Visits, Gifts, and Offers to Volunteer*

It is perfectly appropriate to visit a department and to talk to faculty and graduate students as a way of sizing it up for yourself. Some students do this to help them decide whether to apply. Many successful applicants do this to help them decide which offer of admission to accept. Conversations with current graduate students are especially likely to provide you with insights into the realities of the program.

If you visit a department, bear in mind that this is a two-way interview. You may be looking for information, but inevitably you are also leaving an impression of yourself. Therefore, it is important that you have read as much as you can of the publications of the faculty you talk with and generally be knowledgeable about their fields. One good way to initiate contact with faculty you have identified as interesting to you is to write them, telling them about yourself and requesting reprints and description of their current research--again, without toadying.

However, never give the impression of bribing or manipulating the faculty you meet. Give no gifts, and do not offer to volunteer your research or other services before admission to the program unless you are already an undergraduate student in that department or there is some other compelling, nonmanipulative reason to do so.

### *How Does Being a UMM Graduate Affect Your Chances?*

Most likely in a positive direction. Graduate programs acquainted with our UMM psychology program hold it in high regard. Our graduates have uniformly performed well in the graduate programs they have entered. Most report that they are better prepared than the average of their graduate classmates.

## What If You Don't Get In?

The admissions process is very imperfect. Most applicants make several or many applications, which means that any one program receives masses of applications, typically many times more than they can admit. Admissions committees are often swamped with high-quality applications and are therefore hard put to make rational decisions. Any given program is likely to reject perfectly able, competitive applicants. Don't take the rejection personally.

Chances are that if you compile a superior academic record and follow the strategies described above, you will be accepted somewhere. However, some applicants may receive only rejections. In our long experience with UMM psychology graduates, this has happened in only a handful of cases. What do you do then? Do you need to hang it up and leave psychology? Not necessarily. There are a number of options.

One option is to spend some time reducing your negatives and enhancing your positives, and then reapplying in a future year. For example, if your GPA was a bit shaky, you could take more courses and get A's. If the problem was your GRE scores, you could work on improving those skills and retaking it. You could perform some good research and get it accepted for publication. If you want to become a practitioner, you could get some BA-level professional experience, pay off debts and save up money, and then reapply, perhaps to a free-standing professional program whose admissions criteria may be more flexible but may also emphasize experience and maturity.

If you are after the doctorate but can get admitted only to master's programs, you may wish to look for a good, rigorous master's program that acts as a "feeder" program to doctoral programs elsewhere. Such master's programs provide a way for you to prove your abilities and strengthen your chances of admission to a doctoral program. But beware: most terminal master's programs are not effective feeder programs. Their graduates have little advantage in gaining admission as compared with applicants who have only BA's. Even from a good feeder program, you will lose some time as compared to starting in a doctoral program in the first place; but it is a strategy that has in the end worked well for a number of UMM graduates.

Anyhow, remember that as a graduate of UMM psychology, you go out with an educational advantage. You have reasons for optimism, and we are behind you all the way, ready to help in whatever way we can, both now and later after you graduate. We wish you the very best of luck!

## **Additional Resources**

American Psychological Association (1993). *Getting in: A step-by-step plan for gaining admission to graduate school in psychology*.

American Psychological Association (2003). *Graduate Study in Psychology*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association.

Hayes, L. J., & Hayes, S. C. (1989). How to apply to graduate school. *APS Observer*, 2 (5).

Mayne, T., & Sayette, M. (1990). *Insider's guide to graduate programs in clinical psychology* (1990-91 edition). New York: Guilford.

See also the web sites of the American Psychological Association ([www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)) and American Psychological Society ([www.psychologicalscience.org](http://www.psychologicalscience.org)).