

Graduate School Advice – Applying to Clinical Psychology Ph.D. programs

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Selecting programs

-Selecting programs to apply to can take a very long time so don't wait until the last minute! When I applied, I narrowed my focus to about 10 states and did a state-by-state search of all APA-accredited Ph.D. Clinical Psychology programs. Locating information on the schools' websites is time-consuming, so be sure to leave plenty of time for this part of the application process.

-Consider how many programs you can apply to. Each program will have an application fee, and you will also have to pay to send your official transcripts to schools. Depending on how many schools you're applying to, you may also have to pay to have your GRE scores forwarded. Consider applying to some master's programs as well.

-Be aware that clinical psychology Ph.D. programs are extremely competitive and most programs get hundreds of applicants for fewer than 10 positions.

-Schools that don't yet have APA accreditation can be less competitive, but be careful with these. If it's a university that recently started a clinical psychology Ph.D. program, they have to wait until they have students in each year of the program (1st through 5th or 6th) before they can apply for accreditation. Once they get accreditation, degrees obtained within a certain window before they got accredited (maybe 3 years?...I'm guessing!) will be certified as "APA accredited." If you're applying to these programs, be sure it's reputable school and/or has other APA accredited programs already (which increases the likelihood that they know what they're doing and will get their clinical program accredited as well!). If you apply for your predoctoral internship prior to your university getting its program accredited by the APA, your options for getting a predoctoral internship are limited. Most APA-accredited internships require you to be enrolled in an APA-accredited doctoral program. Although people can have successful careers in private practice when they graduate from a non-APA-accredited program, they are not going to be eligible for many jobs, particularly VA medical centers and universities.

-Many schools prioritize GPA and GRE scores as a way to narrow the applicant pool. If your GPA and/or GRE scores are not as high as other applicants, you have very little chance of getting an interview. Many schools post average GPA and GRE scores for each cohort.*

-Look at the number of applicants versus the number of students offered a position each year to get an idea of a school's competitiveness.

-Consider applying to some schools that get fewer applicants. Sometimes these programs are located in more rural or less desirable locations, but once you get the degree, you can move!

-Select schools in which 80% or more of their students who apply for predoctoral internship get an APA accredited internship on their first try. This information should be posted on each program's website. A predoctoral internship is a one-year, full-time internship that is typically completed in the 4th or 5th year of graduate school that is required to get the Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. You can only apply once a year, so not getting one the first time you apply will increase the length of time it takes you to get the degree and will often cause you to need to take out more student loans. There has been an internship shortage that has gotten worse in the last 5 years, so not everybody who applies gets an internship; in

fact, in the 2013 application cycle, only 60% of students who applied got an APA-accredited internship. Some programs prepare you better for the internship application process than others do. Some people choose to do non-APA accredited internships, but this may limit your future job outlook. All VA medical centers and many universities and hospitals require people to have an APA-accredited internship. VA medical centers are the largest single employer of clinical psychologists, so you don't want to prematurely take yourself out of the running from a career with the VA.

-VERY IMPORTANT – only apply to schools that have a faculty member in the doctoral programs who conducts research on the topic that you're interested in. Because the application process is so competitive, programs look for a good match between a student interests and the interests of a faculty member who can serve as the student's mentor. This is not nearly as important in master's level programs, but it's crucial in Ph.D. programs.

-Some people recommend that you contact faculty members with interests that match yours prior to sending in your application. People sometimes do this for several reasons: (1) to see if that faculty member anticipates taking any new students that year (you can save the application fee if they aren't!); (2) to establish a personal connection with them because they think it will increase the odds that their application is taken seriously. If your GRE scores and GPA aren't high enough, though, contacting professors personally is unlikely to change the admissions outcome. If you do contact professors beforehand, only contact the professor with research interests that match yours. If you email all the professors, you will likely be perceived as someone who doesn't have any real research interests and who is just trying to get accepted anywhere. Assume that professors talk to each other! ☺ Also, if you do email professors, be sure to use correct spelling and grammar, address them with the "Dr." title, and keep the message brief. In the email, introduce yourself and say that you are considering applying to the doctoral program. You can say that you saw on the department website that they research such-and-such, which is similar to your interests. If you've read any of their articles, mention a specific one that you liked and why you liked it. Describe your research interest and relevant research experience in a sentence or two. You might say that, before you send in your application, you wanted to check to see whether they anticipate accepting new students this year. Conclude your email by thanking them for their time. If they don't email you back, don't send any more emails or try to contact them another way. If it's a place that you're really interested in, go ahead and apply anyway. If you were on the fence, you may want to skip applying there. If you get in to a program, you'll be spending a lot of time with that faculty member, and you'll want someone who's responsive to communication (trust me!).

-In my opinion, contacting professors beforehand is optional and is unlikely to change the admission outcome, but it can help you narrow down places to apply. If you do want to contact professors, I'd only do it for your top choice schools that have a professor that matches your research interests particularly well. Because you should personalize the emails, it can add extra time to the application process. Sending a poorly written email or a generic email is actually more likely to hurt you in the application process; it's better to not send any emails if you don't have time to make them professional!

-Consider applying to several MA or MS programs in clinical psychology or a related field. You can start the classwork and get more research experience to make you more competitive for a Ph.D. program. If you don't have a high GPA or have very little research experience, getting an MA/MS first is probably going to be the route that's most likely to lead to you eventually getting your Ph.D. Consider programs that have a Ph.D. program as well. If you're a stand-out student in their MS/MA program, you increase your odds of getting into their Ph.D. program. Also, you'll get to know faculty's research interests and the classes you've already taken will likely count toward their program requirements. Getting a master's

degree first usually adds one extra year to the total time to get your Ph.D. because you probably won't take the same number of classes each semester as the doctoral students do.

Applying

-Leave plenty of time for this process as well. It's time-consuming!

-Contact your recommendation letter writers at least a month before the application deadline if possible. Provide them with a list of the universities and corresponding mailing addresses and contact person to whom they should address their letters. Organize this information so that they can access it easily, and also provide them with deadlines and how their letter should be sent (e.g., mailed, emailed, uploaded to a website, etc.). Writing letters for grad school admission can be fairly time-consuming for professors/supervisors, so be sure to leave them enough time!

-Personalize your cover letters to match each program and to align your research interests to a specific faculty member at that university (or a few faculty members). This is one way that the admissions committee evaluates your writing ability, so spend time on this! Avoid personal/family stories of mental illness. Emphasize research experience and interests. Avoid cliché responses, like "I just want to help people." It's good to want to help people, but the committee wants to know why you are applying to a Ph.D. program instead of a master-level program. There are more direct routes to being a therapist, so show that you're interested in research. Be sure to address any required components requested in the application materials.

*A cohort refers to a group of students that enter a doctoral program in the same year. They often take most of their classes together.