

**Pursuing a degree in Clinical Psychology: advice from a past OU psych major.
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This essay includes a description of the field, lists of programs available for training Clinical Psychology, requirements for admission, and job opportunities available in the field.

As any undergraduate student studying Psychology discovers early in his or her academic career, the field of Psychology is a dauntingly broad one. Among other sectors, Clinical Psychology is one of many specializations available from which to choose. Even as a specific specialization, the attempt to pursue higher education in Clinical Psychology is an involved, time-consuming pursuit. This essay attempts to introduce and clarify various aspects of such a pursuit, including a description of the field in general, what preliminary steps one may take as an undergraduate, available graduate programs, the application process for those graduate programs, job opportunities after completion of a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, and relevant resources for further information.

Some of the most valuable resources for Psychology students are available through the American Psychological Association (APA), which publishes information related to *every* aspect of the field both in print and electronically. So, naturally, they provide useful information relative to Clinical Psychology. They define and characterize it in the following way:

“The field of Clinical Psychology integrates science, theory, and practice to understand, predict, and alleviate maladjustment, disability, and discomfort as well as to promote human adaptation, adjustment, and personal development...Interventions in Clinical Psychology are directed at preventing, treating, and correcting emotional conflicts, personality disturbances, psychopathology, and the skill deficits underlying human distress or dysfunction.”¹

Oftentimes, Clinical Psychologists address more severe and abnormal mental disabilities, which differentiates it from other areas of specialization within the field of Psychology that might be

¹ www.apa.org/divisions/div12

considered similar. For example, counseling psychologists “help people recognize their strengths and resources to cope with their problems,”² which tend to be more common and less severe ones. More obviously, the described nature of Clinical Psychology separates it from other areas within the field of Psychology that involve, for example, studying human development throughout the lifespan (Developmental Psychology), utilizing psychological theories within the context of law (Forensic Psychology), attempting to improve workplace productivity by implementing strategies based on psychological principles (Industrial/Organizational Psychology), investigating the interactive relationship between the brain and behavior (Neuropsychology), or exploring how individuals’ mental and behavioral characteristics are influenced by the social environment (Social Psychology). Clinical Psychology specifically demands an interest in interpersonal interaction with the aim of assessing and treating mental illness. Additionally, Clinical Psychology is different from some other areas of the field in that practicing it requires a doctoral degree (Ph.D. or Psy.D.). A number of careers in the field of Psychology can be obtained after procuring a Bachelor’s degree, and many more become available once one receives a Master’s degree. Without exception, however, Clinical Psychology requires the intensive training that may only be obtained through gaining a doctoral degree.

But even prior to graduate training, a Psychology student can do a lot to work toward his or her goal of becoming a Clinical Psychologist. As an undergraduate, one should obviously enroll in courses which provide preparation for graduate study in Clinical Psychology. For example, most graduate programs in Clinical Psychology expect applicants to have taken specific courses related to Theories of Personality, Abnormal Psychology, Experimental Methods, and Statistics before undergoing graduate study (as part of a larger set of courses required to complete a Psychology major). This should be taken into account when considering

² www.apa.org, “Careers for the Twenty-First Century”

electives to choose to meet degree requirements. Beyond choosing one's courses wisely, an undergraduate can also prepare for graduate school by researching different universities' Clinical Psychology programs and application processes — and *every* university is unique in those two respects. And, again, APA's publications, such as *Graduate Study in Psychology*, are good starting points for such research. It is important to realistically perceive what preparation for a career in Clinical Psychology entails, and this research is the first step to doing so.

In addition to investigating graduate programs that are available, it is essential to plan to take the GRE general test, which is required by all Clinical Psychology graduate programs, and the GRE Psychology subject test, if required by programs in which one is interested. Due to a delay in reporting scores to chosen universities, it is advisable to take both tests at least two months before application deadlines. These scores are important to universities considering application to their programs, so preparation is, again, imperative. Study books, free online study aids, and classes are available to help with preparing for the tests, and www.GRE.org provides information on how to obtain available studying resources.

Some of the most efficient preparatory efforts that can be made by an undergraduate are related to gaining experience that improves one as a candidate for graduate study, and these experiences generally take one of three forms: research, internships, and volunteer/paid work experience. Conducting research is mandatory up to a certain point for course requirements, but efforts should be made to extend one's experiences beyond those requirements. Publication of one's work before admittance to graduate school is looked on well by graduate admissions committees. Research without publication is also considered favorably as well, however. One should cultivate relationships with his or her professors as an undergraduate. Gaining research experience in a professor's lab is invaluable. Efforts should be made toward publication,

presentation at appropriate conferences, etc., so that one's graduate program application may become even stronger.

Internships and volunteer/paid work experience are also beneficial to pursuing a graduate degree in Clinical Psychology. One should attempt to find and procure positions in organizations, practices, etc. that relate to what one aims to take part in later in life as a Clinical Psychologist. Experiences that inform either graduate study or one's future career as a Clinical Psychologist are necessary requirements when applying for graduate study. Many admissions websites for graduate programs in Clinical Psychology explicitly state that flawless grades and test scores are not solely sufficient for obtaining admission. Admissions officers look for candidates that not only show academic excellence, but show commitment to and knowledge of the field. Research, internship, volunteer, and work experiences are great ways to convey those characteristics and to cultivate skills that will undoubtedly prove to be valuable during graduate study.

Once one has committed to the pursuit of graduate study in Clinical Psychology and has prepared accordingly as an undergraduate, the next step is to begin the application process. One of the first decisions that must be made before choosing programs for which to apply is whether one wants to enroll in a terminal Master's program or a program whose end result is a Ph.D. Countless sources advise applicants to consider the terminal Master's as the best option if they are not sure what specific area of Clinical Psychology they want to work in—or if they even want to work in Clinical Psychology at all. Also, doctoral programs in Clinical Psychology are much more competitive than Master's degree programs. Therefore, for example, if one's academic record, test scores, résumé, etc. are not up to par, applying for a terminal Master's degree might be the smartest option.

There are some drawbacks to enrolling in a Master's program and then reapplying separately for a doctoral program. Almost all students pursuing a Master's degree are financially responsible for their education, whereas many doctoral programs provide significant amounts of financial support in the form of grants, assistantships, and other opportunities. Aside from a financial downside, initially obtaining a Master's degree before attempting to procure a Ph.D. takes a little longer than if one were to pursue the doctoral degree initially. However, if one is not undoubtedly sure of what they want to do and, therefore, which program is right for him or her, then the financial and temporal investments will be worthwhile in the end.

Once one has decided to apply to a doctoral program in Clinical Psychology, what happens next? What are typical requirements for these programs? As mentioned, the process is a competitive one. The following list includes the top ten Psychology programs, listed in the National Research Council's most recent Report on Quality in Ph.D. Education in the U.S.:³

1. Stanford University
2. University of Michigan
3. Yale University
4. University of California, Los Angeles
5. Illinois University
6. Harvard University
7. Minnesota University
8. University of Pennsylvania
9. University of California, Berkeley
10. University of California, San Diego

A full list of accredited universities that have doctoral programs in Clinical Psychology can be found at the end of this paper. Generally, a broad range of psychology classes (preferably supplemented by courses in the natural sciences), a high GPA, high GRE scores, some form of experience in the field, good letters of recommendation, and a strong statement of purpose—

³ from www.berkeley.edu

sometimes also referred to as an autobiographical statement, personal statement, or admissions essay—are required by all programs for admission.

Take for example the University of Pennsylvania, which has one of the most competitive Clinical Psychology Programs in the nation. For the admitted class for the 2005-2006 academic year, the GPA range of all students was 3.12, with a median GPA of 3.738. Scores for the same graduate student sample on the GRE were just as impressive. On the verbal section, the median score was 600 (on a scale of 200-800), and scores ranged between 560 and 760. The median score for these students on the quantitative section of the GRE was 764, with a range from 720 to 800. For the writing section, the University of Pennsylvania's most recently admitted Clinical Psychology class had a median score of 5.8 (on a scale of 0-6), and scores ranged from 5.5 to 6.0.

As another example, consider the University of California, Berkeley's Clinical Program in Psychology. Two hundred ninety-eight individuals applied for admission to the program for the 2005-2006 year. Of those 298 applicants, only 7 were admitted, which is a two percent acceptance rate. The average undergraduate GPA for this particular class was 3.73. For these 7 students, the median verbal GRE score was 690, which ranked them in the 96th percentile. Their sample of scores for the quantitative section had a median of 740, and the corresponding percentile rank was 77. Finally, these students performed well on the writing section as well, the median score for this sample being 5.75.

As is evident, applying to these and similar programs is a task that should not be undertaken lightly due to the competitive nature of the admissions process for these programs. As mentioned, however, GPA and GRE scores are not the only things that admissions

committees look for in an applicant. So what else is typically required for a grad school application?

Though each university has a different process, some general statements can be made about what is required to complete an application for a graduate program in Clinical Psychology. Naturally, since all programs need to know your GPA and GRE scores, the appropriate paperwork must be sent. Official transcripts are requested from each university one has attended, including universities where one may have cross-registered or been a transient student. Processing is usually speedy, with the transcripts being mailed out within 2-3 business days, and there are usually fees assessed for each transcript request. Official GRE score reports must be requested through ETS, which is the organization that administers the GRE. When one initially takes the test, he or she is allowed to send his or her score report to four institutions free of charge. It is advisable to do one's homework ahead of time and use these four choices wisely because score reports cost fifteen dollars each otherwise. Score reports can be requested online, over the phone, or via mail, and details on this process can be found at www.GRE.org.

In addition to sending score and grade reports, one must also complete individual applications for each program to which he or she applies. Most programs require that two applications be completed, one for the university's graduate school and one for the actual department to which one applies. Most, if not all, universities have all applications available online, either to submit electronically, or to print, complete and mail.

Each university, beyond the typical application information, requests that one submits various supplemental materials. One of the most important parts of one's application for a graduate program is the personal statement. Each school has a different prompt, as well as a different length they request the personal statement to be. Some universities limit applicants to as

little as 300 words, while other universities put no limit on the essay length. Prompts vary widely, some being open-ended, and some detailing in an outline which specific questions should be addressed. The following are several examples of prompts from different applications to Clinical Psychology programs:

A personal statement (**not to exceed 500 words**) summarizing your experiences, skills, and reasons for applying to West Virginia University.⁴

The Clinical Psychology program places great emphasis on training for professional competence. Therefore, Clinical applicants are asked to respond to the following three questions in approximately 1,000 words total: 1) Describe yourself. 2) Describe a personal well known to you. 3) How would this person describe you?⁵

The Department of Psychology asks that all applicants for admission submit a statement, one or two pages in length, about their objectives in taking graduate work. To the extent permitted by the present development of your plans, the statement should address: (1) the kind of position you hope to obtain after graduate work is completed, and your preference among alternate kinds of positions; (2) the specialized interests you intend to pursue in such a position; (3) your reasons for selecting the vocational plans described under (1) and (2); (4) your previous training. Wherever you have not clearly decided on any of these points, you should, if possible, indicate the major alternatives you have in mind and the probable basis for future selection among them.⁶

Please provide an essay of about 1,000 words. It should include a brief autobiographical sketch, and should also address the following: What are your career objectives? How will a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology advance those objectives? In what ways does the UMass Boston Clinical Psychology Program address your particular academic, career, and personal goals? What do you foresee as your primary activity five years after receiving your Ph.D. degree? What professional and academic experiences, and what experiences in the rest of your life have especially prepared you for the challenges of graduate school and for a career in Clinical Psychology? What personal strengths do you bring to your

⁴ West Virginia University

⁵ University of Michigan

⁶ Pennsylvania State University

graduate level studies? What personal limitations or hurdles must you address in order to complete graduate school? What research relevant to the Clinical Psychology Program are you interested in pursuing at UMass Boston? What research experiences of yours have prepared you for research work in the Clinical Psychology Program? Please describe a published work in psychology or a related field that has had a significant impact on your thinking. Explain why you found this work so meaningful.⁷

Admissions committees give a lot of weight to applicants' personal statements, but much consideration is also given to letters of recommendation as well. Most universities request that each applicant have three letters of recommendation submitted by professors, supervisors, or other individuals who know the applicant's potential for graduate study quite well. Some universities welcome letters beyond the minimum three that are required. Applicants should approach potential recommenders long before application deadlines to see if they would be willing to submit recommendations on their behalf. Those who are willing should be given the appropriate recommendation forms, which can be found on each program's website or may be requested via telephone, as early as is possible. All recommenders should be notified of the application deadlines so they have a timeline with which to work.

In addition to the supplementary materials already discussed, graduate programs in Clinical Psychology all require applicants to submit either a résumé or curriculum vitae. Reasons for this request are obvious—they want to see what you have accomplished that makes you a suitable candidate for graduate school. Before formally making either of these documents, it is helpful to brainstorm about what one might include. For example, work experience, volunteer experience, internship positions, research experience, and academic honors and awards should be listed. Usually, an applicant's undergraduate institution has resources available through career services departments to help with the development of these supplemental materials. Finally,

⁷ University of Massachusetts, Boston

some universities request additional materials. For example, some universities require applicants to send a separate worksheet of all psychology courses taken, grades in each, and the resulting GPA. Unique requests like these are common, and each program has its own specific requirements. Each university admissions webpage should be consulted to see which supplemental materials are required and what format is expected for those materials.

But how do you know which programs to apply to? Are they all the same? The answer is a resounding no—sort of. All Clinical Psychology graduate programs have the eventual endpoint of a doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology, and in that way are all the same. However, depending on which universities to which one applies and attends, the training and educational experience can differ widely due to differing interests between professors at different institutions.

When one applies for graduate study in Clinical Psychology, he or she is technically applying to the program, but is, practically speaking, applying to a certain professor within that program. Therefore, when investigating which graduate programs might be a good match, one should specifically look for professors whose research interests and theoretical orientation are compatible with his or her interests. After all, who wants to commit themselves to research in which they are not interested? Departmental web pages for all universities list faculty. Usually, with this list, one can locate either individual faculty websites or a departmental website that summarizes the academic and professional careers of each professor, including what laboratory investigations have been completed and those that are underway. It should also be noted that not all professors within a Clinical Psychology department are necessarily accepting students to advise during any given year. Many departmental websites will post which professors are

accepting students, and those that do not provide such information can always be contacted via e-mail or telephone regarding this inquiry.

Also regarding the exploration of faculty at universities of interest, one should research departmental (and individual faculty) theoretical orientations. Some universities are eclectic in that their Clinical Psychology faculty is comprised of individuals with varying theoretical perspectives. Other universities, however, tend to have faculty that are aligned with each other in reference to theoretical orientation. For example, there are a diminishing number of universities, many of them in the Northeast, whose faculty profess a psychoanalytic or psychodynamic orientation. Other universities have faculty that prefer to take a strictly behavioral approach to Clinical Psychology. Still other institutions' faculty base their work on a cognitive behavioral approach. Each university is different and must, therefore, be considered by the applicant individually. By the time one is ready to apply, it should be known what theoretical orientation is preferred—or at least those that surely are not preferred. This characteristic of graduate programs in Clinical Psychology should be taken into careful consideration, since the training one will receive will be in line with the theoretical orientation of the faculty at the university.

Both research interests and theoretical orientation of the faculty should weigh heavily on an applicant's decision on whether or not to apply to a program. In fact, one of the important purposes of one's personal statement is to assist the admissions committee in deciding whether an applicant is a good match for their department and for any specific faculty members. One's personal statement should therefore reflect that he or she has researched these aspects of the university's program and that he or she is able to justify admittance into the program by indicating what contributions he or she might make to the department. Therefore, this is a necessary way to narrow the list of potential programs to which to apply.

Though each program is unique due to the interests and practices of the faculty, most Clinical Psychology programs entail similar curricula to prepare students for future practice in Clinical Psychology. Upon researching various websites and graduate catalogs for universities, it becomes apparent that one may expect to enroll some of the following courses at some point in his or her graduate career:⁸

- Seminar in Psychology
- Graduate Research
- Thesis Research
- Advanced Statistics
- Multivariate Methods of Analysis
- Seminar in Learning and Motivation
- Personality Assessment
- Clinical Neuropsychology
- Advanced Physiological Psychology
- Principles of Psychotherapy
- Behavior Therapy
- Contemporary Issues in Cognitive Research
- Practicum in Psychology
- Advanced Clinical Placement
- Life-Span Developmental Psychology
- Psychopathology
- Psychometrics
- History and Systems in Psychology
- Seminar in Ethics and Professional Issues

Some of these courses, specifically those involved in research and clinical training (i.e., practicum and/or internship courses), have multiple parts, all of which must be taken. One can be sure that graduate education in Clinical Psychology, especially beyond the first year, will entail extensive training through internships and practicum training. Additionally, research courses will be geared toward development and completion of a thesis. In order to receive one's doctoral degree, one must successfully defend his or her thesis before a board of faculty members in addition to satisfactorily completing (which is usually defined as receiving a letter grade of B or higher) all required courses and clinical training.

⁸ partial list, based on the curriculum of the University of Alabama

So what can one do with a doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology? Multiple options are available. Most people pursue a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology with some intent of practicing psychotherapy. However, there are other opportunities available for Clinical Psychologists, and APA summarizes these opportunities in the following way: “Clinical Psychologists work throughout the United States in a variety of settings including individual practice, mental health service units, managed healthcare organizations, hospitals, schools, universities, industries, legal systems, medical systems, counseling centers, governmental agencies, and military services.”⁹ Clinical Psychologists, through receiving such extensive education, possess the potential to be quite flexible with their careers. Many Clinical Psychologists operate a private practice and are involved in other careers simultaneously, such as teaching or conducting research. The take-home message is that job opportunities for Clinical Psychologists are in abundance—each student just has to decipher which niche he or she wants to fill.

This paper only begins to touch on some of the many aspects of considering, applying to, and undergoing graduate study. The decision to become a Clinical Psychologist should not be executed lightly. Otherwise, valuable financial, emotional, temporal, and other resources might be wasted. However, once one has comfortably concluded that he or she would like to become a Clinical Psychologist, there are plenty of resources available to aid in realization of that ambition. They are out there, but it is up to each student of Psychology to find them and make the most of them!

⁹ www.apa.org/divisions/div12

Accredited Programs in Clinical Psychology (U.S. and Canada)^{10;11}

Adelphi University
 Adler School of Professional Psychology
 University of Alabama
 University of Alabama at Birmingham
 University of Albany
 Alliant International University—San Francisco Bay
 American University
 Antioch New England Graduate School
 Argosy University, Atlanta
 Argosy University, Chicago Campus
 Argosy University, Phoenix
 Argosy University, San Francisco Bay
 Argosy University, Tampa
 Argosy University, Twin Cities Campus
 Argosy University, Washington, D.C.
 University of Arizona
 Arizona State University
 University of Arkansas
 Auburn University
 Azusa Pacific University
 Baylor University
 Binghamton University
 Biola University
 Boston University
 Bowling Green State University
 Brigham Young University
 University of British Columbia
 University of Buffalo
 University of California, Berkeley
 University of California, Los Angeles
 California Institute of Integral Studies
 Carlos Albizu University—Miami Campus
 Carlos Albizu University—San Juan Campus
 Case Western Reserve University
 Catholic University of America
 University of Central Florida
 Central Michigan University
 Chestnut Hill College
 Chicago School of Professional Psychology
 University of Cincinnati
 City University of New York at City College

¹⁰ www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/clinpsyal.html

¹¹ www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/clinpsymz.html

Clark University
University of Colorado at Boulder
Concordia University
University of Connecticut
Dalhousie University
University of Delaware
University of Denver
DePaul University
University of Detroit Mercy
Drexel University
Duke University
Duquesne University
Emory University
Fairleigh Dickinson University
The Fielding Institute
University of Florida
Florida Institute of Technology
Florida State University
Fordham University
Forest Institute of Professional Psychology
Fuller Theological Seminary
Gallaudet University
George Fox University
George Mason University
George Washington University
University of Georgia
Georgia State University
University of Hartford
University of Hawaii at Manoa
University of Houston
Howard University
Idaho State University
University of Illinois at Chicago
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Illinois Institute of Technology
Immaculata University
Indiana State University
Indiana University
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis
University of Indianapolis
University of Iowa
Jackson State University
John F. Kennedy University
University of Kansas
Kent State University

University of Kentucky
La Salle University
University of La Verne
Loma Linda University
Long Island University
Long Island University/C.W. Post Campus
Louisiana State University
University of Louisville
Loyola College in Maryland
Loyola University of Chicago
University of Maine
University of Manitoba
Marquette University
University of Maryland Baltimore County
University of Maryland College Park
University of Massachusetts Amherst
University of Massachusetts Boston
Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology, Inc.
McGill University
The University of Memphis
University of Miami
Miami University
Michigan State University
University of Minnesota
University of Mississippi
University of Missouri—Columbia
University of Missouri—Kansas City
University of Missouri—St. Louis
University of Montana
University of Nebraska—Lincoln
University of Nevada, Reno
University of New Brunswick
University of New Mexico
The New School
New York University
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
University of North Dakota
University of North Texas
Northern Illinois University
Northwestern University
Northwestern University Medical School
Nova Southeastern University
Ohio State University
Ohio University
Oklahoma State University

University of Oregon
 University of Ottawa
 Pacific Graduate School of Psychology
 Pacific University
 University of Pennsylvania
 Pennsylvania State University
 Pepperdine University
 Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine
 University of Pittsburgh
 Ponce School of Medicine
 Purdue University
 Queen's University
 Regent University
 University of Rhode Island
 University of Rochester
 Roosevelt University
 Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science
 Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
 San Diego State University/University of California, San Diego
 University of Saskatchewan
 Simon Fraser University
 University of South Carolina
 University of South Dakota
 University of South Florida
 University of Southern California
 Southern Illinois University
 University of Southern Mississippi
 Spalding University
 St. John's University
 St. Louis University
 Stony Brook University
 Suffolk University
 Syracuse University
 Teachers College, Columbia University
 Temple University
 University of Tennessee, Knoxville
 Texas A&M University
 University of Texas at Austin
 University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas
 Texas Tech University
 University of Toledo
 University of Tulsa
 Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences
 University of Utah
 Vanderbilt University
 University of Vermont

University of Victoria
University of Virginia
Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Consortium Program in Clinical Psychology
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
University of Washington
Washington State University
Washington University
University of Waterloo
Wayne State University
West Virginia University
Western Michigan University
University of Western Ontario
Wheaton College
Wichita State University
Widener University
University of Windsor
University of Wisconsin—Madison
University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee
The Wright Institute
Wright State University
University of Wyoming
Xavier University
Yale University
Yeshiva University
York University