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Guide to Graduate School

Note: Request an electronic copy by emailing psyadv@iupui.edu. It will make following the numerous links in this document much easier.

Is Graduate School Right for You?

If you want to be a counselor with your own practice, be a professor, or conduct research, some level of graduate study is necessary. If you want to help people in the social services, through a nonprofit or government job, or work in business or human resources, graduate study may not be necessary at this time. You should discuss your options with your advisor or faculty mentor. Here are some things to consider if you are trying to decide if graduate school is right for you.

Motivation: Do you love school? Is it hard to put down the latest academic research from your field of interest? Can you work well in a situation with little structure from professors? Are you self-motivated? Does the idea of 2-6 years of additional study excite you? Are you okay living very frugally for 2-6 years? If you answered yes to these questions, then graduate school *might* be right for you.

Academic preparation: What is your GPA? Graduate programs are competitive and look for GPAs well above a 3.0. Have you done well in courses related to your field of interest?

Academic focus: If you have not decided on a specific career path, graduate school may not be the best option for you. Graduate programs are typically very specialized and will not give you an opportunity to explore a variety of options. Your undergraduate course work, out of class experiences and independent study can all be factors in helping you select a focus. What do you hope to gain by continuing your education? If it's just the degree title, then you're probably not ready for graduate study at this time.

The Masters

As a master's candidate, you will spend about two years in graduate school, depending on your program of study. The purpose of this program is to give you a solid education in a specialized field of scholarship. You will probably receive less financial aid than declared doctoral candidates do; in many cases, you may receive none at all.

In your first year, you will take courses that are similar in structure to your undergraduate classes. These classes are usually designed to build a foundation for future coursework. The workload is heavier, the course topics are more specific, and much more is expected. You may choose to be assigned an advisor at the beginning of your program. With your advisor's help, you will begin to develop an academic focus.

In your second year, you may take further courses to complete your degree requirements. You will likely direct more and more energy toward your concentration. Some programs may require you to complete at least one practicum. These positions can be paid or unpaid and allow you to gain hands-on experience in your chosen field. Also, depending on the program, you will probably complete a master's thesis, a portfolio, a manuscript, or sit for comprehensive exams. The purpose of this is to demonstrate mastery in your field. Depending on your chosen field and profession, you may decide to continue your education and begin work on a doctorate.

Students interested in pursuing a counseling master's degree in the State of Indiana have four options for licensure. Visit <http://www.in.gov/pla/index.htm> for more information about these requirements. In other states, you can research requirements here: www.asppb.org. Often overlooked, masters programs are an excellent way to enter the counseling field in roughly two years beyond the bachelor's degree.

The Doctorate

The doctoral candidate spends four to six years at graduate school. The purpose of the program is to give you extensive knowledge of your field, train you to do original and meaningful research, and prepare you to function as a member of a teaching faculty.

Your first two to three years you will take courses to satisfy your degree requirements and gain a broad knowledge of the field. If you are fortunate, you will gain valuable experience by securing a research or teaching assistantship. You will gradually focus your research interest, working with an advisor in your area of interest who is usually appointed at the beginning of your program. At the end of your second or third year, you will take comprehensive exams and possibly start preparing a dissertation topic. The exams will help demonstrate your qualifications to continue with your doctoral work. A previously completed master's degree may replace some of this coursework.

During the last two to three years, coursework becomes a much smaller part of your academic work, and may end altogether as you work at conceptualizing and completing your doctoral dissertation. Your dissertation must constitute a new and meaningful contribution to knowledge in your field. Depending on your focus, you will teach classes, and may even teach a course of your own design. You will collaborate increasingly with faculty members, who may rely on you for research and inform you of their own work. You will probably become closely associated with a single professor who will become your dissertation director. Your program culminates in the completion of your dissertation, which may include an oral defense of your work before a faculty committee. Many clinically-based programs require a one year internship at an APA accredited site.

There is another category of doctoral degree in psychology called the PsyD (Doctorate of Psychology). The PsyD is a professional degree that is focused on practice in psychology rather than research and practice (which is true of the PhD, Doctorate of Philosophy). To learn more about the origins of the degree read this:

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/jan00/ed1.aspx>.

Things to Think About and Ask

Where do you want to study?

Geographic location and availability of the "best fit" program is important to consider. It may not be in Indiana.

How much does the school cost?

What forms of financial aid are available? Are graduate assistantships or fellowships available? How can you secure one? How reliable is financial support from year to year?

What is the emphasis of the program?

Is it practice or research focused or both?

What are the program requirements?

Do you have to complete a thesis, dissertation, manuscript, practicum, post doctorate or exit exams?

What are the professors' interests?

Are they similar to your own?

How is your advisor assigned?

Do you select your advisor or is that choice made for you?

Talk to current students if possible.

Are their interests and experiences similar to your own? Are these people you want to spend a lot of time with? What do they like about the program? What don't they like about the program? How accessible are the faculty to students? How long does it tend to take students to get through the program there?

Where are graduates from the program employed?

What kind of assistance does the school provide in helping you find a job upon graduation?

Is practical experience possible?

Can you gain experience through internships or a practicum?

Visit the school you are applying to.

Can you picture yourself at that school and in that city?

Does your experience meet the program requirements?

How selective is the program? Do your scores (GPA, admission test scores) meet at least their minimum requirements? Do you have the required undergraduate courses? Some programs require experience through job shadowing, internships, volunteering or community service.

What will you do if you are not accepted into the program?

Do you have a back-up plan?

Funding Graduate School

Graduate school can be expensive; however, financial aid is available in several forms. Depending on your program and school, you may qualify for scholarships, fellowships, grants, assistantships, loans and more. Doctoral programs tend to have more funding available for students, particularly if they are more research focused.

Fellowships

Fellowships are designed to encourage study in your area. Applications are generally available from departments or agencies. Fellowships vary and may include tuition and a stipend. They usually require full-time enrollment.

Assistantships

Assistantships are teaching, research, and other staff positions that usually include tuition, a stipend, and some benefits.

Scholarships

Scholarships are awarded to incoming graduate student with proven academic records of achievement and typically focus on a specific area of study. Applications are generally available from departments or agencies.

Federal Support and Loans

To be eligible for any federal support you must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Federal Work Study allows you to work to earn money toward educational expenses while enrolled in school. Students may also be eligible for subsidized or unsubsidized loans. Alternatively you may be able to secure private loans, although these generally cost more than federal loans.

The Costs to Apply

Transcripts	\$ 8.00 each from IUPUI, more if you have transcripts from other schools
GRE	\$150.00 to register for the general test
GRE scores	\$20.00 for each score sent beyond the first 4, which are free
Application Fee	\$50-100 each depending on the program
Interview/Visit	\$\$\$\$ Travel, Room, Board, a new suit?

Postage	\$ for each letter of recommendation and each final application packet that's mailed (if you procrastinate, you'll have overnight shipping charges too)
Time	\$\$ many report up to 9 hours a week

Graduate Entrance Exams

Although not all graduate programs require applicants to take entrance exams, many do. The main exams for graduate and professional programs are listed below. Some exams can be taken any time of the year; some are restricted to a few times a year. Practice and prepare well for the test the first time to save money and energy.

GRE (Graduate Record Exam)

This exam is taken for admittance into a variety of graduate programs. It has three parts: verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing. Each part is used to measure your ability in different areas. The GRE also offers subject tests. Visit <http://www.gre.org> for more information.

GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test)

This exam is used by business schools to assess the qualification of applicants for advanced study in business and management. It measures verbal, quantitative, and writing skills. Visit <http://www.gmac.com> for more information.

LSAT (Law School Admissions Test)

This exam is required for admittance into law school. It tests verbal and verbal reasoning skills. Visit <http://www.lsac.org> for more information.

MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)

This exam is used for admission into medical school. It assesses problem-solving, critical thinking, and writing skills in addition to knowledge of scientific concepts and principles. Visit <http://www.aamc.org> for more information.

PCAT (Pharmacy College Admission Test)

This exam helps identify qualified applicants for admission into pharmacy school. It measures general academic ability and scientific knowledge necessary for pharmaceutical education. Visit <http://www.pcatweb.info> for more information.

DAT (Dental Admission Test)

This exam is required when applying to dental schools. It measures knowledge in natural science, perceptual ability, reading comprehension, and quantitative reasoning. Visit <http://www.ada.org> for more information.

MAT (Miller Analogies Test)

This is a standardized test of verbal analogies that some graduate programs use to assist in their admission process. Visit <http://www.milleranalogies.com> for more information.

Timeline for Application

SOPHOMORE YEAR:

- Complete the required math course(s) so that you can complete the [Statistics](#) (B305) and [Introductory Lab in Psychology](#) (B311) sequence by the end of your junior year. PhD programs in psychology are particularly interested in your grades in these courses.

- Get involved in Psi Chi and/or Psychology Club. Build your leadership skills, engage in service, and meet students, faculty and staff in psychology.
- Begin to research the areas in psychology that most interest you. When you apply to graduate school in psychology, you must apply to programs in specific areas (clinical, developmental, experimental, social, etc.) so you will need to be clear about your focus. You may also gravitate towards professional programs (law, medicine, pharmacy), or PhDs or Master's programs in a variety of areas outside of psychology. Either way, now is the time to be researching your options.
- Get experience! If you are leaning toward PhD programs, get involved in research with faculty and graduate students. If you are leaning toward master's programs and allied health programs (like PT or OT) gain practical experience in your area of interest through job shadowing, work, volunteering or internships.
- Begin to develop a mentoring relationship with at least one faculty member. This person can serve as a guide through the application process, mentor you in research or in an internship, hopefully write you a strong letter of recommendation (you'll need 3), and review your personal statement and other writing that you submit with an application.

JUNIOR YEAR:

- During your junior year complete Statistics (B305) and Introductory Lab in Psychology (B311). PhD programs in psychology will look closely at your grades in Statistics and Introductory Lab in Psychology, so you will want to do very well in these courses. Graduate schools will be evaluating your transcripts in January and February of your senior year so they won't know about your work in your senior year.
- Continue to gain relevant experience! If you are leaning toward PhD programs, get involved in research with faculty and graduate students. If you are leaning toward master's or allied health programs gain practical experience in your area of interest through job shadowing, work, volunteering or internships.
- Investigate specific graduate programs in the area of specialization you have chosen. To generate a list of psychology programs, begin with ***Graduate Study in Psychology*** (produced by the APA and can be borrowed from the Psychology Department). Faculty can also offer great advice on the quality of graduate programs. Fit is probably one of the most important pieces to the graduate school application puzzle (after all your numerical scores). The questions you need to be able to answer are how does this program (and the faculty you'll be working with) align with your academic and professional interests? Why this program over another?
- Look for student groups associated with professional organizations. The American Psychological Association (APA) has (APAGS) and the American Psychological Society (APS) has (APSSC). Try a web search and look for other career-specific organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers or The Council on Social Work Education, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. They often have great resources and information about graduate training.

SUMMER BETWEEN JUNIOR AND SENIOR YEAR

- Use the summer months to prepare for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or other required admission examination.
- Get organized! Narrow your list down to less than 20 schools; you should thoroughly review the programs web sites to get detailed information about their programs and deadlines. The summer is a good time to begin collecting this information. *Be sure to look for information about and applications for financial aid, if these are not sent with the application materials.*
- If application material is not available online then request the information be mailed to you. When the materials arrive, use the rest of the summer to review the information. Among other things, look at the research

interests of the program's faculty members to see if there are some matches with yours. Reduce your list of prospective programs to less than 10-15.

- Start a spreadsheet so that you can track the programs you're interested in, basic requirements/standards, faculty of interest, deadlines and eventually application submissions.
- Register for the GRE, or other required graduate admission exam, mid to late summer. Prepare for the test diligently and do your best the first time. Retaking the test can be a costly approach. Not only is it a waste of money, but in some cases scores are averaged or only the first score is noted. And if you retake it and do worse it reflects poorly on your ability.

SENIOR YEAR (Fall)

- Because PhD programs in psychology are so competitive, this is the formula that some advisors have recommended for applications. Choose 10-15 schools on your list, 1-2 should be programs that are "long shots" (schools whose entrance requirements--GRE and GPA--you don't meet); 2-3 should be "borderline" programs (you meet the GRE requirement, but not the GPA or vice-versa); 3-8 should be "good match" programs (those whose average scores match yours); and 2-3 should be "almost sure bets" (programs whose requirements you clearly exceed). If you haven't taken the GRE by this time, it will be difficult to assess your chances. However, you can take several practice tests and average your scores. Although not a guarantee, this is usually a good indication of how you will do on the real thing.
- If you are applying to masters or other less competitive programs, you can apply to fewer programs.
- Once you know the schools to which you will apply, update your spreadsheet with information on all the schools, the application materials required (application form, GRE scores, autobiographical statement if required, letters of recommendation, etc.), financial aid application information, and all relevant deadlines. Stay organized.
- Prepare a draft of your personal/autobiographical statement. Most schools require such a statement as a way to assess your writing ability, learn about your educational background, your interests in psychology, the reasons you want a graduate degree in psychology, and your career and professional goals. Get feedback on this writing from your faculty mentor(s).
- Contact faculty mentors, professional supervisors, and/or employers who can write you strong letters of recommendation and prepare them with all of your material (resume/CV, transcripts, statement of purpose, and any material from the schools). Give your letter writers plenty of time to prepare your letters.
- PhD programs usually have deadlines in December and January. Master's application deadlines are often later in the spring (March/April). Mail (or complete them online) with several weeks to spare. Use your spreadsheet to be sure that you have included all necessary information.
- Request that transcripts be sent to programs from all colleges attended.

January-April

- Contact the departments to which you have applied to be sure that they have received your GRE scores and all letters of recommendation. Most schools will not consider incomplete applications. If there are any outstanding letters of recommendation, remind your letter writers of the deadlines.
- Complete any remaining applications.
- Most PhD programs will notify you of your status (regular acceptance, provisional acceptance, on waiting list, application denied) on or around April 15. Masters programs are often a little later.
- Upon receiving notification of acceptance(s), consult with faculty mentors when making your final decision. Once you have notified the school of your acceptance, be sure to tell other schools you will not be coming so they can offer your place to another student.

- If all of your applications are rejected, consult with your faculty mentor about your options. Some of those options are: (1) work for a year, retake admission exam, and re-apply to programs the next year, (2) try to take some courses in a master's program as a non-degree student, re-take the GRE, and reapply to a master's programs, or (3) apply to degree programs in fields similar to psychology such as social work (M.S.W.) or education (M.Ed. or Ed.D.).

This document was adapted for psychology at IUPUI from the following sources:

Kieth-Spiegel, Patricia (1991). *The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admissions*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Missouri University Career Center. (2010). *Career Specialist Training Manual Appendices*. Also available at <http://career.missouri.edu/handouts>. Special thanks to MU for freely sharing their resources.