

Introduction to Clinical Psychology 9e

Douglas A. Bernstein, Bethany A. Teachman, Bunmi O. Olatunji, and Scott O.

Lilienfeld

Chapter 16

Getting into Graduate School in Clinical Psychology

**What Types of Graduate Programs Will Help Me Meet My Career Goals?
Am I Ready to Make the Commitment Required By Graduate Programs At This
Time In My Life?
Are My Credentials Strong Enough For Graduate School In Clinical Psychology?
I Have Decided to Apply To Graduate School In Clinical Psychology. What Should I
Do Now?**

Chapter Preview: Students ask a number of questions when they are thinking of applying to graduate school in clinical psychology. In this chapter, we hope to answer some of those questions and to pose some others that potential applicants need to consider. We know this is an anxiety-provoking process for most students, so we want to demystify the process as much as possible! We begin by addressing questions related to deciding whether to apply to graduate school in clinical psychology, and then discuss the logistics of doing so. We dispense with our usual Section Previews and Section Summaries and present instead a “frequently asked questions” format in which headings provide the questions and the paragraphs that follow provide the answers.

What Types Of Graduate Programs Will Help Me Meet My Career Goals?

In thinking about a career in psychology, the first questions you must ask yourself are, “What type of career do I want?” and “What types of graduate programs are available to meet my career goals?” The field of psychology offers many career options, so we suggest that you read the APA’s free brochure called “Psychology: Scientific Problem

Solvers—Careers for the 21st Century.” You can find it online at www.apa.org/careers/resources/guides/careers.pdf. For more detailed information, there are entire books written about career options for psychology undergraduates (e.g., Morgan & Korschgen, 2013). Of course there are many career options available within clinical psychology itself, and the Council of University Directors of Clinical Psychology has put together some excellent resources on selecting and applying to programs that will be a good fit for you. You can access the resources at <http://clinicalpsychgradschool.org/>.

Research versus Clinical Emphasis?

All university-based graduate programs in clinical psychology provide training in research as well as in clinical service delivery, and most provide training related to teaching psychology as well, but there are differences in emphasis from one institution to another. It is worth your effort to learn about each program’s emphasis when you are gathering other information about their programs. Subtle differences in a program’s description (e.g., scientist–practitioner vs. clinical scientist; see Chapter 15) may reveal a great deal about the program’s training emphasis.

If your primary career interest is in *research* on mental health, psychopathology, prevention, and treatment, then a PhD program in clinical psychology is probably your best option. These programs typically offer the most training in research, the most focused time on conducting research, and widest variety of clinical research opportunities. As described in Chapter 1, clinical researchers find careers in a variety of mental health settings, hospitals, medical schools, government, public, and private agencies. Research-oriented clinical PhD programs also provide training and supervision

in clinical work, so graduates of these programs typically have the option of shifting into clinical work as long as they have kept their licensure requirements up to date. In fact, most clinical psychology doctoral graduates will end up in more than one role, even if they spend the bulk of their time on research.

Certain nonclinical psychology PhD programs may also provide avenues to clinical research. Graduates of programs in developmental psychology, personality psychology, cognitive neuroscience, experimental psychopathology, or social psychology sometimes conduct research with important clinical applications (e.g., childhood psychopathology, positive psychology). These strictly research-oriented, nonclinical programs are expected to make their focus clear in their descriptive information and will typically refrain from using “clinical psychology” as a program title. These programs tend to attract fewer applicants than clinical programs do, and, though still quite difficult to get into, may be less competitive than clinical programs. However, clinical research options may be more limited in these programs than in clinical PhD programs, and graduates of nonclinical programs will *not* be eligible for psychotherapy licensure or practice.

If your primary interest is in clinical work, especially therapy, then there are a number of options both inside and outside of clinical psychology. First, if you are most interested in doing assessment, rather than therapy, we encourage you to look into programs in school psychology, clinical neuroscience, or forensic psychology, all of which include a strong focus on assessment, though the populations their graduates mainly work with differ (e.g., children with potential learning disabilities, older adults with cognitive impairment, individuals involved with the legal system). All accredited

clinical psychology programs will also include some training in assessment as well as therapy.

In Chapter 1, we described several mental health professions other than clinical psychology whose graduates engage in assessment, psychotherapy, or counseling. These include counseling psychology, school psychology, social work, rehabilitation counseling, marriage and family therapy, psychiatry, and psychiatric nursing, among others. We do not have the space here to provide details about the graduate admission requirements for each of these fields, but you can find this information at the websites of professional organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers, the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

Also note that the U. S. Government's Bureau of Labor Statistics has a searchable database on "Occupational Employment Statistics" at www.bls.gov/oes/ that can help you compare incomes earned by people in these various professions. For instance, you can read about occupational employment and wages across different work settings for clinical, counseling, and school psychologists at <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes193031.htm>.

MA, PhD, or PsyD?

Many students seem to think that if they want to do clinical work, they must enter a PhD program in clinical psychology. In fact, approximately four times as many students get master's degrees in psychology as get doctoral degrees (American Psychological Association, 2018). Further, the growth of managed health care systems has stimulated the job market at the master's-degree level for those seeking a career in direct clinical

service. Thus, the master's degree in clinical psychology is a more marketable degree than it had been in the past. Further, what was seen as the biggest drawback to the master's degree—the need for continual supervision from a licensed PhD psychologist—may be changing. The state of Kentucky, for example, allows master's-level psychologists to be licensed to work independently after they meet certain training and professional experience requirements. Other states, such as Florida, allow professionals with a master's degree in a mental health–related field (such as clinical or counseling psychology, or rehabilitation counseling) to seek licensure as an independently practicing mental health counselor. Thus, if you are interested in having a full-time clinical career and if you have limited interest in research training, you may want to consider pursuing a master's degree in clinical psychology or in a related field (Martin, 2011).

The master's degree does carry some limitations, though. In most states, if you want to be licensed as a psychologist (which means that you can actually use the term *psychologist* rather than another term like *counselor* or *psychological associate*), you have to have either a PhD or a PsyD. How and whether that will change over time is uncertain, but there are reasons to think that master's degree guidelines may be shifting. For instance, in January 2019, the American Psychological Association prepared a report exploring the possibility of starting to accredit master's programs.

Still, income levels are typically lower for master's-level clinicians, and advancement opportunities are fewer. Certain career opportunities, such as being a professor at a college or university, or being awarded clinical research grants are often unavailable to those without a doctorate. Further, employment settings may be somewhat more limited for master's-level clinicians. Thus, the doctoral degree gives you more

flexibility, which can be helpful given that your career interests will likely change somewhat over your life span. However, if you are sure that you only want to do clinical work (as opposed to a combination of research and direct service), then you may want to consider earning a master's degree so that you can begin to seek your desired job sooner. The bottom line is that this is a time of some transition for clinically-related master's degrees, so while the growth of managed care systems has stimulated the job market at the master's degree level, be certain that the jobs available will match your career goals before opting for a master's degree.

At the doctoral level, you have the choice of PhD and PsyD programs. Traditionally, the PhD degree is considered the terminal degree in clinical psychology. As described in Chapter 15, PsyD programs tend to emphasize clinical training while reducing the emphasis on research. However, it is important to remember that PsyD programs themselves vary considerably. As mentioned in Chapter 1, some follow the *Boulder model* and emphasize research almost as much as some PhD programs do, while others adopt the *Vail model* and emphasize research considerably less. Programs that deemphasize research still require that students acquire knowledge of statistics and research methods, but students are usually not required to conduct an empirically-based thesis or dissertation and the level of statistical training may be less intensive.

Another difference between PhD and PsyD programs is that the latter are often not affiliated with a specific psychology department or even with a university. Freestanding professional schools generally place the least emphasis on research training. These programs are attractive to some students because they so clearly emphasize practice over research and because, for reasons described below, they generally have

considerably less stringent selection criteria than PhD clinical programs (see Table 16.1). However, some cautionary notes are necessary. First, because these programs are in stand-alone institutions, their financial support comes mainly from students' tuition fees, and as in medical schools and law schools, the fees can be quite high and there is often little or no financial aid available. In contrast, most clinical PhD programs offer their students some financial support, including tuition fee waivers and stipends as research or teaching assistants. Second, if PsyD programs are to turn a profit, or at least break even, they have to accept a large number of students (e.g., as many as 100) each year. This means that students may not get the same individual attention that they would in a PhD program, where the entering class may include only three to ten students. Finally, the relatively weaker research training in many of these programs means that graduates are less likely to find employment in research-oriented clinical positions or to combine research with their clinical work. These points are summarized in Table 16.2, which presents myths and realities about getting into doctoral degree programs in clinical psychology.

TABLE 16.1 Average Acceptance Rates for APA-Accredited Clinical Psychology Programs

	Freestanding PsyD	University-based PsyD	Practice-oriented PhD	Equal-emphasis PhD	Research-oriented PhD
Number of applications	227	163	155	160	183
Number of acceptances	108	58	18	16	12

Acceptance rate	50%	40%	16%	14%	7%
-----------------	-----	-----	-----	-----	----

Source: From *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology*, 2018/2019 Edition, by M. A. Sayette and J. C. Norcross, 2018, p. 54 (New York: Guilford Press). Copyright 2018 by Guilford Press. Data drawn from Norcross, Ellis, & Sayette (2010). Used with permission.

TABLE 16.2 Myths and Realities about Clinical Psychology Graduate Training

Topic	Myth	Reality
Graduate school acceptance rate	Anyone can get into a PsyD program, but it is very difficult to get into a PhD program.	Among APA-accredited programs, PsyD programs accept about 50% of applicants—some higher, some lower. PhD programs accept about 7–16% of applicants—some higher, some lower. Although there are more PhD programs, the number of PsyD degrees awarded each year exceeds the annual number of PhD degrees awarded.
Financial assistance	You cannot get financial aid if you attend a PsyD program, but all PhD students get aid.	There is considerable variability in the amount of financial aid offered in PsyD and PhD programs. While only 1% of students in <i>free-standing</i> PsyD programs received both a tuition waiver and financial support through an assistantship or fellowship in 2007, the figure was 17% for <i>university-based</i> PsyD programs. For practice-oriented PhD programs, it was 42%, while for research-oriented PhD programs, it was 89%.
	Faculty in traditional PhD programs are mostly cognitive-	A cognitive-behavioral orientation is the most

Theoretical orientation of clinical faculty	behavioral, while those in PsyD programs are psychodynamic and humanistic.	frequently cited one in PhD and PsyD clinical programs. University-based graduate departments tend to have higher percentages of faculty endorsing a cognitive-behavioral perspective. The percentage of faculty endorsing humanistic orientations, though lower than cognitive-behavioral, is highest in freestanding schools.
Training in evidence-based practice	PsyD programs do not train students in empirically tested psychotherapies.	Most programs offer some training in treatments that have been defined in manuals and found efficacious in at least two well-controlled randomized clinical studies, but few require both didactic and clinical supervision in conducting these treatments. PsyD programs have the highest percentage of programs (67%) not requiring it.
Performance on national licensing board exam	PsyD students are not well prepared for the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP).	PsyD students score lower on average on the national licensing exam, but there is great variability. Higher exam scores are more reliably associated with smaller-sized clinical programs, better faculty-to-student ratios, and traditional (Boulder model) PhD curricula.

Sources: Norcross, J. C., Castle, P. H., Sayette, M. A., & Mayne, T. J. (2004). The PsyD: Heterogeneity in practitioner training. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35, 412–419; Norcross, J. C., Ellis, J. L., & Sayette, M. A. (2010). Getting in and getting money: A comparative analysis of admission standards, acceptance rates, and financial assistance across the research–practice continuum in clinical psychology

programs. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 4(2), 99; Sayette, M. A., & Norcross, J. C. (2018). *Insider's guide to graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology: 2018/2019 edition*. New York, NY: Guilford; Weissman, M. M., Verdell, H., Gameraoff, M. J., Bledsoe, S. E., Betts, K., et al. (2006). National survey of psychotherapy training in psychiatry, psychology, and social work. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 63, 925–934.

AM I READY TO MAKE THE COMMITMENT REQUIRED BY GRADUATE PROGRAMS AT THIS TIME IN MY LIFE?

After exploring the career options available with master's and PhD degrees, and after careful consideration of what you want to achieve, suppose you have decided that a doctoral program in clinical psychology offers you the most career flexibility and the best chance to achieve your research and clinical goals. The next question you have to ask yourself is whether you are prepared to make the major commitments in time, money, and physical and emotional energy that are required to succeed in such a program.

Time Commitments

Your typical weekly activities in a clinical psychology doctoral program will shift over time. In the first few years, it is common to take several classes each semester, but by the third or fourth year, you will probably be finished with coursework. While completing that coursework, you may work as a teaching assistant or research assistant (often for 10-20 hours per week), and participate in a clinical practicum in which you will conduct assessments, therapy, or other clinical services for 8 to 20 hours a week, depending on where you are assigned to work. In addition, you will be expected to make progress on independent research toward completion of your masters thesis and doctoral dissertation. In more research-oriented programs, you will also be expected to publish and present your research at conferences. Thus, it is not unusual for graduate students in clinical programs to work well over 40 hours per week throughout the year. Unlike many

undergraduates, doctoral students view the summer as a time to focus on making progress on their research and other writing.

On average, it takes five to seven years to complete a doctoral program; the first five or six years are spent in residence at the program site, and then one year is spent completing a full-time clinical internship. The internship is a paying job, but it does not typically pay well, so be aware that unless you have independent financial resources, completing a doctoral program means living for a number of years on low wages and perhaps taking on additional student debt. Depending on the state in which you wish to work, you may also have to take a one- or two-year postdoctoral position in order to obtain the necessary supervised clinical experience required for licensure. Thus, it may take anywhere from 6 to 9 years after starting graduate school before you are ready to venture fully into the job market. Generally, the more research-oriented a graduate program is, the longer it will take to complete because in addition to completing their clinical, teaching, and coursework requirements, students also need to be very productive in their research to be competitive for desirable research positions.

All in all, becoming a Ph.D. clinical psychologist is a lengthy and demanding process, so be sure it is really what you want before you start applying for training.

Financial Commitments

Given the high cost of graduate education, the majority of graduate students in doctoral programs end up borrowing money. The debt they incur varies with the type of program they attend. A 2009 survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found that approximately 90 percent of recent PsyD graduates and 61 percent of PhD graduates had some type of debt after completing their degrees (Michalski, Kohout, Wicherski, &

Hart, 2009), and that higher debt was associated with the more practice-oriented, less research-oriented, programs. The average debt load carried by graduates of PhD psychology programs was nearly \$58,000; the figure for PsyD graduates was nearly \$103,000. Beginning salaries in clinical psychology are not high enough to make it easy to pay off these debts; it often takes 10 to 15 years.

As already mentioned, many graduate programs offer their students income opportunities, usually in the form of assistantships or financial aid. Although funding has increased over the years, the median teaching assistant or research assistant stipends continue to be modest for a 20-hour-per-week position. A 2010 report found that the median pay for teaching and research assistants at public universities was between \$12,000 and \$13,000 for the 9-month academic year (Sayette & Norcross, 2018), though we have seen stipends rise considerably in the past decade such that assistantships of \$20,000 or more are no longer unusual at top programs. Many universities also offer fellowships and scholarships, which are usually given as work-free grants to support and encourage students with outstanding academic and research potential. For example, it is not uncommon for programs to offer fellowships that will increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the students in the program. Many programs also provide some form of tuition remission. They may offer complete remission, meaning that the student pays no tuition at all, or they offer some tuition reduction (e.g., half), and cover students' health insurance fees. Alternatively, the program may allow out-of-state students to pay in-state tuition.

As we mentioned earlier, many programs, especially those at freestanding professional schools, do not offer funding to the large majority of students. One survey of

APA-accredited clinical psychology doctoral programs found that approximately 6 percent of students entering a freestanding practice-oriented PsyD program were offered full financial aid, compared to 57 percent of students in practice-research PhD programs and 84 percent of students in research-oriented PhD programs (Norcross, Castle, Sayette, & Mayne, 2004). Thus, the type of program you are seeking will likely have a large impact on your pocketbook.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Loan Repayment Program has added some much needed help for psychology graduates with student loan debt (Clay, 2006). This program offers different types of loan repayment options, depending on a graduate's research interests (e.g., patient-oriented research, health disparities research, pediatric research). For example, if graduates commit to working at least half time for two years in a NIH-relevant research-oriented position (e.g., working on nonprofit or government-subsidized research in the areas of clinical or pediatric psychology), they can receive up to \$35,000 per year to repay their student loans, and students can apply for more than one year of this funding. This federal program is in great demand, so the funding is in no way guaranteed, but it has helped a great many research-oriented students to decrease their debt while also adding to the research knowledge needed to help clients. Clinically-oriented students can seek loan repayment assistance through the National Health Service Corps (Clay, 2006). Those who commit to working for at least two years in an underserved area of the United States (such as an impoverished urban area or a rural or tribal community with limited health care services) can apply to have a significant portion of their loans repaid. The amount varies depending on the community's Health Professional Shortage Area score, but it can be as much as \$50,000 for providers working

full time for two years in a community with a high score, and those providers may be able to pay off all of their student loans if they continue their service there. This program is also in great demand because it allows successful applicants to reduce or eliminate their debt while also helping provide psychological services to individuals who might not otherwise have access to such services.

More information on the NIH Loan Repayment Program and the National Health Service Corp program can be found on the Internet. Both are subject to change, so make sure to check the most up-to-date information when you are close to completing your graduate degree.

Academic and Emotional Commitments

In addition to the financial costs associated with doctoral programs in clinical psychology, you will be expected to make other commitments. For one thing, you will be asked to work harder than you likely ever have in your previous academic endeavors. In addition, given the competitiveness of clinical psychology PhD programs, the majority of students will have to uproot themselves from friends and family to relocate to the school where they are accepted. Another move is likely when students are accepted for their full time internship toward the end of their graduate program, and perhaps yet another when the time comes to seek a postdoctoral fellowship or a first job.

We are not presenting this admittedly sobering information to discourage you from applying to doctoral programs in clinical psychology. Rather, we are doing so to help you better prepare for the initial decision-making process through which all potential applicants should go before they spend the hundreds of dollars and numerous hours needed to apply to graduate programs in clinical psychology. It is worth noting, too, that

many prospective students are not accepted anywhere the first time around and so must go through the application process more than once. This is especially true if they are seeking admission only to the most competitive research-oriented doctoral programs.

Fortunately, and contrary to what you might have heard, your application to graduate school in clinical psychology will not be jeopardized if you decide—or are forced by circumstances—to put your education on hold for a while after completing your undergraduate studies. In fact, this academic break can enhance your application if you are able to obtain a position in the field, either as a research assistant or as a mental health worker of some kind. Both of these options will help document your commitment to the field as well as give you valuable experience and further insight in helping to decide your future. If you cannot obtain paid research or clinical positions, try to find a volunteer position in these areas. Even volunteering to work ten hours per week in a lab while working a regular job to pay bills can make a big difference in the competitiveness of your subsequent graduate school application. If you are located near a university, consider taking one or more graduate courses in psychology or a related discipline. This, too, will help document your commitment to the field and may help you decide whether graduate school is right for you. Although your inclination may be to take clinically related courses, graduate admissions committees will probably be more impressed if you take (and do well in) graduate courses in non-clinical areas, such as statistics, research design, or advanced seminars (e.g., learning theory or cognitive neuroscience). You might get credit for these latter courses when you enter a graduate program, though many clinical programs will require that you repeat any clinically related courses you may have taken previously because they want to expose you to their specific brand of training.

We should also mention that for many clinical psychologists, graduate school was an exciting and rewarding time. Despite the workload and relative poverty, there were riches in terms of learning, personal growth, and relationships with friends and colleagues. It is also heartening to know that graduates tend to be relatively satisfied with their jobs after they complete graduate school (see Table 16.3).

TABLE 16.3 Recent PhD Graduates' Satisfaction with Their Current Job

Based on a large survey of students who graduated with a PhD in psychology in 2009, the following numbers reflect the percentage of recent graduates who were either satisfied or very satisfied with these characteristics in their current job:

Income/salary	66.7%
Benefits	75.4%
Opportunities for promotion	62.2%
Opportunities for personal development	77.4%
Opportunities for recognition	75.2%
Supervisor	77.2%
Coworkers	84.6%
Working conditions	81.2%

Source: Data from Table 5c of the APA 2009 Doctorate Employment Survey (www.apa.org/workforce/publications/09-doc-empl/table-5abc.pdf).

Deciding whether it is worth it to you to make the sacrifices required for graduate school will depend on many factors, including your expected job satisfaction and your view of the lifestyle you anticipate once you've graduated. Financial rewards are one part of these considerations. In Chapter 1, we reviewed some salary figures from the APA, and you can find estimates for clinical, counseling, and school psychologists at the website of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. While it can be somewhat misleading to look at results when these different degrees and disciplines are grouped

together, the data are nonetheless intriguing. The mean annual wage nationally for 2018 graduates is listed at \$85,340, though there is considerable variability depending on the work setting and region of the country. For instance, the mean annual wage for psychologists working in elementary and secondary schools is \$78,970, while it is \$96,930 for those working in the offices of other health practitioners. Further, psychologists working in Vallejo-Fairfield, California have a mean annual wage of \$119,110 while those working in the West Montana non-metropolitan area have a mean annual wage of \$54,090.

ARE MY CREDENTIALS STRONG ENOUGH FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY?

In order to evaluate your credentials objectively and to be aware of your strengths and weaknesses, it is important to understand the criteria employed by graduate admissions committees in clinical psychology. These include: (a) the requisite undergraduate experiences, especially research experience and, to a lesser extent, coursework; (b) Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores; (c) grade point average (GPA); and (d) letters of recommendation. Each graduate program may weigh these criteria differently, and programs will examine other factors (e.g., personal statements, interviews) as well, but all of these criteria tend to be used, to some extent at least, by all doctoral clinical programs.

Undergraduate Coursework and Experience

Your undergraduate years offer the opportunity not only to take courses but also to gain career-relevant experience in psychology.

Coursework. Your undergraduate department will have designed a graduate preparatory major to meet your course needs. It will probably include a core program of introductory

psychology, statistics, and experimental psychology/research methods (including a laboratory). These are the minimum requirements for most graduate programs, regardless of specialization area. Note that a class in research methods has been identified as the most important class for students who seek training at the doctoral level in a clinical psychology PhD program (Sayette & Norcross, 2018). For careers in clinically oriented fields, you also might consider taking courses such as abnormal psychology, abnormal child psychology, introduction to clinical psychology, clinical research methods, tests and measurement, and other courses that are specific to your area of interest. It is rarely necessary to take more than one or two of these basic clinical survey classes, so we encourage you to also take advanced seminars where you can learn about a topic in depth. Some programs also allow highly motivated undergraduate students with strong grades to take a graduate class as a non-degree-seeking student. All of these courses should help you come to a clearer decision as to what type of career you wish to pursue, and they should can help you score higher on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) Subject Test in Psychology if you are required to take it.

Research Experience. While standard coursework can help you determine what areas of psychology interest you most and demonstrate your basic competence as a student, research experience is typically considered more critical for demonstrating your qualifications for conducting doctoral-level work. Independent research such as an honors thesis and experience as a research assistant (working as a volunteer, for pay, or for course credit) are very helpful, in general, and essential for entry into PhD programs.

There are many reasons for gaining research experience prior to applying to doctoral programs in clinical psychology. First, the PhD in clinical psychology is both a

research degree and a clinical degree, and in many programs you will spend more of your graduate training on research than on clinical work. Admissions committees want to ensure that applicants understand what is involved in research and that they are excited about and committed to research activities. Second, working on several research projects will give you a deeper understanding of what research in graduate school will be like. It is not unusual for undergraduate students to sign up as research assistants simply because they know that the experience will help their application to graduate school, but then find that they truly love being involved in research. Others find that research is really not for them, and so they reconsider their plan to apply to research-oriented PhD clinical programs. Third, working with faculty on their research is an excellent way to obtain letters of recommendation that define more precisely and credibly your potential for graduate school. Fourth, working on research projects can help you decide which research areas you would (and would not) like to pursue in graduate school. This information, in turn, will help you apply to those psychology departments whose faculty members are working in the areas of your greatest interest. Finally, research experience serves as an excellent basis for discussion with faculty during any graduate school interviews that you might later have as part of the application process.

Recent years have seen a trend in which an increasing number of interviewees for PhD programs have undertaken an independent honors thesis or capstone research experience. Many successful applicants to research-oriented clinical programs have already presented their research at a conference (perhaps as co-author on a poster) or have been a co-author on a published research article. Such publication credentials are typically considered the most impressive and prestigious evidence of research experience

because they indicate that an applicant has made extensive and conceptual contributions to work in the field. Needless to say, applicants who have no research experience are at a distinct disadvantage during the interview process, because they do not have the depth of knowledge that comes with working intensively on a specific research project.

Clinical Experience. If you think you want to be a clinician, but have never worked with a clinical population, we encourage you to consider gaining some clinical experience.

Often, structured programs (e.g., suicide or crisis hotlines, or child advocacy groups such as *guardian ad litem* organizations) will provide excellent training as well as close supervision for your volunteer work. Working with clients who have psychological problems can be very demanding, and it is not for everyone. We know of a number of professors who had planned to become clinicians but changed their minds after volunteering in a clinical facility. Others found that the experience confirmed their belief that the work would be challenging and rewarding. For some people, hearing in-depth, personal stories about others' emotional pain and trauma makes it difficult for them to enjoy their own lives, and the caregiver's empathy leads to sustained sadness as they carry that emotional weight outside the clinical setting. Others are able to be empathic and emotionally connected while in the clinical setting, but can still enjoy their lives outside the clinical setting, often drawing motivation from their clinical work to figure out new approaches to better address the problems affecting their clients. Both responses are understandable, but before applying for graduate training it is helpful to figure out how intense contact with others' emotional pain will affect you.

Although clinical experience can be valuable in helping students decide whether the mental health profession is the field for them, and in knowing which clinical areas

(e.g., child, substance use) they are especially interested in, clinical experience is not typically deemed especially important by those involved in graduate program admissions. This is especially true for PhD programs in clinical psychology, where members of admissions committees may see interest in and aptitude for clinical work as quite common, whereas they are looking for those relatively few applicants who have the genuine interest and requisite skills for a long research career. Undergraduate clinical experience is valued to a greater degree by admission committees selecting students for training at the master's level in psychology or social work, as well as for PsyD, or school or counseling psychology programs, all of which put more emphasis on clinical training.

Extracurricular Activities Participation in extracurricular activities, including psychology clubs and honor societies such as Psi Chi or Psi Beta, can help you learn about the field and come into contact with professionals from various specializations. Many psychology clubs provide talks on careers in psychology, how to prepare for the GREs, and how to apply to graduate school. Being a member of these groups will help you learn more about the field, but membership alone will not add significantly to your application for graduate school. Being in a leadership position in one of these organizations, however, will likely strengthen your application because it suggests that you have initiative and leadership skills and it may also lead to a strong and detailed letter of recommendation from the organization's faculty advisor.

Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores

Most graduate schools use standardized tests to assist them in evaluating applicants. The most common example is the GRE, including both the General Test and, less frequently, the Psychology Subject Test. Students often do not like to hear this, but performance on

the GRE is a valid predictor of success in graduate school as measured by a variety of outcome measures, such as graduate GPA, publication citation counts, and faculty ratings (Kuncel & Hezlett, 2007).

Many people worry about whether the wording or structure of GRE items might be more familiar to people of a particular gender, or racial, ethnic or other group, thus giving certain groups an advantage over others. Fortunately, research on this question has generally suggested little evidence of bias (Kuncel & Hezlett, 2007). Thus, the GRE can provide useful data to compare applicants in an objective way. Still, admissions committees typically try to view each applicant as a person who can be evaluated via multiple indicators of their potential for success in graduate school. Ideally, no single score or indicator is overemphasized.

Students often ask what GRE scores are necessary to get past the initial screenings used by admission committees. This is a difficult question because, first, programs vary considerably in the range of GRE scores they expect from their incoming students. Second, graduate programs often do not have strict GRE cutoff scores but instead employ guidelines as to what they are looking for. For example, the minimally acceptable GRE scores reported by schools in the graduate guidebooks tend to be considerably below the median scores of the entering graduate classes (Morgan & Korschgen, 2013). In other words, if your GRE scores are just at or a little above the minimally acceptable scores reported by a school (e.g., at the 50th percentile on each subtest), you probably will not be admitted to that program. To be a strong candidate for admission to an APA-accredited PhD clinical program, it would be ideal for you to score 150 or above on the quantitative and verbal scales of the revised general GRE test. That

said, there is certainly variability in expected scores across schools, and students with other very strong aspects of their admissions package may not require as high GRE scores to be competitive (see Sayette & Norcross, 2018, p. 45). We discuss the GRE in more detail later in this chapter.

Grade Point Average

Whereas the GRE is seen as a predictor of certain key abilities that will be useful in graduate school, undergraduate GPA is seen as an indicator of the effort exerted in college and the ability to learn new material and to demonstrate that learning on tests and other standard academic tasks. Once again, it is impossible to offer absolute guidelines as to what PhD clinical programs are looking for when they examine an applicant's undergraduate GPA. Surveys of entering classes in PhD clinical programs suggest that a psychology GPA of at least 3.5 or 3.6 (on a 4-point scale) is typically necessary to be a strong candidate for admission (Sayette & Norcross, 2018). The expected GPA is usually lower for PsyD or less research-oriented programs. Thus, if your GPA is somewhat marginal, consider trying to improve it by repeating courses in which you did poorly. For example, if you earned a B-minus in undergraduate statistics, you would be well advised to retake the course. Otherwise, admission committees may be concerned about your ability to handle more difficult graduate statistics courses, where a B-minus is the minimally acceptable grade. Some students with marginal GPAs take additional courses after graduation (e.g., via a post-baccalaureate program) so that their application package can include grades in addition to those in their undergraduate transcript. If your overall GPA is being brought down by a particular course or poor performance in a particular

semester, you should provide some context to help selection committees understand the situation (e.g., that you had a health problem that has since been resolved).

As mentioned earlier, efforts are being made by many graduate programs these days to consider students' applications as a whole, rather than focusing heavily on any single score, like the GPA. These efforts are aimed partly at increasing the diversity of clinical psychology graduate students by reducing the impact of potential bias in the selection process (e.g., failing to take into account the negative impact of discrimination on academic performance; see Billingsley & Hurd, 2019).

Letters of Recommendation

When reading letters of recommendation, admissions committee members tend to look for comments relating to the applicant's overall potential for graduate school, willingness to work hard and show initiative, intellectual curiosity and openness to feedback, level of interpersonal skills, ability to work collaboratively, and likelihood of success in clinical work. Letter writers are not likely to learn these things about you through classroom contacts alone. Even if you received one of the top grades in a course, if the professor had no other contact with you, there is not much else he or she can say about you. Thus, it is crucial that you develop means of interacting with faculty outside the classroom. The best way to do this is to get involved as a paid or volunteer member of one or more faculty member's research groups. In addition, make a point of stopping by professors' offices to talk with them about class content that has intrigued you. Most professors welcome these visits!

Ideally, your professors should be able to write about your motivation, your conscientiousness, your ability to think intelligently about the subject matter, your ability

to take on independent responsibility, and your maturity, among other factors. You need to give them enough samples of your behavior in these domains that they can write a positive and knowledgeable letter. If you plan to take some time away from school before applying to graduate school, be sure to maintain some contact with the professors from whom you plan to ask for letters. Simply sending them an update on your work and plans a couple times each year helps these potential letter writers to stay connected to your professional development and remember all the great work you did when you worked with them.

Given My Credentials, To What Type Of Program Can I Realistically Aspire?

One of the most difficult things about applying to graduate school is being realistic about the strength of your credentials. They may simply not be strong enough to gain entry to PhD programs in clinical psychology. These programs routinely receive anywhere from 100 to 400 applications and generally accept anywhere from three to ten students. Thus, as already mentioned, these programs are extremely competitive and shortcomings in any of the selection criteria described above can undermine your chances of being accepted. Unless you are willing to apply more than once (and take time between applications to gain experience to improve your competitiveness), you may be setting yourself up for disappointment.

Several other options are available. For example, the GPA and GRE expectations of master's programs in clinical psychology are usually lower than those of PhD programs. You might want to consider these programs if a terminal master's degree will allow you to meet your career goals. But be cautious about entering a clinically-oriented master's program as the first step toward a PhD program. It can be a reasonable path if it

addresses your need to compensate for a low undergraduate GPA, but it is typically a very expensive route to the PhD, because many doctoral programs do not allow students to transfer many (or any) of the credits they received elsewhere. So having the master's degree may not shorten the length of your doctoral program. Further, if the master's program you complete did not provide any high quality research experiences, it may not do much to strengthen your credentials. So although master's programs in clinical psychology can often be valuable, be aware of what they can and cannot provide. Their clinical training can vary in quality and rigor, so it is important to evaluate prospective programs carefully. Before applying, do your homework to evaluate markers such as what the programs' students typically do after graduation, typical class sizes, and the extent to which each program emphasizes training in research-supported assessments and therapy.

Counseling psychology, school psychology, and social work programs that offer clinical training also tend to be less competitive than PhD programs in clinical psychology. As noted earlier, students in these programs often receive as much applied training and experience as students in clinical psychology programs, and master's-level job openings, and even potential licensure, appear to be on the rise. Finally, nonclinical PhD programs in psychology (e.g., developmental, social) tend to attract fewer applicants and have lower admission criteria than do clinical programs. If you are committed to the field of psychology and want to remain in a research environment, you may find a nonclinical psychology PhD program more rewarding than a mental health-related doctoral or master's program in another field. Further, completing a research-oriented,

non-clinical master's program can help increase your research experience and productivity, and thus strengthen a subsequent application for a clinical PhD program.

In short, PhD programs in clinical psychology often provide great training but they are not for everyone. They are highly competitive, they place great demands on their students, they take 5 to 7 years to complete, and they emphasize research training as much as, if not more than, clinical experience. But if a PhD in clinical psychology is truly what you want, please read on.

I HAVE DECIDED TO APPLY TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY. WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW?

Applying to graduate school is a major step that requires considerable planning. Here we list the main tasks you will have to complete. Later, we provide more information on how to accomplish them.

1. Study for and take the GRE General and Subject tests at least once each.
2. Search online for training programs, and identify at least 10 to 15 that appear appropriate for you and your interests.
3. Obtain information on these programs, and fill out the application and relevant financial aid forms for each.
4. Arrange for your transcripts from all of your undergraduate institutions to be sent to each graduate program.
5. Arrange for your GRE scores to be sent to each program.
6. Identify three or four professors who are willing to write letters of recommendation for you, and get them the necessary forms and information about your undergraduate career at least one month prior to the first application deadline.

7. Write a general personal statement and revise it as often as necessary based on feedback you have received from one or more faculty members and current graduate students.
8. Individualize your general personal statement for each program to which you are applying so the statement clearly shows your fit for that program and, in particular, your fit for a given professor's research lab. This last step is both crucial and time-consuming because it involves learning enough about the research of at least one professor at each site that you can note your interest in that research topic in a compelling way.
9. Once you have submitted your applications, check with each department to which you have applied to assure that your application is complete. The large majority of admissions offices now have online tracking systems that allow applicants to verify the status of their applications, and although some departments notify students when letters of reference or GRE scores are missing, many do not. To eliminate this problem, be sure to track your application through the proper channels at the different programs.

How Do I Get Information about Graduate Programs and Identify “Good”

Ones?

The first step in choosing a graduate program is to be sure it will provide the training and professional environment that will meet your needs as determined by your personal goals and plans. Are you most interested in research, balanced training in clinical practice and research, or primarily in clinical practice? Are you interested in doctoral-level or master's level programs? Do you have an interest in a specific client population? These are but a few of the questions you should be asking yourself before the application process begins.

The stronger your credentials, the more freedom you will have in deciding to which programs you will apply.

Unlike professions such as law, psychology maintains no widely accepted list of top-ranked programs. To determine whether a particular university, department, and program fits your needs, including whether it offers the mix of “research” versus “clinical” that is right for you, you should gather as much information as possible, not only through the channels described below but also by corresponding with some of the graduate students and faculty in each program. Be sure to learn about whether there are faculty undertaking research in areas of interest to you, and whether those faculty plan to accept a new doctoral student in the coming year (check the faculty listings on department websites, or email professors directly). What are the graduation and internship placement and licensure rates? What types of jobs do students typically take after graduation? What is the student–faculty ratio? Are there opportunities for a variety of practicum experiences? What are the campus and local community like? Are potential research advisors supportive and welcoming? How extensive and adequate are the department’s research and other resources? What theoretical orientation(s) or approaches are emphasized by the program’s clinical faculty?

Admittedly, some of these questions are difficult to answer without making a visit or talking frankly with current students, so ask your research advisor or some other trusted faculty member in your department for recommendations and candid feedback on your list of potential graduate schools. Similarly, graduate students in your department know a great deal about the application process—they have all been through it. If you have clinical psychology graduate students as teaching assistants or instructors, talk with

them about their application experiences. They may also have information about programs that you are interested in because they may have also applied to and been interviewed at those programs not long ago.

If you can attend one or more regional or national psychology conferences, make it a point to approach graduate students who currently attend PhD programs to which you're considering applying and ask them about what life is like in those programs. You can often talk to these students when they are presenting posters at conferences; this is also a great chance to learn more about the research going on in the program.

Table 16.4 shows a number of valuable resources that can help in all stages of the application process. We highlight three of them here because they are especially useful. The first is *Graduate Study in Psychology* (American Psychological Association, 2018h), which lists all master's and doctoral programs in the United States and Canada. This book delineates which programs are APA- or CPA-accredited, and also lists programs in other areas of psychology (industrial/organizational, behavioral neuroscience, cognitive, etc.).



Photo 11.1: Dr. Arthur Evans, Chief Executive Officer of the American Psychological Association since 2017, leads the country's largest organization of doctoral psychologists and graduate student trainees. The APA offers an online version of *Graduate Study in Psychology* that includes a searchable database. The cost is approximately \$20 for three months of access: www.apa.org/pubs/databases/gradstudy/index.aspx.

A publication similar to the print version of *Graduate Study in Psychology* is called *Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology*, 2nd ed. (American Psychological Association, 2007c). It provides detailed information on the application process for graduate programs in any area of psychology. Many sections of the book focus on specific aspects of the application process (choosing programs, preparing a resume, writing a personal statement, etc.), and there is an appendix with a timetable for the application process.

An extraordinary resource aimed specifically at clinical or counseling doctoral programs is the *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology 2018/2019 Edition* (Sayette & Norcross, 2018). This book focuses on the application process and also lists every APA- and CPA-accredited PhD and PsyD program in the United States and Canada, with helpful information about each. The programs' orientations are rated on a 1 to 7 scale (where 1 means fully practice oriented, 4 means equal emphasis on practice and research, and 7 means fully research oriented).

TABLE 16.4 Helpful Resources for Psychology Majors and Those Who Are Considering Applying to Graduate School

Caption: This is not an exhaustive list, but many of these books have been extremely helpful to students who are considering a career in psychology and who plan to apply to graduate school.

Career Options in Psychology	Applying to Graduate School
<i>Careers in Psychology: Opportunities in a Changing World</i> , 5th ed., by Tara L. Kuther and Robert D. Morgan (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2019)	<i>Applying to Graduate School in Psychology: Advice From Successful Students and Prominent Psychologists</i> by A. C. Kracen and I. J. Wallace (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008)
<i>Finding Jobs With a Psychology Bachelor's Degree: Expert Advice for Launching Your Career</i> by R. E. Landrum (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009)	<i>Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology</i> , 2nd ed., by the American Psychological Association (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007b)
<i>The Insider's Guide to the Psychology Major: Everything You Need to Know About the Degree and Profession</i> by A. R. Wegenek and W. Buskist (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010)	<i>Graduate Study in Psychology</i> , by the American Psychological Association (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2018h)
<i>The Portable Mentor: Expert Guide to a Successful Career in Psychology</i> (2nd ed.) by M. J. Prinstein (New York: Springer, 2013)	<i>Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology</i> , by Michael A. Sayette and John C. Norcross (New York: Guilford, 2018)
<i>The Psychology Major: Career Options and Strategies for Success</i> (5th ed.) by R. E. Landrum and S. F. Davis (Hoboken, NJ: Pearson, 2013)	<i>Surviving Graduate School and Beyond</i>
<i>Your Career in Psychology: Putting Your Graduate Degree To Work</i> , by S. F. Davis, P. J. Giordano, and C. A. Licht (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)	<i>The Compleat Academic: A Career Guide</i> , 2nd ed., by John M. Darley, Mark P. Zanna, and Henry L. Roediger (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004)
	<i>Life after Graduate School in Psychology: Insider's Advice from New Psychologists</i> , by Robert D. Morgan, Tara L. Kuther, and Corey J. Habben (New York: Psychology Press, 2012)
	<i>You've Earned Your Doctorate in Psychology. . . Now What? Securing a Job</i>

as an Academic or Professional Psychologist, by E. M. Morgan and E. Landrum (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012)

Additional information can be found online, including at the APA website (www.apa.org), where you can explore APA-accredited programs, careers in psychology, and salary information about various jobs in psychology. The Council of University Directors of Clinical Psychology (CUDCP) also maintains a website that provides excellent information about applying to clinical doctoral programs: <http://clinicalpsychgradschool.org/>. The site includes advice about whether to pursue a clinical PhD, guides to choosing programs that will be a good fit, many application tools and tips, as well as links to labs and programs hiring for post-baccalaureate positions. CUDCP also supports an online calendar that lists the application deadlines and interview dates for some programs: <https://teamup.com/ks952632ef38687f3e>. The link to additional resources (<http://clinicalpsychgradschool.org/resou.php>) includes advice on applying, links to organizations with additional tips, directories of programs, and numerous other helpful resources.

In an effort to help students learn more about programs as they decide where to apply, CUDCP also has a voluntary program through which clinical programs provide full disclosure of admissions and outcome data for their program on their website. This information is very useful to potential applicants, who can then compare programs directly on the same variables, including number of applicants, number of accepted students, number of underrepresented students in the program, GRE and GPA averages for recently admitted students, number of graduate students who applied for and secured

an internship, number of graduating students and their job placements, and average length of time it took for those students to graduate. If you are scanning doctoral programs online, go to the clinical psychology website for a department that interests you and look for this Full Disclosure Data page.

You can also find related information at a department's clinical area website under "Student Admissions, Outcomes, and Other Data." This link will take you to tables containing program data from the past ten years that the American Psychological Association (APA) requires all APA-accredited doctoral programs to update annually. There you can review the following information:

- Time it takes to complete the program.
- Cost of completing the program (e.g., tuition, fees, financial aid options, etc.).
- Percent of incoming students receiving funding.
- Success of graduate students in obtaining internships.
- Attrition (i.e., how many students enter the program and then drop out each year).
- Number and percentage of graduates from the program who have become licensed in the past decade.

This information is meant to help students compare programs on these variables so that they can make informed decisions when considering their options for graduate training (Munsey, 2007). For example, as noted in Chapter 15, there has been a nationwide "internship crisis" that leaves some students without access to an internship site (McCutcheon, 2011). While this crisis has been alleviated to some extent by the addition of more internship programs, the problem remains for students in certain training programs (Parent & Williamson, 2010), so be sure to look carefully at the internship

“match” rates of all the programs you are considering. Be aware, for example, that a comparison of APA-accredited clinical psychology programs found that freestanding PsyD programs had significantly lower internship match rates than any other type of program (Norcross, Ellis, & Sayette, 2010). When searching clinical programs’ websites, look for the link to “Student Admissions, Outcomes, and Other Data” to find the internship match information.

There is also an impressive blog called “How to apply to clinical psychology PhD programs: Practical advice from someone who’s done it . . . three times.” by Emily Bell. She was a graduate student in clinical psychology at Kent State University and a valuable aspect of her blog is its acknowledgement that it often takes multiple tries to get into a PhD program in clinical psychology (<http://clinicalpsychgradapp.wordpress.com/>). There are also online message boards for students interested in clinical psychology (Fauber, 2006). Sites such as *The Student Doctor Network* (<http://studentdoctor.net/>) in clinical psychology receive a great deal of attention from prospective students. Given that the postings are mostly just other students’ opinions, you may want to check more formal sites to confirm information that is crucial to your application (e.g., an application date or specific information about a professor), but message boards are yet another way that you can access up-to-date information.

With the wealth of information in printed material as well as online, you should have access to plenty of resources during the arduous task of applying to graduate school. But beware. Many websites are run or funded largely by for-profit institutions—so seek information from reputable sources that are not trying to sell you something, and think critically about the information you find. Also, be cautious about overinterpreting

information on listservs or sites where prospective applicants share information about interview invitations or admissions offers. While this information can be valuable, it can also be misleading. For instance, an applicant hoping for an on-campus interview might assume that he will not be invited because someone else posted that she had already received an invitation. But not all invitations go out at the same time, so the lack of an invitation may mean nothing about one's interview prospects.

Another resource for identifying potentially good programs is the US News and World Report's ranking of the "Best Clinical Psychology Doctorate Programs." It was last updated in 2016: <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-health-schools/clinical-psychology-rankings>. While these rankings can be helpful for getting a general sense of a program's standing, there is wide skepticism in the field about their validity—even among faculty who work at the top-ranked programs. There is a strong sense that the rankings are not necessarily based on the most important criteria. Thus, we alert you to this site because you may hear about it in your search process, but you should view its information cautiously and in a general, rather than very specific, way. For instance, knowing that a program is among the top 25 programs likely is a useful indicator that it is a high quality program, but knowing a program is in 7th place versus 12th place likely does not provide useful distinguishing information. Determining the right program fit for *you*, especially with regard to making a match with a good faculty research mentor, is far more likely to influence your ultimate happiness with your program choice.

Professional journals and related publications are additional information sources that many applicants overlook. For example, one of the best ways to find programs that

meet your needs is to identify faculty who are studying topics that interest you. A thorough search of the literature—using PsycINFO, Google, or other online search engines—will very likely highlight faculty with whom you might like to study and indicate where they can be reached. A related approach is to pay attention to the journal articles you've read in your classes or research projects that particularly fascinated you, identify the authors and their departments, and then look for their personal websites and/or curriculum vitae (CVs). Their e-mail addresses are nearly always posted on the university website (check the “People” section for the Psychology Department); e-mail addresses are also listed on professors' published articles. However, do some “homework” before asking these people questions about their work or the graduate program that could easily be answered with a quick review of their CV or the departmental website.

Regardless of how you identify the faculty members who could be your future research advisor, do not rush this part of the process. We cannot overstate the importance of making a good match with a research advisor; it is crucial to success in a doctoral program.

What Does It Mean When a Clinical Psychology Graduate Program is Accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA)?

APA accreditation means that a clinical program has met a minimum standard of quality (see Chapter 15). Accreditation applies to educational institutions and programs, not to individuals. It does not guarantee jobs or licensure for individuals, though being a graduate of an accredited program greatly facilitates such achievements. It does speak to

the manner and quality by which an educational institution or program conducts its business. It speaks to a sense of public trust, as well as professional quality (APA, 2012).

Thus, graduating with a PhD from any APA-accredited program is seen as a laudatory accomplishment. Further, some APA-approved internships will only accept applicants from APA-approved graduate programs and many states will only grant licensure as a psychologist to applicants from an APA-accredited program. These are all reasons to consider limiting your search to APA-accredited programs, though be aware that, as we mention in Chapter 15, there is now an alternate program accreditation option, namely, the Psychological Clinical Science Accreditation System (PCSAS; see below). As a result, a number of top research-oriented programs are accredited by both APA and PCSAS. Further, some top doctoral programs may not maintain their APA accreditation in the future, and thus may be accredited only by PCSAS. This change will probably be noted on each department's website so applicants can make informed choices about where to apply. Overall, then, we recommend selecting an accredited program. Both APA and PCSAS accreditation are good markers of quality, but may have different implications for flexibility in obtaining a psychology license. In some states, only applicant from APA accredited clinical programs are currently eligible for licensure.

A list of APA-accredited programs in clinical psychology is published each year in the December issue of the APA's main journal, *American Psychologist*. The APA also accredits PhD programs in other areas, including counseling and school psychology, as well as a number of PsyD programs. Master's programs are not currently accredited by APA, so it is more difficult to identify high-quality programs at that level, but APA is

exploring whether to accredit master's programs in the future—yet another example of the interesting transitions happening in the field!

A complete list of APA accredited programs in clinical, counseling, and school psychology can be found on the APA website at

www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/programs/clinical.aspx

What Does it Mean When a Clinical Psychology Graduate Program is Accredited by the Psychological Clinical Science Accreditation System (PCSAS)?

As mentioned in Chapter 15, the new Psychological Clinical Science Accreditation System (PCSAS) was developed by research-oriented clinical scientists who were dissatisfied with the APA accreditation system (Baker, McFall, & Shoaham, 2009).

PCSAS set out to develop an accreditation system that focuses on programs that strongly emphasize the *science* of clinical psychology, and they base accreditation criteria mainly on whether the programs' graduates later work as clinical scientists (e.g., conducting research or otherwise advancing clinical scientific knowledge), rather than whether the programs include particular kinds of coursework or practicum requirements. Both accreditation systems value and expect high-quality research and applied clinical training, but they vary in some of their requirements and in their emphasis on empirical rigor.

The first clinical psychology program was accredited by PCSAS in 2009, and by 2019, 39 programs had been accredited and 7 more were under consideration. The latest list of PCSAS-accredited programs is available at

<https://www.pcsas.org/accreditation/accredited-programs>. As of 2020, all PCSAS-accredited programs are also accredited by APA but, as mentioned above, some of them may not be renewing their APA accreditation, so if you are interested in one of these

programs, be sure to ask about the implications of these changes. There is a helpful Frequently Asked Questions section on the PCSAS website (<https://www.pcsas.org/faq/>) that provides up-to-date information about relevant internship and licensing regulations for PCSAS students and graduates.

When Should I Apply, and What Kind of Timeline Should I Expect?

Specific timelines can be found in both *Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology*, 2nd ed. (American Psychological Association, 2007) and the *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology* 2018/2019 (Sayette & Norcross, 2018). These guidelines should help to make sure you are accomplishing all of the necessary application tasks in a timely fashion.

In general, it is reasonable to start seeking program-specific information in June or July, a little over a year before your desired admission date (e.g., July 2021 for the fall of 2022). Seeking specific information earlier than this can sometimes backfire, because admissions deadlines or requirements might change from year to year, but it is never too early to look for more general information about programs that fit your needs because overall program emphases and training philosophies do not usually change that rapidly. In any case, nearly all graduate programs post admissions information on their websites and most programs also post application forms and related materials, and many have a Frequently Asked Questions section that helps to clarify the application process.

Although department application deadlines vary, most fall between December 1 and January 15. A few come earlier, while others (mostly for master's degree programs or professional schools) are later. Some departments with later deadlines select their

students continuously as applications arrive for processing. If you apply to programs that use this “rolling admissions” plan, it is to your advantage to submit your application early.

Our comments here refer specifically to the timeline of the application process; preparing yourself to be a strong applicant for graduate school should begin much earlier, because multiple years of research experience have become the norm for competitive applicants.

To How Many Programs Should I Apply?

It is difficult to identify a specific number of applications that is appropriate for all students. We are reminded of two cases: One student applied to six schools and was admitted to all of them, while another applied to 27 and was admitted to one. Because competition for admission to PhD programs is fierce, the general rule is to apply to approximately 12 to 15 programs if you can reasonably afford to do so. It is not a simple matter of “more is better,” however. You should apply only to programs for which you are likely to be a good fit, based on your research background and current interests. It will make little difference whether you apply to 5 schools or 20 if you have no research background. And if your goal is to study the genetics of dissociative identity disorder, there is no point applying to programs whose faculty have no expertise in that area.

It is our experience that even students with relatively strong credentials will want to apply to at least 10 programs to increase the likelihood of at least one offer of acceptance and to increase their chances of receiving funding as well. A good rule is to apply to at least five programs which you might consider “safe” schools where your credentials would be considered to be strong, five “ambitious” programs where your

credentials might not be as strong as needed but at least you are in the ball park, and a couple “stretch” programs where your credentials are below the average but perhaps where your research interests are especially well matched to those of program faculty (Sayette & Norcross, 2018). Note, however, that the demand for PhD programs in clinical psychology is such that there are fewer and fewer programs that can be considered “safe” bets for admission.

As you try to categorize programs as “safe,” “ambitious,” and “stretch,” pay attention to the information about how many applications each program receives and how many applicants are admitted to the program. Even among excellent clinical doctoral programs, the percentage of admissions varies significantly, thus affecting your chances of being accepted. For example, in a recent admissions cycle, 73 students applied to the clinical PhD program at the University of South Dakota and 12 (19.0 percent) were offered admission (2017-2018 data), while 244 students applied to University of Virginia and 5 (2.0 percent) were admitted (2018-2019 data). Both programs are excellent—yet the numbers of applicants varied significantly.

Although we know of no formal studies on this issue, it appears that programs in larger cities or especially desirable places to live (e.g., those with mild winters!) tend to receive more applications than comparable programs in smaller towns or in areas with harsher climates (remarkably, we know of at least one such program that received about 700 applications in one recent year!). Thus, if your dream school is in a highly desirable city with perfect weather, you may want to consider also looking into equally excellent programs in less popular places because there may well be fewer applicants there.

The bottom line is that getting into any clinical doctoral program is challenging but you should apply to the programs for which you fit best and where you will feel passionate about the research you would be able to do and the training you would receive.

Once you have decided on a final list of schools, ask yourself what you will do if you are not accepted by any of them. You may want to take a couple of years to strengthen your next application (such as by working in a research lab). Alternatively, if you know your credentials are marginal (e.g., a weak GPA) when you first apply for doctoral training, consider also applying to a handful of research-oriented master's programs as a back-up. However, do not apply to programs that are really not of interest to you. Such applications waste admission committee time and your time, not to mention your money.

How Much Will It Cost to Apply?

Applying to graduate school is, indeed, an expensive process. Taking both the GRE General and Subject tests costs approximately \$310. Departmental application fees can be as high as \$100, but average about \$50 for doctoral programs and \$35 for master's programs (Sayette & Norcross, 2018). Undergraduate transcripts cost about \$5 to \$10 each. The cost of sending GRE scores to four graduate schools is covered by the registration GRE fee, but sending them to additional schools costs \$27 each. So the average cost of applying to 12 graduate programs is about \$1,250. Note, too, that if you are lucky enough to be invited for an interview, you will typically also need to cover most of your travel costs.

If you are operating under significant financial constraints, there may be ways to reduce your costs. For example, the Educational Testing Service offers a GRE Fee

Reduction Program for those who: (a) can demonstrate financial need (e.g., students who receive financial aid at their university and who receive little or no money from their parents), (b) are involved in certain national programs that work with underrepresented groups (such as the McNair Scholars Program or the Gates Millennium Scholars Program), and (c) are unemployed and receiving unemployment compensation (see eligibility information at

https://www.ets.org/gre/institutions/advising/fee_reduction?WT.ac=40361_owt33_18082

0). Under this program, GRE fees can be reduced by 50%, but thorough documentation must be provided and the reductions are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis.

In addition, many universities allow you to petition for a reduced or waived application fee. Typically, one's financial hardship must be documented, and in some cases only applicants with certain characteristics (e.g., members of an underrepresented racial/ethnic group, first generation students, or those with specific financial aid requirements) are eligible for a reduced or waived fee.

What Testing is Involved in Applying to Graduate School?

The large majority of graduate schools require the GRE for admission and most admissions committees weigh GRE scores heavily in their acceptance decisions (Sayette & Norcross, 2018), though exactly how heavily can vary considerably. Let's review the contents of the GRE, how to study for it, and the role it plays in the graduate school admissions process.

What is the GRE?

The GRE consists of a general test and a subject test—in this case, the subject is psychology.

The General Test is described thoroughly at the Educational Testing Service's *Graduate Record Examinations* website (<http://www.ets.org/gre>). The General GRE Test is now called the *GRE revised General Test* due to the new scoring procedures we describe later, and has three main components: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Analytical Writing. The test takes about 3 hours and 45 minutes to complete and is offered via computer in the United States and most industrialized countries. There are hundreds of official testing sites across the United States and Canada, and students can arrange to take the test at a time that is convenient for them. For details on test registration, test day logistics, and score reporting, see the GRE Information Bulletin at http://www.ets.org/s/gre/pdf/gre_info_bulletin_18_19.pdf.

The General GRE Test cost is approximately \$160 and your scores are valid for five years. The computerized testing format was revised significantly in 2011. Previously, you could see only one question at a time and had to answer that question before being allowed to proceed. The new multi-stage test allows you to skip questions and return to them later. Further, before 2011, scores on the Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning sections could range from 200 to 800 in 10-point increments. These scores can now range from 130–170 in 1-point increments. Scores on the Analytical Writing section of the revised test range from 0 to 6, in half-point increments. The test is given in six sections with a 10-minute break in the middle.

The Subject Test in Psychology is required by approximately two-thirds of doctoral programs in psychology. It consists of about 205 multiple-choice questions and takes almost three hours to complete. It costs approximately \$150, a fee that includes some free preparation and support materials, such as the GRE Psychology Test Practice

Book. This book includes a full-length practice test, as well as advice on test-taking strategies (see http://www.ets.org/s/gre/pdf/practice_book_psych.pdf). The test covers material from many subfields of psychology, including but not limited to: learning, memory, and behavioral neuroscience, social, clinical, abnormal, developmental, personality, and industrial/organizational psychology, research methodology, measurement, and the history of psychology. The test results in six subscale scores: 1) biological, 2) cognitive, 3) social, 4) developmental, 5) clinical, and 6) measurement, methodology, and other.

Unlike the General GRE Test, the Subject Test in Psychology can be taken only on paper, and is offered only three times a year (usually in September, October, and April). It takes approximately five weeks to receive a copy of the Subject Test score, so be sure to take this test on a date that is at least six weeks before your earliest application deadline.

It is important to know the results of your GRE General and Subject Tests before you begin the graduate school application process because the scores will shape your decisions about where to apply. If you score at the 95th percentile it will be reasonable to apply to the most competitive schools, whereas scores at the 50th percentile would require a more conservative strategy. If you take the GRE tests more than once, there is a program called “ScoreSelect” (see https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/scoreselect/) that allows you to decide whether to submit all or only some of your scores for applications you submit for the next five years. Be aware, though, that certain graduate programs require applicants to report scores from all of their GREs, so ScoreSelect may not always be an option.

Should I Study for the GRE?

Yes, you definitely should study for the GRE! The GRE website and the free preparation book mentioned earlier describes the types of questions found on the general test, along with a number of strategies you can use in taking the computer-based test. The Educational Testing Service also sells practice material, including GRE general tests and GRE subject tests actually administered in previous years. In addition, ETS now sells software that allows you to practice the computer version of the test and receive feedback on your performance. All of this material can help you become familiar with the types and forms of questions you are likely to encounter on the GRE, and it can also give you practice at pacing yourself during the actual examination.

You can also prepare for the GRE general test via test preparation courses that are presented live or online by companies such as Kaplan and Princeton Review, and also via annually revised test preparation books. Because in-person and online courses can be quite expensive (some cost more than \$1,200), most students tend to use the test preparation books. These books usually provide a mathematics and vocabulary review, tips on test taking, and a set of sample test items, and many of them come with computer-based enhancement features. Some of the more frequently used “how to prepare” books are published by Barron’s Educational Series, Arco Publishing Company, Kaplan, and Princeton Review. They are readily available at most online and local bookstores.

Deciding on test preparation courses versus self-preparation is a matter of individual choice and financial means. Some students do not have the time or inclination to design a disciplined self-preparation study schedule and, for them, the expense of test preparation courses is feasible and worth it because the courses provide needed structure.

An alternative strategy is to self-prepare for the first time you take the test, and then if you are not satisfied with your scores, try a formal test preparation course. Whatever you decide, some form of preparation for the GRE General Test is important. The stakes are rather high; whether you are accepted into a PhD program and/or whether you receive financial aid will depend in part on how well you do on the GRE tests.

When preparing for the GRE Subject Test in Psychology, remember that it covers all areas of the discipline. Names, theories, and definitions are likely to be tested, as will basic concepts. If you have not been exposed to certain aspects of psychology, you will no doubt have trouble with some questions. You can prepare for the Subject Test by thoroughly reviewing a comprehensive introductory psychology textbook. In addition, books that present the history of psychology and/or systems and theories in psychology provide information that is particularly useful in preparing for this test. As with the General GRE, there are also face-to-face, online, and printed materials that can help you prepare for the GRE Subject Test. If you are not a psychology major, scoring well on the GRE Subject Test may be especially important (though this will depend on where you are applying), because it may be the only way for you to show your knowledge of the field. In our experience, the GRE General test is typically weighted more than the Subject Test in making admissions decisions, but it is in your best interest to study intensively for both tests.

Why is the GRE so important to admission committees? In addition to its predictive validity, it represents the only data for which direct comparisons can be made across all applicants. Everyone takes exactly the same test, so performance is not influenced by differences in collegiate standards, as can be the case with letters of

recommendation and college grades. A score at the 85th percentile on the verbal subtest means the same whether it was earned by a student at the University of California–San Diego or at the University of Vermont. Thus, the GRE is widely viewed as providing a useful, albeit imperfect, indicator of a student’s potential for success in graduate school. In addition, the GRE and undergraduate GPA together can serve as relatively objective screening instruments that help admission committees reduce several hundred applicants to a more manageable number. With this dramatically smaller pool of applicants, the admissions committee can then give much closer scrutiny to other, more qualitative and time-consuming selection criteria, such as personal statements, letters of recommendation, and personal interviews (Morgan & Korschgen, 2013).

What counts as acceptable GRE scores can vary according to the type of program to which you are applying. For example, some freestanding, non–university-based PsyD programs do not even require the GRE test as part of the admissions process. Acceptable GRE scores for a master’s program will likely not be as high as those needed for a doctoral program. There are not yet enough data from the revised GRE scoring system to make comparisons but, to give you a general idea, one survey of scores on the old system found that students in master’s programs averaged 1053 on the GRE (Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning combined), whereas students in doctoral programs averaged 1183 (Norcross, Karpiak, & Santoro, 2005). Note, however, that this survey included all areas of psychology and also included both PsyD and PhD doctoral programs. A follow-up to that study, still using the old GRE scoring system, found that across all clinical programs, the average combined score was 1243. The highest average combined score (1283) was found among students in research-oriented PhD programs and the lowest average

combined score (1061) was seen among students in freestanding PsyD programs (Norcross, Ellis, & Sayette, 2010). Overall, the minimum GRE scores reported for PsyD programs are lower than in programs with equal emphasis on research and practice, and also lower than in research-oriented PhD programs (see Sayette & Norcross, 2018, p. 44, but be aware that these data are not very recent).

How Important is My Grade Point Average?

Your GPA is seen as an excellent indicator of the effort you have exerted in college and your willingness to work up to or beyond your predicted potential. Thus, an outstanding undergraduate GPA may offset to some degree a less than stellar GRE score.

Admissions committees look for several things when examining an applicant's undergraduate transcripts. The overall GPA is important, but committees often focus extra attention on your psychology GPA given its relevance to graduate study in the field. This means that committees tend to be somewhat forgiving of a lower overall GPA if, for example, you started off in another area of study (e.g., as a premed student) and did poorly in those courses. They tend to be more forgiving of poor grades early in your college career than they are of poor grades later on. They also check on whether you maintained or improved your GPA as you went along or let your grades slip as you got closer to graduation. They may pay particularly close attention to grades in more rigorous required courses, such as statistics and experimental methods, which serve as the foundation for advanced work in the field.

Will I Need Letters of Recommendation? If So, How Many and from Whom?

Three letters of recommendation are required by most graduate programs in clinical psychology. Sometimes additional letters are accepted, but we do not recommend

submitting more than four unless they are requested specifically. Whether you submit three letters or four, at least two of them should be from academic references—that is, from psychology or other faculty members who are familiar with your academic ability. Ideally, at least one of the letters should be from someone who has supervised you in research-related activities. If faculty from disciplines other than psychology can enlarge the picture of your academic achievement and potential for graduate study, feel free to ask those people for letters. Applicants who gained post-baccalaureate research experience in a psychiatry or neurology department at a medical center/hospital will want to obtain letters from the faculty with whom they worked.

A letter from someone who supervised a clinically related experience or relevant job is generally not given as much weight by admissions committees at PhD programs as letters attesting to research and academic skills. Similarly, letters from “important people,” such as politicians or religious leaders are unlikely to help your application unless the writer had been in a position to judge your potential as a graduate student, researcher, or a clinician. Similarly, if you know a clinical psychologist through social contacts only (e.g., as a friend of the family), you should not ask that person to write you a letter of recommendation. Although the psychologist knows what it takes to excel in graduate school, the letter will not be considered objective because of the personal and social relationships that exist between the psychologist, you, and your family. Most letters of recommendation include a statement as to how the letter writer knows the applicant, and admissions committees do not look kindly on letters that say things like “I have known the applicant for all of her life, and I have watched her grow from a timid toddler into a scintillating senior student.”

What Should I Know about Asking for Letters of Recommendation?

When you approach faculty members to ask for a letter, it is likely that they will want you to provide information about yourself as a reminder of what role you played on a research project, what grade you got in a course, the topic of your final paper in a seminar, what honors you won, and the like. Information about your activities, accomplishments, and job experiences can supplement classroom contacts in a way that enhances the tone and thrust of a recommendation letter.

You can provide this information in the form of your resumé or curriculum vita and a draft of your personal statement, along with a description of your research experiences (including comments about the full extent of your roles), and a brief outline of your professional goals. Some faculty may also want a list of the psychology laboratory courses you have taken or a transcript of your college courses and grades, with information about what your major (and minor, if relevant) was, and your GPA. Providing information about honor societies, clubs, and organizations to which you belong(ed), along with comments on your participation (be sure to mention positions of responsibility you held), can also be useful, as can a brief note about jobs you have held and volunteer work you have done (see Morgan & Korschgen, 2013). Some students carry heavy workloads while being enrolled as full-time students in order to pay for their education; this information should be included, too. No matter how much information you have provided, remember to ask your letter writers about any additional items they might want to see.

Be sure to ask for letters and provide all appropriate recommendation information at least one month before the first application is due. Remember, faculty often write

letters for many students, so give them plenty of time to prepare yours. To reduce the possibility of error and to speed the process, do everything you can to minimize the work the faculty has to do in putting your recommendation materials together. Provide your letter writers with a list of the schools to which you are applying, along with the application deadline for each, which specific program you are applying to (e.g., master's in counseling, PhD program in clinical psychology), any additional rating forms to be completed, and information about how the letter should be sent (e.g., a hard copy directly to the admission's office, a hard copy in a sealed and signed envelope to be returned to you, or perhaps an e-mail sent to someone or posted to a secure website). If hard copies are required, then you should provide stamped, addressed envelopes for each program.

Most programs these days use one of two different application systems:

1. A self-contained application, whereby the applicant has to collect all of the materials (including the letters of recommendation in a sealed envelope signed across the flap by the letter writer) and submit them in one packet, or
2. Completely online (including letters of recommendation that are either sent via e-mail or posted to a secure website in the admissions office). This system is rapidly becoming the standard one.

Will I Be Able to See My Letters of Recommendation?

Because of federal law, letters of reference are not confidential unless you waive your right to see them. We encourage you to do so because many admissions committee members feel that letter writers are more likely to provide candid evaluations when they know that the student will not see the letter. If you are concerned about what the letter might include, ask potential letter writers if they can write *in support* of your application,

not just if they will write a letter of reference. Most faculty are more than willing to say whether they can write a favorable letter for you.

What Should I Include in My Personal Statement?

Most applications require some form of a personal statement, usually 1.5 to 2 pages in length. Longer is not better because admissions committee members will be reviewing dozens to hundreds of statements and may miss important information if—as often happens—they just skim the longer ones. Good advice on writing a personal statement is provided in the two references we cited earlier: *Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology*, 2nd ed. (American Psychological Association, 2007) and *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology 2018/2019 Edition* (Sayette & Norcross, 2018).

Generally, variations on the same personal statement can be used for all of your applications, but the essay should be revised for each program to reflect how your research (and clinical) interests mesh with each particular program. Programs differ in how much weight they give to the personal statement, but it is typically pivotal in highlighting the match between you and particular research advisors and programs. It is also an important showcase for your writing skills and professionalism. Any mistakes in spelling or grammar, and any typographical errors will reflect negatively on your writing skills, your conscientiousness, and your attention to detail. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that you ask multiple people, preferably including a current graduate student or faculty member, to read your statement for coherence and writing style as well as to identify any errors.

Contrary to its title, a personal statement should not be too personal. Think of the document as a professional rather than personal statement. It is not a general autobiography, but a chance to highlight how your earlier experiences have prepared you and motivated you to succeed in graduate school. It is fine to share a personal story about what draws you to the field, because this can help potential advisors get to know you a bit, but make sure the focus is on your professional development and current interests relevant to graduate school.

What if your interest in clinical psychology is influenced in part by personal problems that you or your family members have had? There are pros and cons to mentioning this in your personal statement. Such problems can be hugely formative experiences in a person's life, and we certainly would not want to perpetuate the stigmatizing idea that those experiences should be hidden. Nevertheless, information about past or current problems does nothing to show your readiness to *succeed* in graduate school and, in some cases, can raise questions about your sensitivity to personal vs. professional boundaries. So whatever you decide to include, keep in mind that the main emphasis of your statement should be on what you have been doing to prepare yourself to be an excellent graduate student.

Indeed, a personal statement is akin to a job application cover letter, so similar guidelines apply. It provides you with a chance to convince the admissions committee that you are a good match for their graduate program. Think about what graduate programs are looking for in their applicants, and then describe how you meet those criteria. As noted earlier, graduate programs generally are looking for students who are intellectually curious, highly motivated, hard working, and have a good familiarity with

the science of psychology, especially as it relates to research experience. These are the factors that you should be addressing in some fashion in your personal statement, which should cover four key components: (a) previous research experience, (b) current research interests, (c) other relevant experience, and (d) career goals (Bottoms & Nysse, 1999). Here, we focus on the first two.

In the section on current research interests, make sure to include some brief discussion of how your interests coincide with ongoing research by the faculty in the program to which you are applying. This is arguably the most important part of the personal statement. Most programs assign students to faculty for research mentoring, so it should be crystal clear how your interests mesh with those of one or more of the faculty in the program. It is expected that you will name one or two faculty members with whom you would like to work and discuss how your research interests align. In fact, some programs separate applications into clusters based on which faculty members are named, and review them accordingly. That is, faculty member A will do a preliminary review of all applications that named her as the desired primary advisor, faculty member B will review those that identified him, and so on. You can name as many as three faculty members with related interests, but don't try to list the entire clinical faculty; that will make you appear unfocused and not sufficiently mature in your research interests. Listing one person is common and often effective if the person is a good match (and you have confirmed the person is accepting new students).

Ideally, you will have already made contact with at least one faculty member in each program to express interest in the person's work, so in your personal statement, mention one or two research papers from that faculty member's group that you find

particularly interesting and note how the work relates to your own research interests. You are not expected to know exactly what you want to study in graduate school (your interests are likely to evolve over time), but the statement allows you to highlight the directions you are currently excited about and show that you've done your homework on each lab. In doing so, be sure not to copy and paste information from a faculty member's web page. That faculty member probably wrote that page and seeing the same text in your personal statement may create the impression that your research about the lab has been superficial and that you are not genuinely interested in the area.

One aspect of your fit with the programs to which you are applying is compatibility of clinical theoretical orientations. As Figure 16.1 shows, the typical clinical theoretical orientations of faculty vary widely across types of programs, so it can be helpful to mention in your personal statement that your orientation would mesh well with a given program's focus. In particular, if you are applying to more research-oriented clinical programs, noting your interest in receiving training in evidenced-based approaches to clinical work may be helpful.

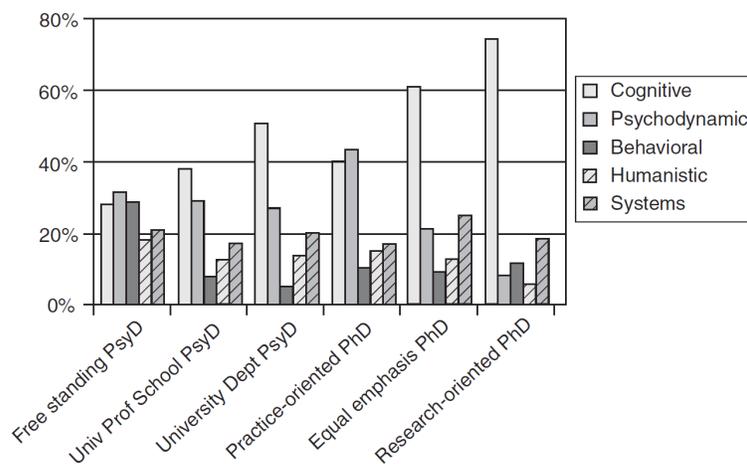


FIGURE 16.1 Faculty Theoretical Orientation by Type of American Psychological Association-Accredited Clinical Program. Source: Norcross, J. C., Ellis, J. L., & Sayette, M. A. (2010). Getting in and getting money: A comparative analysis of admission standards, acceptance rates, and financial assistance across the research-practice continuum in clinical psychology programs. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 4*, 99–104.

The section of your personal statement on other relevant experience is the place to include a brief discussion of any clinical volunteer work or relevant extracurricular activities in which you have been involved. Having clinical experience may not be a very important criterion for admission, but admissions committees may still like to know if you have had some experience in “helping relationships.” Similarly, a long list of extracurricular activities, such as being a member of Psi Chi, will not strengthen your application very much unless you served in a leadership role. So go ahead and include mention of clinical activities and extracurricular activities, but realize that they are not considered strongly in the admissions process except to the extent that they indicate your involvement in psychology, your interpersonal skills, and your willingness to work hard. Also, listing activities in the personal statement that are already included in your curriculum vita adds little new information, and is usually not interesting reading!

Are Personal Interviews Required?

Once applications have been reviewed by admissions committees, it is common for strong candidates to be invited for an in-person interview. Offers for interviews usually come only after the the number of candidates has been considerably narrowed down, say from 300 applicants to the 25 who are given a brief preliminary phone interview, to the 10 who will be interviewed in person. Interviews are usually held on campus to give the candidate and the department a chance to learn about potential fit on both sides. If you are invited for an interview, try to accept it if at all possible. If departments have to

choose between two equally qualified students, only one of whom interviewed in person, that individual will probably have the advantage. Fairly or not, graduate admissions committees may interpret the lack of an interview as a possible sign that the applicant is not really interested in the program. Even if you cannot attend the program's main interview days due to a conflict, you may be able to schedule an alternate visit day (though it is preferable to attend the established/invited dates). If it is financially or physically impossible for you to attend an interview, you can still show your motivation for admission to the program by requesting telephone or video-conference interviews with a number of faculty, by contacting a number of graduate students to begin a dialogue about the program, by letting the admissions committee know via e-mail that you remain very interested in their program, and the like. This is a particularly common strategy among international students for whom the cost of travel to interview in person would be prohibitive. Do not make a pest of yourself, of course.

Programs that require telephone or video-conference interviews rather than in-person interviews are the exception rather than the rule. However, as already mentioned, some programs conduct an initial screening interview on the phone to gauge the applicant's interest in and appropriateness for the program before inviting the candidate for an onsite interview. Normally, a program will send an email to schedule a time for this call so that the applicant can plan for it but, in some cases, the call can come without warning. With this in mind, you might want to try a strategy used by one successful applicant we know. He created an information sheet about each of the programs to which he had applied (e.g., faculty names, particular emphases and strengths) along with notes about his career interests and goals, and carried the notes with him at all times in case his

next cell phone call was from someone on an admissions committee. He felt that if he received a call from a school to which he had applied, having this information handy would reduce his anxiety about the conversation and help him organize his responses so that his emphasis would be appropriate for each institution. This plan also assured that he would include all the points he wanted to make during a call and thus avoid regret over failing to mention something important. He did receive a call and his strategy worked.

The same strategy can be used when you are contacted by e-mail. Increasingly, graduate admissions committees deal with applicants solely electronically, so be sure to check your e-mail (and your spam folder!) frequently throughout the application process. If you have a non-university-based e-mail address with a provocative name (e.g., `sexything555`), then you should definitely set up an e-mail account with a more professional address well before the application process begins. Also, double-check any quotations or images that are sent automatically as part of your e-mail signature because these sayings or images might not present you in the best light professionally.

Although social norms differ somewhat in the use of e-mail, your e-mail messages during the application process should be formal. Make sure to use proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling when communicating with a graduate program. Even contact with a graduate student or staff member should be professional, and keep in mind that these individuals often provide feedback to the admissions committee. Indeed, every contact you have with the university is another opportunity for the admissions committee to make judgments about your professionalism. To our knowledge, texting is rarely used for communication between applicants and programs, but if you do receive a text about your application—your response should be as formal and professional as possible.

While we are on the topic of technology, you should be aware that a number of admissions committees look for additional information about applicants by conducting searches on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social media. They may also read material on your personal website or blog. You should do similar searches yourself, review what you find, consider what an admissions committee would think about you after reviewing your online presence, and consider editing your information (Behnke, 2007). This step is important not only to enhance your chances for admission, but also to burnish your professional image even after a graduate program has accepted you. The impression that others have of you online may have professional repercussions. Consider the fact that, for example, once you begin to work with clients, those clients might well search for information about you online. What impression would their search convey about their therapist? These points relate to many professional issues that were discussed in Chapter 15, but they also are relevant during the application and interview process.

If you did not take part in a face-to-face interview, but were lucky enough to be admitted into more than one program, it is appropriate to visit each school and talk with department representatives and graduate students. Make an appointment well ahead of time by e-mailing the admissions coordinator or the Director of Clinical Training and ask to meet with clinical psychology faculty and graduate students. Be prepared to outline briefly the nature of your questions, and have a number of alternative visit dates in mind.

Often, students want to schedule interview appointments before they apply to a school or before they are admitted. Some departments, especially PsyD and master's programs, welcome early interviews. However, other departments have so many

applicants that it is impossible to accommodate such requests. Usually, the information you gather through the methods mentioned earlier will be sufficient to help you decide whether or not to apply to a particular program. If the material you accessed is not sufficiently informative to give you a clear picture of a particular program, contact the department for additional details. Before doing so, though, be sure to carefully read the material you have on hand so that you do not ask about things that a department has already covered in its printed or online material. Once you are admitted, however, campus visits and interviews can help you to compare programs and guide your decision about which offer to accept.

How Do I Prepare for an Onsite Interview?

If you are invited for an interview, it means that you are in the final, relatively small (e.g., 10 to 35) pool of applicants to a particular program and thus have a reasonably good chance of eventually receiving an offer from that program. Exact percentages vary, but often a little over half of interviewees are ultimately admitted. To optimize the impact of your interview, both in terms of the information you gather and the impression you make, do some preparation and practice. Here are some specific suggestions.

1. Gather and read as much information about the program as you can. Become familiar with everything the program has sent you, as well as any additional information you can find on the Internet. Nearly all graduate programs use their websites for recruitment purposes, so make sure to read everything on the clinical area website (including affiliated websites or attached documents, if they are provided). It is quite common for programs to show sample course sequences on their website, so make sure to familiarize yourself with these details before you show up for the interview.

2. Read and become familiar with several published articles by each of the faculty members with whom you are most interested in working. As you read these articles, make notes on topics that interest you and questions that the research raises.

3. Prepare yourself to talk at length about your own research experience. You should be able to describe the purposes of the research, the methodology, the primary results, and the lessons you have learned from this experience. It is a good strategy to prepare in advance a brief description of your research experience and to practice presenting this brief summary. Do not assume you can just show up at the interview and spontaneously describe your research in a coherent and knowledgeable fashion. Be ready to answer questions such as:

- If you were to repeat the study, what might you do differently?
- If you could do a follow-up study, what might you want to look at?
- What research questions/areas intrigue you most right now?
- What surprised you about conducting this study or the results?
- What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses as a researcher?
- What do you enjoy most about the research process?
- What would make a graduate program a top fit for you?
- Why are you interested in obtaining a degree in clinical psychology?
- What type of career do you expect you'll want after graduation? E.g., mostly research, clinical work, or teaching...?

4. Plan the questions you will want to ask the faculty and graduate students. They will assume that you have questions and, if you are not prepared, the interview will end early and on a negative note. Try not to ask questions that can be answered by reading the

information on the program's website (e.g., what courses will I take in my first year?). In addition, many of the “nuts-and-bolts” issues (e.g., financial support) are handled in group information sessions. Instead, in your faculty interviews, you should ask substantive questions that will better inform you about what it would be like to be a graduate student in this program. Appropriate topics include the faculty member's current and future research plans and mentoring style, the strengths and weaknesses of the program, graduate student–faculty relations, opportunities for collaboration and training in particular areas (e.g., interdisciplinary work, advanced quantitative skills, grant writing), and the types of internships and jobs obtained by graduates from the program. Most faculty members at research-focused programs love to talk about research ideas—this is usually a big part of why they went into the field—so asking questions about current projects and upcoming grant plans can often be a good way to start exploring areas of potential collaboration.

Some programs offer to have their graduate students provide housing for you during your visit. Take them up on this offer because this is an excellent opportunity for you to spend time asking current graduate students about life in the program. You may want to ask them many of the same questions that you ask the faculty, especially those dealing with mentoring, student–faculty relations, and strengths and weaknesses of the program. It's also a good way to get more of an “inside scoop” about whether graduate students feel well supported in the program. A word of caution, however—it is very likely that the graduate students will offer feedback to the faculty regarding the applicants they have met. Therefore, do not say things that contradict what you told the faculty members and do not insult other applicants, students, or faculty. Further, if the students

should happen to take you out socially after the interview, be careful about how you behave. The formal interviews may be over, but you will continue to be under scrutiny. So align your behavior—including the amount of alcohol you consume—to match your goal of being admitted. There are many cases in which applicants' chances for admission were ruined by things said or done late at night while out with the department's graduate students.

During the interview, you will want to come across as poised, mature, motivated, thoughtful, and interpersonally skilled. Remember that clinical program faculty will not only evaluate you in terms of your potential as a graduate student but also as someone whom they will feel comfortable sending into clinical settings. A good way to increase your poise and confidence during interviews is to practice role-played interviews before going on the visit. These mock interviews can be with a roommate or, better yet, with a graduate student or faculty member at your home institution. Make the interviews as realistic as possible. Dress appropriately, shake the person's hand, introduce yourself, and in all ways interact as if the interview were the real thing. Address the interviewing faculty members as "Dr." until and unless you are told to do otherwise.

What Kind of Financial Aid Is Available for Graduate Study?

As mentioned earlier, most PhD programs in clinical psychology offer some form of financial aid to their students, while PsyD and master's-level programs are much less likely to do so. Financial aid comes in several forms: loans, fellowships, tuition remission, and work programs. The major source of financial aid for graduate students is the university in which they are enrolled, though aid may also be available through guaranteed loan programs (many of which are government sponsored) and national

awards, which are competitive and have specific criteria for application. These awards are given directly to students for use at the school of their choice.

The availability of awards and loans changes regularly, so you should check with the financial aid officer at your college or at the institutions to which you are applying for current information. Because your financial support is most likely to come through the program to which you are admitted, the information you will receive with your application material is very important—read it carefully!

Fellowships and *scholarships* are given on many campuses as outright grants to support and encourage students with outstanding academic and research potential. These are few in number, and competition for them is fierce. Many fellowships and scholarships are used to encourage applications from especially talented people who have limited financial resources and/or are members of racial/ethnic minorities, or other groups that are traditionally underrepresented in PhD psychology programs. Others are designed for applicants who have outstanding academic records or who have distinguished themselves in other ways, such as by conducting or publishing research in a particular topic area.

Assistantships come in two forms: research assistantships and teaching assistantships. As their names imply, both entail working at jobs that require the graduate student to assist faculty in research projects or in teaching responsibilities (e.g., as a discussion leader, laboratory instructor, or grader). Assistantships usually require 10 to 20 hours of work each week. Although these positions have a work requirement, many graduate programs consider the work requirement to be part of students' training (e.g., learning to conduct research or to teach, respectively), so these positions are often helpful to students for what they *learn* in addition to what they *earn*.

Loan programs exist on most campuses as a way of assisting students to invest in their own futures. These loans usually carry a low interest rate, and repayment begins only after the student leaves graduate school. Students in PsyD programs are more likely than those in PhD programs to need loans (Sayette & Norcross, 2018). This is because PsyD programs tend to be more expensive and are less likely to offer financial aid or paid teaching or research assistantship positions. Note that, partially due to the increasing default rate of on federal student loans, the rules for these loans are becoming more restrictive. Time and credit limits for completion of master's and graduate programs may apply, and there are more restrictions on who is eligible, so think carefully about enrolling in a program whose cost may leave you with unmanageable debt.

Finally, many programs offer some form of tuition remission. They may offer complete remission, meaning that the student pays no tuition at all, or they offer some portion of remission (e.g., 50%). Alternatively, the program may waive the out-of-state tuition and only require that the student pay in-state tuition, even if the student is coming from out of state.

Not all types of aid are offered at all schools. Again, carefully read the financial aid information you receive to be sure you understand what is available at each school you are considering. Further, tuition costs differ dramatically across schools. If the program does not guarantee tuition remission to its students, then you must factor tuition costs into the equation when deciding where to apply. In addition to consulting the financial aid office website at the universities you are considering, you should explore other resources for information about applying for financial aid. These include, for example, Peterson's (2018) *Scholarships, Grants, and Prizes*. Note too that, as mentioned

earlier, APA accredited programs are required to provide information on the percentage of incoming students who received funding, so be sure to look for that information on the programs' websites when you are comparing programs. It will be in the section labeled "Student Admissions, Outcomes, and Other Data."

If you are accepted into a clinical psychology program that offers little or no financial aid, it is well worth your time to check on the availability of assistantships in departments outside psychology. For example, administrators of campus residence halls may hire graduate students to serve as hall counselors. Further, departments offering large undergraduate courses may not have enough graduate students in their programs to fill the teaching assistantships available and thus may "import" assistants from related areas. Identify your skills and experiences and seek out jobs that fit them. Note, however, that many programs require that you receive permission before working outside of the program, so double-check with your mentor or with the Director of Clinical Training before seeking employment on your own.

When I Am Admitted to a Program, How Long Will I Have to Make a Decision about Whether to Accept?

Most admissions offers include a specific deadline by which the student must accept or reject the offer. For doctoral programs, offers of acceptance and financial aid typically must be given to applicants by April 1, and applicants must respond by April 15.

Realistically, offers from competitive programs often are given well before April 1st, and many offers are made as early as February these days. The April 15th deadline for responding to an offer was adopted by the APA Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology to protect students from being pressured to make decisions before having full

information about their alternatives (American Psychological Association, 2013). Once you make a final decision about which offer to accept, you should convey that information to all programs at which you are still being actively considered. Your acceptance decision is considered binding after the April 15th date, although professional courtesy suggests that the decision is binding even if it is made before April 15. For further details on expectations regarding receiving and responding to graduate school offers in a timely way, see the CUDCP Guidelines for Graduate School Offers and Acceptances at

[https://cudcp.wildapricot.org/Resources/Documents/CUDCP%20Policy%20on%20Graduate%20Program%20Offers%20and%20Acceptances%20\(FULL%20version\).pdf](https://cudcp.wildapricot.org/Resources/Documents/CUDCP%20Policy%20on%20Graduate%20Program%20Offers%20and%20Acceptances%20(FULL%20version).pdf).

Ideally, you will have ranked all your potential programs once you have completed your interviews so that you can provide quick feedback to programs once you begin receiving offers. For example, if you are lucky enough to get an early offer from your top choice, you should quickly accept the offer and then also should withdraw your applications from the other programs. Similarly, if you receive an offer from your third choice, you should withdraw your applications from your fourth and lower choices but hold onto the acceptance at your third choice while waiting to hear from your first and second choices. Overall, if you have decided not to accept an offer, courtesy dictates informing the department of that decision as soon as possible. This courtesy will be appreciated by the department and may provide space for another student. If you do not receive an acceptance by April 1, you may be the one who appreciates an applicant turning down an offer quickly, since it may free up a space for you.

Will I Be Successful in Gaining Admission?

Obviously, we can't answer this question with certainty, but we hope the information and suggestions presented here will be helpful. A careful examination of your own credentials and the advice of those who have experience with students applying to graduate school in clinical psychology will help you apply to appropriate programs and maximize your chances of admission.

It may also be helpful to hear about the winding path to graduate school that has been taken by successful applicants. One recent survey (Werntz, Hsueh, Hobaica, & Owens, 2019) of more than 700 current clinical doctoral students at CUDCP PhD programs indicated that 73 percent of them applied only to clinical PhD programs, while the others applied to clinical PhD programs along with other types of programs (e.g., PsyD or Master's programs). In the year they were admitted, students reported applying to an average of 10 clinical PhD programs each, but the range was enormous (from 1 to 27!). Also, one-third of these students reported having applied to graduate school more than once, reinforcing the idea that it is common to need to re-apply during a later application cycle after further strengthening one's application.

We also encourage you to review "Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process" (Appleby & Appleby, 2006). This article reports results of a survey of chairs of graduate school admissions committees in psychology that asked about applicant actions that decreased their chances of admission. The results summarize many of the things we have warned you about in this chapter, such as submitting personal statements that are too revealing, asking questions that suggest you have not bothered to

read available information, having typos or grammatical errors in written materials, and the like. So if you read this chapter carefully, most of these mistakes are easy to avoid.

We wish you success in your application process!

What are your rights as a graduate student?

While there is no doubt that being a graduate student carries many demands and responsibilities, it is also important for you to understand what you have the right to expect. Different programs will promise different support packages and each faculty mentor-student relationship is unique, but the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS) has developed some general guidelines that they consider “indispensable to the fair, equitable and respectful treatment of every psychology graduate student throughout their education and training”

(<https://www.apa.org/apags/issues/student-rights-position>).

The APAGS Position Statement on the Rights of Psychology Graduate Students details rights tied to five areas: 1) institutional environment (e.g., the right to receive respectful treatment by the faculty, colleagues, staff, and peers); 2) program policies (e.g., the right to publicly available and accurate information about the program and expectations); 3) professional and educational training opportunities (e.g., the right to quality training in teaching, research, clinical practice, and quality mentorship); 4) work environment (e.g., the right to fair compensation for services provided and the chance to work in an environment free of harassment or intimidation); and 5) appeals and grievances (e.g., the right to due process). In short, you should expect to work very hard during graduate school, but to also be treated with respect!

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided information on various career options for the helping professions and reviewed the requirements and procedures for applying to graduate training programs in clinical psychology. There are a number of paths that can lead to a career as a therapist, including earning a master's degree, PhD, or PsyD degree in clinical psychology, a master's or PhD degree in counseling psychology, a PhD degree in school psychology, a specialist degree in education (EDS, EdD), or, a master's or doctorate in social work, a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, a medical degree in psychiatry or behavioral pediatrics, or a nursing degree in psychiatric nursing.

Depending on which career they are interested in pursuing, students can use coursework, research experience, clinical experience, and extracurricular activities to prepare for their career. Salaries vary across careers, with doctoral-level jobs typically paying more than master's-level positions.

There are a number of different training options in clinical psychology for students to consider, including a master's, PhD, or PsyD degree. If they are seeking a doctoral program, it is important to consider whether the program is accredited by APA or PCSAS, or unaccredited, and the relevant implications for licensure eligibility in different states.

Students who are educated about the process of applying to graduate programs should fare better than those who are not. There are significant personal and financial commitments required of graduate students, so you must evaluate your own motivation and goals before proceeding. If your motivation and energy are strong, then the components of the application process and the process itself should be manageable. The

primary components of the application are finding a good fit based on research interests, GRE scores, GPA, letters of recommendation, and personal statements. The process of applying is complex so it is important to do your homework and not leave it to the last minute. In general, persistence and conscientiousness are encouraged throughout this process. Good luck!!