

## GETTING READY TO WORK IN PSYCHOLOGY

If you are interested in a career as a psychologist, you have to complete graduate school in psychology. While most graduate programs in psychology are in academic departments located in the university colleges of arts and sciences, some are located in professional schools of psychology, education, business, medicine, and engineering.

Take time to research your choices. The program should match your interests. Although most psychology departments offer a breadth of education in the discipline of psychology, they vary in their strengths or areas of emphasis. You need to find out what those are and match them to your graduate education interests. The areas of expertise and research interests of individual faculty members can be a guide to you in matching your career interest with a specific area of research or practice in psychology.

A graduate or professional school's catalogue, brochures, and website are generally the best and most current sources of information about the nature of each graduate program and its program and admission requirements. A composite source of such information is available also in the American Psychological Association (APA) publication *Graduate Study in Psychology*, which can be ordered through the APA via e-mail: [order@apa.org](mailto:order@apa.org); telephone: (800) 374-2721; or at the website: [apa.org/books/](http://apa.org/books/).

Throughout the application process, discuss your plans with an advisor or your undergraduate faculty. Apply to a number of programs that offer you a reasonable chance of acceptance. For more information you may contact the APA Education Directorate at 750 First Street, N.E., Washington, DC 20002; e-mail: [education@apa.org](mailto:education@apa.org); or Web site: [apa.org/ed](http://apa.org/ed).

### **High School Preparation**

A strong college preparatory high school education is a good beginning for a career in psychology. Courses in science, math, English, history, social studies, and a foreign language are important. Science and math are particularly important because they provide the necessary skills for research and analysis in college psychology courses. Some high schools offer a course in psychology, which can give you an overview of what the field is about. You can also find a volunteer job where psychologists work, or read about psychology in newspapers and magazines to explore the field. Do not be is guided, however, by popular stereotypes of the field, Psychology is a broad behavioral science with many applications.

### **Bachelor's Degree**

Most undergraduate programs require a blend of science and liberal arts courses for a bachelor's degree in psychology. The courses usually include introductory psychology, experimental psychology, and statistics. Other required courses can be in learning, personality, abnormal psychology, social psychology, developmental psychology, physiological or comparative psychology, history and systems, and tests and measurement. Typically, you will be ready to take electives in psychology by the time you are a college junior. This is a good time to make graduate school plans so you can make wise choices about future courses and extracurricular activities during the last 2 years of college. Know, however, that as long as you've taken the basic electives in psychology, you don't always need to have a bachelor's in psychology to get into a graduate program in the field.

## **The Value of the Undergraduate Degree**

Psychology majors, whether they have gone on to careers in psychology (the majority do not) or other fields, cite courses in the principles of human behavior as especially important to life after college. The additional insight gained from these courses helps them, whether they are functioning as parents at home, managers on the job, or professionals in other fields.

Many bachelor's degree holders credit their college psychology courses with teaching them how people, including themselves, learn. "I use information on learning theory every time I conduct a training session for my employees," says a manager in a consumer products company.

Above all, it is the rigorous training in the scientific method—the need to do thorough, objective research, analyze data logically, and put forth the findings with clarity—that stands psychology majors in good stead as they pursue their future careers.

## **Graduate School**

Most graduate departments make entrance decisions on a variety of factors, including test scores, GPA, course selection, recommendations, and practical experience. Most departments furthermore require that you take a standard aptitude test, usually the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Although programs vary in the weight they attach to test scores, successful applicants typically score well above 500 on both the verbal and quantitative portions of the GRE. Determine if your GRE scores will qualify you for consideration by the institution to which you would like to apply. Competition for spaces in graduate school is keen.

## **Master's Degree**

Undergraduate course requirements for a terminal master's degree are relatively few: usually a background in introductory or general psychology, experimental psychology with a laboratory course, and statistics. The university usually takes the undergraduate grade point average (GPA) into account too.

A recent survey of 26 psychology master's programs shows that the most commonly required courses once you are in the master's program are those with industrial/organizational call tent, statistics, and research design. Course work at the master's level often also includes study in ethics, assessment, program evaluation, and personality related topics as well.

A master's degree in psychology, along with preparation in the natural sciences or mathematics, is increasingly valued by doctoral programs in psychology: Each doctoral program *also* decides which credits earned at the master's level it will accept for transfer. Occasionally, students need to repeat some course work. Some institutions will not accept a master's degree from any school other than their own. For these reasons, it is important to ask questions about these and other issues early in the application process.

## **Doctoral Degree**

Each graduate program determines its own entrance requirements. Some doctoral programs require applicants to have a master's degree in psychology. More commonly, students can enter the doctoral programs with a bachelor's degree and work directly on a doctoral degree.

Earning a doctoral degree typically requires at least 4 years, with the median time to degree being closer to 7 years of study after the bachelor's degree. Early in the graduate program, you will probably take course work in the core areas of psychology. You will work with a professor to learn how to do research; you'll also study how psychological research is applied to life situations. Once you have completed all the course work, you must pass a comprehensive exam and write and

defend a dissertation or other scholarly product.

If you want to be a professional psychologist in clinical, counseling, school, or other health service areas of psychology, you will also have to complete a 1-year internship as part of your doctoral study in these areas of practice. Some universities and professional schools offer a PsyD degree in lieu of the traditional research doctoral degree PhD or EdD degree. In choosing applicants, these programs may look for candidates who already have clinical experience or other work experience in applied psychology.

### **The Importance of Accreditation**

There are two kinds of accreditation: institutional and specialized. Institutional accreditation certifies that an institution has met minimum standards of quality. It is granted by one of seven regional accrediting organizations recognized for this purpose by the U.S. Department of Education. Membership in the APA requires that one's doctoral degree in psychology or equivalent be from an accredited institution. Most state licensing boards in psychology also have such a requirement, though some require that the licensure applicant have graduated from an accredited doctoral program in psychology. The latter is what we refer to as specialized accreditation.

Specialized accreditation only applies to professional programs. It certifies that the program meets the minimal standards of quality as defined by that profession. In the field of psychology, specialized accreditation is granted by the APA Committee on Accreditation and applies only to doctoral programs, internships, and postdoctoral residency programs in professional psychology. Increasingly, employers and health services reimbursement companies require that the psychologists whom they employ or reimburse be graduates of accredited programs in professional psychology.

For more information about accredited programs, contact the APA Education Directorate at 750 First Street, N.E., Washington, DC 20002-4242; e-mail: [education@apa.org](mailto:education@apa.org).

### **If You Need financial Aid**

You may be able to get financial aid to attend both undergraduate and graduate school. Assistance comes in different forms: fellowships, scholarships, grants or subsidies, work study programs, federal loans, and teaching or research assistantships. Graduate assistantships and work study require part-time work.

Students seeking financial aid for a graduate degree should get advice as early as possible. Consult with both the psychology

office and the office of financial aid on your own campus and also with the office of financial aid at the school to which you are applying. Students of ethnic minority background should also contact the APA Minority Fellowship Program: [www.apa.org/mfp/](http://www.apa.org/mfp/).

### **Licensure and Certification**

For independent practice as a psychologist anywhere in the United States or Canada, you must be licensed for such. Before granting you permission to take the licensing exam, the state licensing board will review your educational background. A doctoral degree does not automatically make you eligible; requirements vary from state to state. At a minimum, states require that the doctorate be in psychology or a field of study "primarily psychological in nature" and that it be from a regionally accredited institution. You also must have had at least 2 years of supervised professional experience. Information about state and provincial licensing requirements can be obtained from the American Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB) at the following addresses: P.O. Box 4389 Montgomery, AL, 36103 or <http://www.asppb.org>.