How to Choose a Graduate Program in Clinical/Counseling Psychology

**First, the type of programs:**

Master’s in Psychology
- terminal master’s program
- doctoral preparatory program

Doctorate in Psychology
- Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy)
- Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology)

**Should I get a Master’s before applying to a Ph.D. program?**
Many students pondering the idea of graduate school in psychology struggle with this issue. The answer is, it depends on the person and his/her career and educational goals. There are many advantages and disadvantages to all the many different types of programs available in the field of psychology, and each program type may fit each individual for a different reason. Upon researching the different types of programs and assessing your own personal goals and aspirations you can find a school that will be the best fit for you.

**Differences between terminal master’s programs and doctoral preparatory programs:**

Terminal Master’s programs:
- Typically 2 years to complete course work
- Trained to develop professional identity as a counselor in a variety of settings
- Develop understanding/solid knowledge base concerning theoretical and empirical research regarding approaches/techniques to use with clients
- Mastery of skills to prevent and decrease maladaptive behaviors
- Develop an understanding for and a sensitivity to multicultural issues in the community and in counseling
- Emphasis in developing and staying current with ethics and therapist responsibilities
- Provide supervised experience applying basic psychotherapeutic procedures and interventions through approved internship sites.
- Often option to do thesis project or complete extra internship hours
- Provides training and prepares students to apply for licensure and certification upon completion of degree at the Master’s level to work as a counselor
- Look for CACREP accredited programs

**CACREP accredited programs have been approved and meet the requirements for accredited status and licensing requirements. Programs not accredited may not fulfill requirements to sit for licensing exams/licensure. For a list of CACREP accredited programs visit the American Counseling Association: CACREP Directory of Accredited Programs**
Doctoral Preparatory programs:

- Most programs consistent with Scientist-Practitioner Model of Clinical Psychology
- Programs typically take 2 years to complete
- Mission is to prepare student’s for doctoral programs in psychology
- Courses range from research methods and various advanced statistical course to clinically relevant courses such as Abnormal Psychology and Assessment
- Practica placement most usually required for a portion of degree requirements – some programs offer advanced practicum experience for those wanting or needing more experience
- Training to develop and to stay current in ethics and researcher/clinician responsibilities
- Training and development of multicultural awareness
- Emphasis on research – most programs require a thesis (but not all). Research is often available outside of a thesis as independent research with the direction of a faculty member. Other research opportunities available through working with a faculty member – often able to earn co-authorship on papers and journals

Advantages and Disadvantages of Master’s program:

Advantages:

- Help obtain graduate experience without committing to 4-7 years from the start.
- Help identify the confused/unsure student in the direction s/he wants career to go
- Application process less rigorous
- Not quite as competitive as a doctoral program
- Can serve as a safety net if you don’t get into a Ph.D. program
- Having a master’s can make you more competitive and more marketable
- Master’s programs tend to be more flexible than Ph.D. programs – allow freedom to explore multiple fields of psychology
- A completed thesis or advanced internship hours give you advanced experience as a researcher or counselor before applying to Ph.D. programs
- Advanced internship hours can help provide you with more experience if a career at the Master’s level is what you desire – more marketable.
- Master’s program will help the unsure/confused student determine if a Ph.D. program is something s/he wants to pursue
- Many different types of Master’s programs such as I/O psychology, School psychology, Counseling psychology etc.

Disadvantages:

- A master’s program can add considerable length to the time spent in school if you continue on to get your Ph.D.
- Many programs will not accept all credits from the master’s program
- Many programs are quite general/broad in the course work – may be difficult for students looking to narrow interests
• Have a short amount of time to complete program and broad coursework could leave students feeling as though their training it not intense enough in particular areas.
• Different types of programs varying in length, field of psychology, and mission.
• Students that do not know the difference between missions, fields of psychology, and length may enter a program and have an experience that is unexpected due to lack of knowledge.

Psy.D. vs. Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology

Similarities in Programs:
• Both are highly competitive
• Rigorous application process
• Both require courses in research methods, statistics, and clinically relevant courses
• Both promote/provide training in ethics
• Require a dissertation (most Psy.D’s now require a dissertation or research project)
• Both programs take approximately 4-7 years to complete
• Both programs produce clinicians that are license eligible in all states
• Both can be APA approved
• Both degree types receive comparable salaries in the workforce

Differences in Programs:
Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) programs are trained in the Boulder-Model. The primary focus/emphasis in Ph.D. programs is the rigorous education as a researcher with clinical training.

Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology) programs are trained in the Vail-Model. The primary focus is to train students to become practicing clinicians working in a variety of settings. There is less focus on research in these programs and more applied work.

• Acceptance rates in Psy.D. programs tend to be higher, with higher enrollment rates as well. Psy.D. programs average 4 out of 10 applicants to be accepted where Ph.D. programs average 1 out of 10 (Norcoss & Castle, 2002)
• Psy.D. programs typically do not provide the amount of financial assistance that Ph.D programs offer – leaving many Psy.D. students in considerable amount of debt.
• Psy.D. faculty often have more diverse theoretical orientation than Ph.D. faculty. Psy.D. show 30% psychoanalytic, 30% Cognitive-Behavioral, 20% systems/family systems, where Ph.D. faculty tend to be about 65% Cognitive-Behavioral (Norcoss & Castle, 2002).
Where to find valuable information on graduate programs:

Books:

- *The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission: Psychology and Related Fields* (Published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates)
- *Counselor Preparation 1999-2001: Programs, Faculty, Trends* (Published by Taylor & Francis; 10th edition)
- *Graduate Programs in Psychology: Find the School that’s Right for You.* (Published by Peterson’s, a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.)
- *Graduate Study in Psychology and Related Fields* (Published by the American Psychological Association)
- *Insider’s Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical Psychology* (Published by Guildford)

Other good resources include:

- Talking with professors at your current school – most have contacts at several schools.
- Talk to fellow students applying to programs, Psi chi members, or current graduate students
- Utilize the internet – most programs are now online. You can read about faculty interest, program structure and curriculum, request paper based information and even apply online.
- Talk with professionals in your community – request an informational interview with a professional in the field your interested in. Ask for suggestions, recommendations, and contacts. Use your networking skills!

References


