

New Odds for Graduate Admissions in Psychology

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Interest in psychology at the undergraduate level continues to grow. There have been over 70,000 bachelor's degrees awarded every year in psychology since 1994–1995 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In 1979–1980, 42,093 psychology bachelor's degrees were awarded; just 20 years later, that number increased to 74,060, representing a 43.2% increase. This growth is also reflected in the interest in graduate programs of psychology. In the same 20-year time frame, master's degree awards increased by 31.3% and doctorates awarded increased by 21.2%. When growth at the undergraduate ranks accelerates past the growth at the graduate level, this is bound to cause some stress for undergraduate students intending to continue their education in psychology.

Eye on Psi Chi is a wonderful resource for undergraduate students thinking about graduate school. Psi Chi has a long tradition of providing tips on how to apply and to make the best of the opportunity, with a host of recent articles (Arnold & Horrigan, 2002; Buskist, 2001; Dirlam, 1998; Lammers, 2002; Strassle, 1998; Terre, 2002). Graduate admissions in psychology has its own literature as well, studying a range of issues including admissions criteria (Hines, 1986; Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz, 1989). There is also a wealth of information available (in addition to *Eye on Psi Chi* materials) to help prospective graduate students contemplate the process (Bonifazi, Crespy, & Rieker, 1997; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000; Kinder & Walfish, 2001; Norcross, Sayette, & Mayne, 2002; Ware, 1984). Even the odds of acceptance into graduate school is a topic that has been previously addressed (Hovancik, 1985).

This article does not attempt to duplicate the fine work of others. Instead, it is intended as an update for those undergraduate students interested in graduate school. While many students contemplate getting a master's degree or a PhD, it becomes obvious in the data presented



here that the PsyD is becoming a popular option. For additional insights about the PsyD, see Norcross and Castle (2002). The primary benefit from this article rests in Table 1, where the number of applications, number of applicants presented, the percentage of applicants accepted, and the number of newly enrolled students is presented, organized by PhD/PsyD/Master's degree and by 23 specialty areas of psychology.

Notes on Reading the Table

The data presented in Table 1 were compiled by the American Psychological Association (APA) Research Office. The data come from APA's *Graduate Study in Psychology* (2003), a compendium of American Departments of Psychology offering graduate education. The number of applications, number of applicants accepted, and number newly enrolled are reported verbatim from the APA Research Office; I have added the column "percentage of applicants accepted."

It is important to understand the nature of this data and its limitations. First, the data here reflect the Departments of Psychology that are represented in the *Graduate Study in Psychology* (2003) volume. If a particular department does not participate, then obviously its data are not included. Second, some departments related to psychology may be included, while others may not. At some institutions, a Department of Educational

Psychology may be included in the book, while other, similar departments elsewhere may not be included. Third, I only present three degrees: PhD, PsyD, and MA/MS. The actual data from APA are more detailed and include other degree options.

Given those limitations, the data in Table 1 are quite valuable, because it is the best data available (to my knowledge) on the relative competitiveness and popularity of subspecialties in psychology. It is important, however, not to overreach with this data. For instance, in 2001–2002 there were 18,392 applications to PhD clinical programs. This does not mean 18,392 separate students. Many students apply to many schools; in more competitive programs, it is not uncommon for a student to apply to many schools, at both doctoral (PhD, PsyD) and master's levels.

The data in this table provide indirect measures for what I label competitiveness and popularity. Look again at the clinical specialty area under PhD. With 18,392 applications, 1,928 were accepted, for an acceptance rate of 10.5%. I believe that this can be considered an index of competitiveness. Only 10.5% of applicants to PhD clinical programs get accepted. However, of those acceptances, 1,230 actually enrolled. Of course, some students receive multiple acceptances as well, so 1,930 acceptances evolves into 1,230 students actually enrolling in 2001–2002.

I believe that that data in the "number newly enrolled" column can be seen as an index of the popularity of a specialty area. PhD clinical tends to be both competitive and popular, but not all specialty areas share those characteristics. For instance, a developmental PhD program is somewhat popular (343 newly enrolled), but not as competitive (24.8% accepted). These comparisons become more meaningful when looked at across degree programs. For instance, the master's degree in counseling ($N = 2,370$) is much more popular than the PhD in counseling ($N = 412$), but the PhD counseling

TABLE 1

Graduate School Admissions in Departments of Psychology by Subfields, 2001–2002

Specialty Area	PhD				PsyD				MA/MS			
	Number Applications	Number Applicants Accepted	Percentage Applicants Accepted	Number Newly Enrolled	Number Applications	Number Applicants Accepted	Percentage Applicants Accepted	Number Newly Enrolled	Number Applications	Number Applicants Accepted	Percentage Applicants Accepted	Number Newly Enrolled
Clinical	18,392	1928	10.5	1230	4982	2031	40.8	1218	4218	2085	49.4	1413
Clinical Neuropsychology	807	137	17.0	83	240	106	44.2	70	72	27	37.5	11
Community	302	71	23.5	52	80	31	38.8	19	761	444	58.3	338
Counseling	4800	704	14.7	412	85	12	14.1	12	5314	3228	60.7	2370
Health	605	251	41.5	135					45	28	62.2	23
School	1031	295	28.6	190	617	191	31.0	106	1281	596	46.5	579
Other Health Service Provider Subfields	3049	350	11.5	269	365	76	20.8	85	2254	1164	51.6	851
Cognitive	1994	559	28.0	288					99	48	48.8	21
Comparative	49	8	16.3	6								
Developmental	2204	546	24.8	343					462	243	52.3	150
Educational	410	153	37.3	128	4	4	100.0	4	156	112	71.8	78
Environmental	33	12	36.4	9					21	10	47.6	9
Experimental	959	207	21.6	140					715	388	54.2	261
Industrial/Organizational	2631	399	15.2	218	46	20	43.4	13	2133	963	45.1	580
General	24	14	58.3	9					2314	1343	58.0	749
Neuroscience	735	169	23.0	114					122	14	11.4	11
Personality	475	81	17.1	35					61	5	8.1	4
Physiological	24	10	41.7	2								
Psychobiology	386	103	26.7	57								
Psycholinguistics	0	0	0.0	0								
Quantitative	113	53	46.9	26					30	19	63.3	8
Social	2496	450	18.0	221					222	84	37.8	45
Other Research Subfields	1930	422	21.9	266	33	24	72.7	14	1366	751	55.0	497
Other Fields	471	41	8.7	25					9	16	100.0	2
TOTAL	43,920	6963	15.8	4258	6452	2495	38.7	1541	21,655	11,568	53.4	8000
Number of Departments	962				74				659			

Notes. The data in this table were compiled by the American Psychological Association (APA) Research Office, based on the 2003 volume of Graduate Study in Psychology. Shaded areas indicate no Departments of Psychology offering degrees in those specialty areas in 2001–2002.

programs are more competitive (14.7% accepted) than master's degree in counseling programs (60.7% accepted).

Observations

Most of the value of this article will come from students gaining knowledge about the graduate admissions process, and by examining the competitiveness and popularity of various specialty areas in psychology. However, there are some observations and surprises I would like to point out after examining the information in the table.

The popularity of clinical and counseling psychology reign supreme. With PhDs, clinical is ranked #1 in popularity ($N = 1,230$) and counseling is ranked #2

($N = 412$). With PsyDs, clinical is ranked #1 ($N = 1,218$). With master's degrees, counseling is ranked #1 ($N = 2,370$) and clinical is ranked #2 ($N = 1,413$). Given these trends, undergraduate departments of psychology must take into consideration the interests of students in these

areas, particularly as it applies to curriculum matters and internship opportunities.

I was surprised at the popularity of PsyD clinical programs. While the clinical PhD is more competitive (10.5% accepted) than the clinical PsyD (40.8% accepted), both types of programs enrolled **▶ 32**



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◀ 20 approximately the same numbers of students (clinical PhD = 1,230 students; clinical PsyD = 1,218 students). I was also surprised at the variety of specialty areas in which one could earn a PsyD; while I knew about clinical, counseling, and school psychology, I must admit that the remaining specialty areas were unexpected.

The competitiveness for PhD programs was also a bit surprising. While faculty have long talked about “getting into a PhD clinical graduate program is tougher than getting into medical school,” there are a number of PhD programs that are competitive. The thought remains true. Of the 33,625 applicants to American medical schools in 2002, 49% were accepted (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2003).

Using a 20% acceptance rate or lower as a “tough” program to get into, clinical remains the most difficult (10.5%), but some of the others are surprises: clinical neuropsychology (17.0%), counseling (14.8%), comparative (16.3%), industrial/organizational (15.2%), personality (17.1%), and social (18.0%). It’s not just PhD clinical that is tough anymore! And, if you have an interest in comparative, physiological, psychobiology, or psycholinguistics, your only options are to pursue a PhD.

Do not be discouraged by this information. Undergraduate students desiring an advanced degree in psychology have many options. The master’s degree can be used as a stepping stone to the doctorate. Also, for many specialty areas, the master’s degree is the modal degree for professionals in that field (e.g., counseling, school, industrial/organizational). Examination of the “percentage of applicants accepted” for the master’s degree specialty areas shows a different picture from the PhD. Acceptance into master’s degree programs appears much more attainable in many cases.

What should students and faculty take from this information? I believe that knowledge is power, and that students should know their odds when considering their future. Faculty members have an obligation to deliver accurate information in a timely manner, and it has been previously noted that changes in graduate admissions can affect undergraduate instruction (Lunneborg, 1982). While the competitiveness or popularity should not entirely drive a student’s decision to apply to graduate school (or even what specialty area to apply to), students may

want to consider this information as one factor that influences their overall decision making. In the end, faculty should mentor and assist students in reaching their own goals, whatever those goals may be. ☺

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Regional Faculty Advisor Awards—

◀ 26 gratitude for this award, “to the Lord, the students who took the initiative to submit her name, to the National Psi Chi Office, and to the Academy (I just can’t go without humor)!”

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