

# What Are Your Chances?



# New Probabilities of Admission Into Graduate Psychology Programs

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**W**hat are the most pressing questions of any aspiring psychologist? The first burning question is usually, *What are my chances of getting into graduate school?*, followed quickly by the anxiety-laced, *And how much will it cost?* Fortunately, the American Psychological Association and several of its members have collected data to help you answer these important questions (APA, 2010; Sayette, Mayne, & Norcross, 2010).

## Admission Rates Are Up but Vary

Good news! Not only do today's applicants enjoy better odds of acceptance into graduate school in psychology compared to applicants from yesteryear, but there are more programs to which to apply.

In 2008, more than half the applicants to a given master's psychology program were accepted by that program, and acceptance into a given U.S. doctoral program was 22% (APA, 2010). That's twice the acceptance rate during the 1970s (Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2005).

Although the overall picture is positive, acceptance rates vary widely across psychology's subfields. As Table 1 indicates, admission into master's programs and non-clinical programs is generally easier than admission into doctoral and clinical programs.

Acceptance rates into psychology master's programs cluster around 50%. That is, approximately half of the applicants to any master's program will earn admission into that program. Acceptance rates into non-clinical doctoral programs range from 12% to 48%. Whether applying to a master's or doctoral program, you can enhance your admission prospect by applying to multiple programs.

Among the non-clinical disciplines, only 12% of applicants were accepted in social and personality psychology doctoral programs, while 48% of applications to edu-

cational psychology programs were granted admission. Admission into neuroscience, experimental psychology, and cognitive psychology doctoral programs is also relatively challenging with average acceptance rates around 15 to 16% (see Table 1).

## The Peculiar Case of Clinical Psychology

The toughest subfield in terms of admission is PhD programs in clinical psychology. Among APA-accredited PhD programs, the average acceptance rate in 2008 was a minuscule 8%. Before aspiring clinicians despair and transfer into another major, it's important to note four things:

- the 8% average acceptance rate refers to acceptance into a single PhD program, not the likelihood of getting into any PhD clinical program.
- as a general rule, acceptance rates for PsyD programs are much higher (easier) than PhD clinical programs.
- as with the nonclinical fields, gaining admission into clinical master's programs is considerably easier (acceptance rate = 37%; Table 1) than getting into clinical PhD programs.
- there are other, less daunting roads to become a psychotherapist than through APA-accredited doctoral programs.

All clinical programs are *not* created equal. Think of APA-accredited doctoral programs as varying along a practice-research continuum, as shown in Table 2. On the practice side are PsyD programs, which are explicitly practice-oriented. Some are housed in freestanding, proprietary (for profit) institutions, while others are located in conventional universities. In the middle of the continuum are university-based PhD programs that equally emphasize practice and research and that train scientist-practitioners. On the

research side are university PhD programs that are specifically research oriented and designed to train clinical scientists.

Acceptance rates vary in direct proportion to programs' placement along this practice-research continuum. Free-standing and university-based PsyD programs accept substantially more applicants (50% and 35%) than practice-oriented, equal-emphasis, and research-oriented PhD programs (16%, 14%, and 7%). Applicants have a 1 in 2 chance of gaining admission into a freestanding PsyD program, but only a 1 in 14 chance into a research-oriented PhD program in clinical psychology. That's why Table 1 does not list a global acceptance rate for doctoral programs in clinical psychology. Variability, not central tendency, rules the roost.

**Table 1 | Average Acceptance Rates in Master's and Doctoral Psychology Programs** (% of students who apply and are accepted to a particular program)

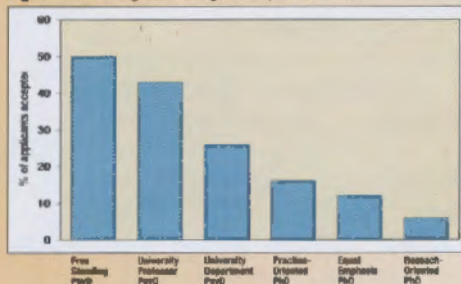
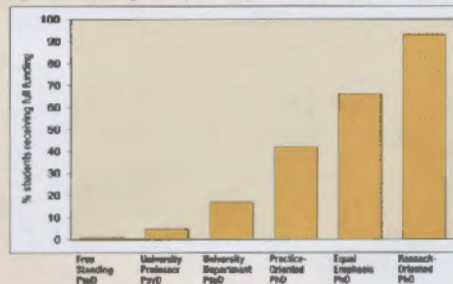
Area	Master's	Doctoral
Clinical Psychology	37%	(table 2)
Clinical Neuropsychology	---	26% <sup>a</sup>
Cognitive Psychology	40%	16%
Community Psychology	61%	24%
Counseling Psychology	63%	30%
Developmental Psychology	44%	20%
Educational Psychology	57% <sup>a</sup>	48%
Experimental Psychology	39%	15%
Health Psychology	41%	16%
Industrial/Organizational Psychology	52%	27%
Neuroscience	32% <sup>a</sup>	15%
Quantitative Psychology	78%	36%
School Psychology	34%	31%
Social & Personality Psychology	39%	12%

Sources: American Psychological Association. (2010). *Graduate Applications, Acceptances, Enrollments, and Degrees Awarded to Master's- and Doctoral-Level Students in U.S. and Canadian Graduate Departments of Psychology: 2008-2009*.  
<sup>a</sup>Data taken from: Norcross, J. C., Kohout, J. L., & Wicherski, M. (2005). Graduate study in psychology: 1971 to 2004. *American Psychologist*, 60, 959-975.

**Table 2 | Average Acceptance Rates and Financial Assistance by Type of APA-Accredited Program in Clinical Psychology**

	Free-standing PsyD	University-based PsyD	Practice-oriented PhD	Equal-emphasis PhD	Research-oriented PhD
% of applicants accepted	50%	35%	16%	14%	7%
% of incoming students given					
tuition waiver only	0%	1%	7%	3%	0%
assistantship only	13%	22%	57%	20%	8%
waiver and assistantship	1%	12%	42%	54%	89%

Source: Norcross, J. C., Ellis, J. L., & Sayette, M. A. (2010). Getting in and getting money: A comparative analysis of admission standards, acceptance rates, and financial assistance across the research-practice continuum in clinical psychology programs. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 4*, 99-104.

**Figure 1 | Getting In: Average Acceptance Rates****Figure 2 | Getting Money: Average % Receiving Full Support**

## Getting Funded: Toll Roads vs. Interstates

The ease of acceptance into explicitly practice-oriented programs comes with a steep cost. PsyD students are far less likely than PhD students to receive financial assistance (Table 2). Figures 1 and 2 depict the relation between getting in and getting money in APA-accredited clinical psychology programs. For example, only 1% of free-standing PsyD programs offer full financial assistance (full tuition remission plus stipend) compared to 89% of research-oriented programs that offer both a tuition waiver and a paid assistantship (Norcross, Ellis, & Sayette, 2010). You don't need SPSS to see that this is a significant difference! PsyD programs are akin to toll roads; they may provide an easier, quicker path to your destination than the free interstate, but it may cost you more to get there.

Similar to clinical psychology programs, APA-accredited counseling psychology programs differ along the practice-research continuum. However, counseling psychology has historically endorsed scientist-practitioner training and, with a few

exceptions, actively resisted the practice-oriented PsyD. The result is a truncated continuum with only a couple of PsyD programs in counseling psychology.

Within this smaller range you will find the same systematic acceptance and funding differences of a counseling program's position on the practice-research continuum. Practice-oriented programs accepted more applicants (29%) than equal-emphasis (19%) or research-oriented programs (16%). However, they offered less full student funding (30%) than equal-emphasis (72%) or research-oriented programs (83%; Norcross, Evans, & Ellis, 2010).

## Apply Wisely

As with many psychological matters, the answers to an aspiring psychologist's two most pressing questions are, *It depends* and *It depends*. The likelihood of getting into graduate school depends on numerous factors, such as your grade point average, Graduate Record Examination scores, letters of recommendation, and research experience. The chance of gaining admission and getting money also depend on

prevailing acceptance and funding rates, which themselves depend, in part, on the type of graduate program. You can't change those rates, but you can use them to make informed decisions in your application process.

A place in graduate school exists for most diligent students if they know where best to apply. Informed students judiciously match their personal credentials and their desired schools' standards when deciding where to submit applications.

Remember, apply widely but wisely. And the best of success to you!

## References

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