An Introduction to Graduate Study in Clinical/Counseling Psychology and Related Fields

1st Edition

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I. Types of Clinical/Counseling degrees and associated work

If you like the helping profession and want to be able to counsel people or provide therapy, you will probably want to pursue a graduate degree. (In Colorado, it is possible to be a counselor without an advanced degree, but there are many advantages to getting a master’s or doctoral degree before attempting to make a career out of providing mental health services. See licensure section for additional information.) There are many different graduate programs available, and it is essential that you understand the difference between the programs so that you pursue what’s right for you.

There are many factors that must be considered before deciding the type of program that you will apply to. This is a very personal and individual decision, and there is no “right” program except for what is the best fit for you. Primarily, you will want to be very clear about your ultimate career goals, so that you choose a graduate degree that will best prepare you for your desired line of work. Other factors to consider include the number of years, the expense, the acceptance rates, and your qualifications for the degree program to which you are applying. Ultimately, you want to apply to a program that best meets your needs and offers the level of education you want (doctorate or master’s), the coursework and training essential to what you ultimately want to do (research; teaching; individual, couples, or family therapy; assessments or testing; working with children, adults, elderly, etc), as well as the theoretical orientations you want to learn (cognitive behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, solution-focused therapy, psychoanalytic therapy, etc.).

Below is an overview of the major types of graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology. It is strongly encouraged that you go beyond this brief overview, and that you further explore the different degree options by talking to professionals with the graduate educations that you are considering. There are also some excellent guidebooks that you can reference, which will further explain the differences between programs and details about specific schools: Insider’s Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology and Graduate Study in Psychology.
Applying to graduate school is an expensive and time-consuming process, so you want to make sure you get it right! Taking your time and applying to the right degree program for you, will likely lead to an easier and more successful application process, appropriate and rewarding graduate training, and a happy and satisfying career!

a. **Clinical/Counseling Doctoral Programs**

Doctoral programs in Clinical or Counseling Psychology offer the most substantial level of training. For clinical programs, the current trend is to apply directly to doctoral programs following your undergraduate degree. Many counseling psychology programs prefer to accept students who have already earned a master’s degree. Some doctoral programs will have you work towards and earn your master’s degree within the first few years of your doctoral training. The master’s degree is built in to their curriculum, but is not a terminal degree. Regardless of the program you apply to, you will want to make sure it is accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA). You can see a list of APA approved sites by visiting: http://www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/programs/index.aspx

i. **Clinical Psychology Ph.D.**

The Clinical Psychology Ph.D. (Doctorate of Philosophy) is the most competitive graduate psychology degree. The program follows the “scientist/practitioner” or “Vail Model” of training, meaning approximately 50% of your training will consist of learning about and conducting clinical research and approximately 50% of your training will consist of learning and practicing evidence-based talk-therapy. Even within Clinical Psychology Ph.D. programs, there will be some variability in terms of how research-focused they are. The more research-focused the program is, the more competitive the program will be, but also the more funding you are likely to receive as a graduate student. You will likely be required to take a few years worth of coursework in statistics and research design so that you can ultimately conduct your own research culminating in your dissertation. Your research is likely to be focused on treatment outcome studies or lend to the understanding of the symptoms or development of various mental health
problems. Empirically validated treatments, assessments, and diagnosing will be emphasized in a clinical psychology training program. Additionally, you will have extensive training in psychological theory and practice. Most clinical psychology Ph.D. programs are housed within a major university, and the graduate position is funded by the research grants that faculty members have secured. When applying to this type of program, you apply to work with a specific mentor who has research funding or opportunities to take on a graduate student, and whose research area matches your own interests (e.g., PTSD, depression prevention, etc.). Depending on the year and funding, a particular clinical psychology Ph.D. program may or may not accept graduate students/applications.

The “Clinical” in “Clinical Psychology” indicates that you are trained to work with people with more severe symptomatology – people who are likely to meet criteria for one or more mental health disorders found in the DSM (e.g. Anorexia Nervosa, Specific Phobia, Bipolar I/II Disorders, etc.) However, you are also likely to work with people who are experiencing normal psychological crises (e.g. grief, stress). Some clinical psychologists work as generalists, treating people with a variety of problems, and others focus on a specific group or disorder (e.g., children, the elderly, eating disorders, ADHD). Your training will prepare you to work with a variety of mental health problems and in a variety of settings.

**Training Emphasis:** Intelligence and Diagnostic Assessments/Testing, Diagnosing, Research, DSM Disorders, Empirically Supported Treatments, Psychotherapy Theory and Practice

**How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree:** 5 years minimum, full-time

**Entering Class Size:** 2-10

**Average Acceptance Rates:** The average acceptance rate into a Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program is 6% (Norcross & Sayette, 2012). However, not all Clinical Psychology Ph.D. programs are the same, and they vary on the
research/practice continuum. The more research focused programs accept fewer than 5% of applicants; whereas the more balanced and practice oriented programs accept a little more than 10% of applicants (Norcross & Sayette, 2012).

Financial Aid: Though the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. has the most difficult admissions rates of all graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology, it also has the most financial aid and funding. 89% of graduate students in a research-oriented Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program receive tuition waivers and a stipend for research or teaching assistantship. If the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program has an equal emphasis on research and practice, this percentage drops to 54%. In other words, the more research focused the program, the harder it is to get in, but the more funding you are likely to receive (Norcross & Sayette, 2012).

General Requirements for Completion of the Ph.D.: Research, Clinical Training and Practicum, Completion of a Master’s Thesis as a part of the Ph.D. Program, Completion and Approval of a Dissertation (usually involving original data collection).

Professional Activities with this Degree: Psychotherapy (80%), Diagnosis/Assessment (64%), Teaching (50%), Clinical Supervision (50%), Research/Writing (51%), Consultation (47%), Administration (53%) (Norcross & Sayette, 2012).

Career Placement: private practice, universities or colleges, medical schools, outpatient clinics, community mental health centers, psychiatric hospitals, general hospitals, Veterans Administration, other.

ii. Counseling Psychology Ph.D.

The Counseling Psychology Ph.D. (Doctorate of Philosophy) shares the “scientist-practitioner” or Vail training model seen in the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program. You will spend approximately 50% of your time trained as a research scientist and approximately 50% of your time learning and practicing the art of talk-therapy. Most Counseling Psychology Ph.D.
programs are housed within a major university, and the graduate position may be funded by the research grants that the faculty members have secured – resulting in more financial assistance to their graduate students. When applying to this type of program, you apply to work with a specific mentor who is accepting applications and whose research area matches your own interests. Depending on the year and funding, a particular Counseling Psychology Ph.D. program may or may not accept graduate students/applications.

The “Counseling” in “Counseling Psychology” indicates that you will be trained to assess, diagnose, research and treat relatively undisturbed individuals facing more normative problems. The counseling psychologist maintains a focus on individuals’ assets and strengths, regular life problems such as work or family problems, adjustment difficulties, troubles with life transitions, person-environment interactions, multicultural issues, educational and career development, and developmental-contextual concerns. Your training will prepare you to work with a variety of mental health problems and in a variety of settings.

**Training Emphasis:** Vocational and Career Assessments/Testing, Research, Intelligence and Diagnostic Assessments, Diagnosing DSM Disorders, Empirically Supported Treatments, Psychotherapy Theory and Practice.

**How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree:** 4-5 years minimum, full-time

**Entering Class Size:** 2-10 students

**Average Acceptance Rates:** The average acceptance rate into Counseling Psychology Ph.D. programs is 8%. The more research focused the program is, the more difficult it will be to be accepted (Norcross & Sayette, 2012).

**Financial Aid:** The Counseling Psychology Ph.D. has considerable variability in financial aid and funding. It is estimated that 10%-89% of graduate students receive both tuition waivers and a stipend for a
research/teaching assistantship. The more research focused the program, the more funding you are likely to receive (Norcross & Sayette, 2012).

**General Requirements for Completion of the Ph.D.:** Research, Clinical Training and Practicum, Completion of a Master’s Thesis as a part of the Ph.D. Program, Completion and Approval of a Dissertation (typically involving original data collection).

**Professional Activities with this Degree:** Psychotherapy (75%), Diagnosis/Assessment (62%), Teaching (60%), Clinical Supervision (54%), Research/Writing (50%), Consultation (61%), Administration (56%) (Norcross & Sayette, 2012).

**Career Placement:** private practice, universities or colleges, community mental health centers, medical schools, outpatient clinics, psychiatric hospitals, general hospitals, Veterans Administration, other.

### iii. Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.)

The "Doctor of Psychology" (Psy.D.) program or the “Boulder Model” of training developed as an alternative training model to the Ph.D. or “Vail Model.” This program follows the “professional” model of training, with a primary focus on the practice of psychology. This is the perfect option if you want to focus on clinical training, but are not interested in quantitative research or a career in academia. If you envision yourself teaching at a 4-year college or university, this is not the degree you will want to pursue, as you will not be trained for an academic position. On the other hand, if you see yourself practicing psychotherapy and you want doctoral training, this may be the perfect option for you!

Psy.D. programs are sometimes housed in major universities and sometime free-standing private schools. The Psy.D. programs that are free-standing and private may be “for-profit” meaning that both class sizes and tuitions are likely to be high to support the expenses of the program. In either case,
PsyD programs tend to be larger than PhD programs. You are more likely to get accepted into a Psy.D. program, but you will pay for it in tuition.

A Psy.D. degree will train you to practice talk-therapy with clinical populations – populations with psychopathology as seen in the DSM. You are likely to work in a variety of settings including private practice, outpatient clinics, or hospitals as a licensed “clinical psychologist.”

Though there is stigma that a Psy.D. is less of a degree than a Ph.D., the similarities between the programs far outweigh the differences, and the licensing process is the same. Psy.D.’s and Ph.D.’s alike are “psychologists” following completion of their degree and attainment of licensure. You should choose the program that is the best fit for you.

**Training Emphasis:** Testing/assessments, psychological theory and practice, being a consumer of psychological research

**How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree:** 3-5 years, full-time

**Entering Class Size:** 20-60 students (Norton & Sayette, 2012)

**Average Acceptance Rates:** 41%-50% (Norcross et al., 2010)

**Financial Aid:** Financial assistance for Psy.D. graduate students is very low. Only 1-10% of students receive full financial assistance (tuition waiver and stipend). Most students pay the heavy tuition and living expenses through personal funds or student loans. **Over 30% of graduate students from Psy.D. programs have more than $120,000 in debt when they graduate from their program** (Norton & Sayette, 2012).

**General Requirements for Completion of the Psy.D.:** Clinical Training and Practicum, completion of a master’s thesis as a part of the Psy.D. program, completion and approval of a dissertation. (Some Psy.D. programs require traditional research based dissertations while others require “doctoral papers,” which are less rigorous than traditional dissertations.)
**Professional Activities with this Degree**: Psychotherapy, Diagnosis/Assessment, Clinical Supervision, Consultation, Administration.

**Career Placement**: private practice, outpatient clinics, psychiatric hospitals, general hospitals, Veterans Administration, other.

b. **Licensure for the Doctoral Degree**

Once you fulfill the obligations of your doctoral program, you will have your Ph.D. or Psy.D., but you will not yet be licensed to practice. Though licensure requirements vary from state to state, in Colorado you can only ethically only call yourself a “psychologist” once you a) have your doctorate degree and b) are licensed to practice. 

*Licensure for your Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology, or Doctorate in Psychology (Psy.D.) is the same, and is at least a 2 year process beyond your doctoral training.* Licensure is important so that you can provide therapy independently, accept pay through insurance, supervise, and be competitive in the job market. The requirements for licensure are as follows:

i. Complete the requirements of an APA-approved doctoral-level program, including an APA approved Clinical Internship (1 year standard of clinical training and practice)

ii. Pass the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP), a national standardized exam

iii. Meet State Requirements

1. Post-doctoral Work - that you conduct a certain amount of supervised work after completing your clinical internship (in Colorado this is 1500 hours, but each state has its own requirements),

2. Take and pass the State Exam for the state in which you would like to work (mostly ethics and state laws).

c. **Master’s Programs**
If you want to become a therapist, but you don’t want the many years of training (or debt) required to complete a doctoral program, a master’s level graduate degree may be a good option for you. In fact, master’s level therapists are becoming the main providers of therapy to individuals, and are more frequently hired by insurance companies.

Master’s level graduate programs take an average of two years to complete, collectively have a 50% acceptance rate, and have substantially more career opportunities than individuals without a graduate degree. The master’s degrees that we will review below are terminal degrees, meaning they will prepare you to work directly in the field of mental health upon completion of your degree and licensure.

Master’s level therapists often have their own private practice (and charge roughly 75% of what doctoral level therapists charge). You will also frequently see master’s level therapists employed in an outpatient clinic, mental health center, a general or psychiatric hospital, adoption centers, and government agencies.

There are many types of master’s programs in psychology and related fields, so it is important that you understand the differences and choose to apply to the type of master’s programs that will best prepare you for the specific work you want to do. Also, the curriculum will vary greatly from program to program, so make sure you take a close look at the course requirements of all programs you are considering. Remember, there is no right or wrong, just what is the best fit for you.

i. Master’s in Social Work (M.S.W.)

Of the master’s degree options, the M.S.W. is the most versatile, flexible, and possibly recession-proof of all. The M.S.W. has earned tremendous respect, and allows for a wide variety of career possibilities, from adoption
specialist, guidance counselor, social services caseworker, policy analyst, agency director, immigration reform advocate, family therapist, mental health counselor…and more.

M.S.W. programs vary considerably, and many offer a clinical or community training focus. Clinically-focused M.S.W.’s will focus on serving as an advocate, therapist, and service provider for “at-risk” populations whose mental health has been negatively affected by the social and economic systems. It is likely that you will focus even further to work specifically with children, families, individuals, the elderly, or couples. Community-focused M.S.W.’s focus on solving community problems through social change. They are likely to focus on program development, administration, social policy development, politics, and social movements.

There are some big advantages to the M.S.W. degree, including: higher rates of admission (65%), few research requirements, an emphasis on practical training, and licensure eligibility across all 50 states.

**Training Emphasis:** direct mental health services and interventions, social advocacy, social policy, social change

**How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree:** 2 years, full time

**Entering Class Size:** approximately 40 students in an entering class

**Average Acceptance Rates:** 65% (Norcross & Sayette, 2012)

**Financial Aid:** Students pay tuition through private funds and student loans.

**Common Careers with this Degree:** hospital care manager, school social worker, mental health center - clinician or practitioner, private practice therapist, school guidance counselor, child welfare, social services, adoption agency, etc.

ii. **Clinical Psychology Master’s Program (M.A.)**
The master’s degree in clinical psychology is an excellent option for students interested in the theory and practice of psychotherapy with a more acute population. Course work and practicums will be tailored to provide interventions with individuals with mental health disturbances and/or psychiatric illness. Some basic training with assessments and research is likely to be provided, but not emphasized. Theoretical orientations taught are likely to be empirically based and will most likely include cognitive behavioral therapy.

**Training Emphasis:** theory, practice, and consumer research pertaining to psychopathological populations (e.g. personality disorders, attention deficit disorder, PTSD, etc.)

**How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree:** 2 years, full time

**Entering Class Size:** The mean entering class size is 35 students
(http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_549.aspx#Table1)

**Average Acceptance Rates:** The average acceptance rate into clinical psychology master’s programs is 37% (Norcross & Sayette, 2012).

**Financial Aid:** Students pay tuition through private funds and student loans.

**Career Placement:** private practice, outpatient clinics, community mental health centers, government agencies, school counseling centers, hospitals

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iii. **Counseling Psychology Master’s Program (M.A.)**

The master’s degree in counseling psychology is an excellent option for students interested in the theory and practice of psychotherapy with relatively undisturbed clients (e.g., adjustment problems), and who are okay with less emphasis on research and assessment training. This degree also has the benefits of high acceptance rates, 2 years of practical training, and licensure eligibility across all 50 states.

**Training Emphasis:** minority/cross-cultural issues, vocational/career issues, adjustment difficulties, multiculturalism, psychotherapy theory and practice related to normal crises (e.g., bereavement, life transitions, stress)
How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree: 2 years, full time

Entering Class Size: the average school has a little over 50 students in an entering class (http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_549.aspx#Table1)

Average Acceptance Rates: 63% (Norcross & Sayette, 2012)

Financial Aid: Students pay tuition through private funds and student loans.

Common Careers with this Degree: private practice, outpatient clinics, community mental health centers, government agencies, school counseling centers, hospitals

iv. School Psychology Master’s Program (M.A.)

If you want to work with children and families within a school setting, a master’s degree in school psychology may be a perfect fit. It is increasingly common to see grade schools and high schools employ a master’s level therapist right within the school. You would have the same academic schedule as teachers, and may even have summers off!

In a school psychology program you would be trained specifically to work with children in the school setting. You will learn how to provide screening and diagnostic assessments for children’s learning, mental health and behavioral needs. You may provide direct mental health services to the children or connect the child and family with outside resources. A major goal will be to help children succeed emotionally, socially, and academically. A big part of your training and career will be to collaborate and communicate effectively with parents, educators, and community resources and leaders.

One disadvantage of pursuing a master’s degree in school psychology is that your professional work is likely to be limited to the school setting. If this is not a concern for you, then this program might be an excellent option.
Training Emphasis: behavioral screenings/assessments for youth, direct mental health services and interventions, serving as an advocate for children and their families, treatment planning and referrals

How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree: 2 years, full time

Entering Class Size: approximately 40 students in an entering class (http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_549.aspx#Table1)

Average Acceptance Rates: 48.9% (http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_549.aspx#Table1)

Financial Aid: Students pay tuition through private funds and student loans.

Common Careers with this Degree: school therapist, school mental health services coordinator, program evaluator

v. Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy (M.F.T.)
Marriage and Family Therapists focus their training and practice on couples and families, and the psychological and relational issues that often arise in interpersonal relationships. Most M.F.Ts assess the problems the couple may face, and then move quickly towards interventions that will solve the particular problem(s). Often, the treatment interventions are brief, solution-focused, and specific, and draw from family systems research and theory. Marriage and family counselors are especially trained to help the distressed couple communicate their emotions and differences, reconnect, and regain closeness and intimacy.

M.F.T programs are short, have relatively high acceptance rates, and have licensing reciprocity across all 50 states. This is an excellent graduate program choice for the student who is not concerned with having a broader and more comprehensive training in counseling, and who specifically wants to work with couples and relational issues. For more information, visit the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy at www.aamft.org.

Training Emphasis: couples therapy - theory and practice

How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree: 2 years, full time
**Entering Class Size:** approximately 40 students in an entering class

**Average Acceptance Rates:** roughly 50% or higher

**Financial Aid:** Students pay tuition through private funds and student loans.

**Common Careers with this Degree:** private practice therapist; marriage and family counselor within a community mental health center, agency, or group.

d. **Other Graduate School Options**

i. **Medical Degree (M.D.)**

Another graduate school option is to pursue a Medical Degree by applying to medical school (4 years) and then specializing in “psychiatry” for your residency (4 years). In your psychiatry residency, you will be trained to conduct talk-therapy as psychologists are, however you will mostly assess, diagnose, and treat patients by prescribing medications.

Students often dismiss the idea of psychiatry, as admissions to medical school can seem too difficult. However, the acceptance rates may be higher than the most competitive doctoral programs in clinical and counseling psychology. In order to apply to medical school, you would need to satisfy some of the undergraduate pre-requisites (e.g., biology, chemistry, etc.).

There are many advantages to a medical degree. Becoming a psychiatrist would result in higher average pay than any other graduate degree in the mental health field, allow you to prescribe psychotropic medications, and allow for more work in a hospital setting. If you like understanding and treating mental illness from a more biological perspective, this may be the right path for you.

**Training Emphasis:** the brain and behavior, psychiatric diagnosis, psychopharmacology, therapy modalities (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, etc.)
**How Long it Takes to Earn Your Degree:** 4 years for the medical degree, and an additional 4 years for the psychiatry residency

**Average Acceptance Rates:** roughly 50%
(http://startmedicine.com/App/applicationprocess.asp)

**Financial Aid:** Students pay tuition through private funds and student loans, though there is often funding for the most qualified students.

**Common Careers with this Degree:** medical doctor (psychiatrist) in private practice or a hospital setting, teaching, supervision, administration

II. Preparing for graduate school

a. Coursework

In general, graduate programs in Psychology will expect applicants to demonstrate a broad education within the field. As such, our Psychology major is specifically designed to provide that breadth. Thus, simply by completing the requirements for the major, the student will have taken the first step in gaining the preferred coursework. However, our major also offers opportunities for students to select coursework to strengthen and enhance their personal interests and goals.

A student interested in pursuing graduate education in the clinical/counseling field should consider completing each of the courses in our “Clinical/Personality” cluster. These include:

- PSY2150 Positive Psychology
- PSY3000 Theories of Personality
- PSY3620 Abnormal Psychology
- PSY4100 Introduction to Clinical/Counseling Psychology

Students who are applying to Ph.D. programs should also consider strengthening their statistics/research methods background by completing courses such as:

- PSY3320 Advanced Psychological Research Methods
- PSY4450 Advanced Statistics: SPSS
b. **Selecting an appropriate minor**

A wide variety of minors can be used to supplement and enhance a student’s preparation for Clinical/Counseling graduate education. Depending on the student’s specific interest, minors of value may include:

- Biology
- Business
- Criminal Justice and Criminology
- Gerontology
- Human Services
- Social Work
- Sociology
- Women’s Studies

c. **Grade point average and GRE scores**

Virtually all graduate programs consider GPA as an important admission criterion. In a review of 232 Clinical Psychology doctoral programs, Norcross, Ellis, and Sayette (2010) reported that, among incoming students, the average GPA was 3.6 (SD = 0.17).

Most (but not all) graduate programs in Clinical/Counseling Psychology will require at least the Verbal and Quantitative portions of the GRE; many will also require the Psychology specialty portion of the GRE. A review of graduate programs in Colorado revealed that, among those requiring the GRE, in every case GRE scores were accorded either “high” or “medium” weight in making admissions decisions.

According to the APA (2012, p. ix),
The overall median GRE scores reported for applicants admitted to master’s degree program…are 512 (GRE-V [verbal]), 590 (GRE-Q [quantitative]) and 653 (GRE-Subject [psychology area test]). The overall median GRE scores reported for applicants admitted to doctoral degree programs…are 572 (GRE-V), 666 (GRE-Q) and 676 (GRE-Subject).

Note that these data are for applicants to all psychology graduate programs, not to Clinical/Counseling programs specifically. Norcross et al. (2010) reported that students entering Clinical doctoral programs had an average GRE-V score of 591 (SD = 49), an average GRE-Q score of 652 (SD = 52), and an average GRE-Subject score of 672 (SD = 43). Program-specific information regarding GRE standards can often be found of each program’s website.

d. **Personal statement**

The personal statement is typically one of the most important components of a graduate school application. It is an intellectual autobiography that allows graduate programs the ability to get to know you and determine whether or not you are a good fit for their program. In addition, it is often used as a way to evaluate your writing ability. Unfortunately, there is not a uniform way to complete the personal statement and each program may evaluate these slightly differently. That said, here are some basic tips that often prove helpful.

i. Read *very carefully* what each particular program expects from a personal statement. Some will be vague while others will be quite specific.

ii. Articulate why you are a good fit *specifically for the program to which you are applying*. This means that if you are applying to multiple programs you likely will not be able to draft one general statement and turn it in to every program. Crafting a general statement as a template can
be helpful, but make sure you personalize it for each application. For example, writing that you wish to seek a degree in counseling for a program that specializes in couples and family therapy would not demonstrate that you are an applicant wishing to attain the specific kind of training the program provides. These sorts of oversights often cause applications to be removed from further consideration.

iii. Read the biographies of faculty members from each program you are applying to. Be familiar with their interests and the research they have completed and are in the process of completing. This gives you a “lay of the land” and demonstrates that you have done your homework. For most Ph.D. programs a mentor model is used where specific faculty select students they wish to work with making this item especially important.

iv. Clinical and counseling programs are interested in learning about you as a person in your statement perhaps more than other types of graduate programs since who you are is crucial to what kind of therapist you might become. However, resist the urge to “over share.” For example, do not write about past psychiatric history or very personal family experiences. Some good questions to ask include: are the personal stories I’m sharing relevant to my ability to succeed as a graduate student? Do they demonstrate maturity? Would they raise any red flags about my character?

v. Be a RUTHLESS editor. Have multiple people read each version of your statement before submitting it with a keen eye for grammar and content. Now is not the time to get timid about receiving honest feedback! It may sting initially, but it will increase your chances of acceptance in the long run.

e. **Letters of recommendation:**

Along with GPA and GRE scores, letters of recommendation are generally very important elements in graduate school admissions decisions. According to Norcross and Sayette (2012, pp. 26-28), letters of recommendation rank at or near the top of admissions criteria among both Master’s and Doctoral programs in
clinical and counseling psychology. So, it is obviously critically important for you to solicit and receive the strongest letters possible. Advisors within the Psychology Department have compiled information on the process by which you can solicit these letters. This information can be accessed on the Psychology Department website:

http://www.msudenver.edu/psychology/applyingtogradprograms/

f. Extracurricular activities: how important are these?

   i. Research: If your goal is to gain admission into a Ph.D. program, research experience is essential. It is less essential at the Masters level, but never hurts. MSU Denver offers a number of ways to obtain research experience. Student clubs such as Research Club and the Clinical & Counseling Club routinely complete scholarly projects and present at peer-reviewed conferences. There are also opportunities to work as a RA (Research Assistant) with individual faculty members. It is always best to get involved in these activities earlier in your academic career as opposed to trying to cram them all in to your final semester. For students seeking admission to a Ph.D. program, multiple research experiences will likely be mandatory.

   ii. Teaching: While teaching experience is not required for admission to most programs, it can be a nice to have some experience in the classroom if your goal is to be admitted to a Ph.D. program since teaching undergraduate classes is often required of Ph.D. students. Moreover, many Ph.D. programs don't spend a lot of time formally training students how to teach. The ability to get experience as a Teaching Assistant (TA) at the undergraduate level is a unique experience that MSU Denver’s psychology department provides. Should you be interested in becoming a TA, reach out to professors who you have had multiple classes with and/or have a good relationship with.

   iii. Internships: Getting some kind of clinical experience can seem daunting when you do not yet have a degree or a license of any kind, but it is very
possible. Some students go through MSU Denver’s internship center while others carve out a placement for themselves, often in consultation with faculty. Keep in mind that an internship through MSU Denver will award you course credit and therefore cannot be compensated monetarily. Some students find paid internships on their own although the amount of pay varies. Masters and Psy.D. programs look very closely at undergraduate clinical experience. One way to think about this is that programs often prefer demonstrated performance over potential. They want to make certain that a student is not just in love with the idea of becoming a clinician and has actually experienced some of the challenges that go along with the work. Ph.D. programs also value some clinical experience, but often value research at least as much if not more.

iv. **Volunteer work:** Volunteer work is a nice addition to any curriculum vitae. Selecting specific opportunities that provide a chance to work with people and mandate that you practice core clinical skills in the process can be especially beneficial. One example of this over the years on MSU Denver’s campus has been Project Homeless Connect, which gives students the chance to work one-on-one with homeless persons. Keep in mind that volunteer work alone is often not a sufficient replacement for a longer-term internship of some kind, but rather, a nice complement.

III. **Selecting schools to apply to: What to look for in a program.**

a. **Accreditation**

The accrediting body for doctoral programs is the American Psychological Association or APA. This accreditation is essential when evaluating doctoral programs. In the last few years an increasing number of free standing or for profit institutions have been offering doctoral degrees that are not accredited by the APA. Often these programs will accurately note that they have some other kind of accreditation or are “in the process of seeking” APA accreditation. This can be very deceptive advertising and making sure that the school to which you are applying already has APA accreditation is essential. In addition, schools without accreditation will often say things like “our graduates may be eligible to become
licensed psychologists.” An APA approved program guarantees that graduates will be able to sit for licensure whereas other programs do not.

The APA no longer accredits Masters programs in clinical and counseling psychology. The accrediting body for Masters programs is now the Council For Accreditation of Counseling And Related Programs or CACREP. For students seeking a Master’s degree the website cacrep.org can be a wonderful resource containing, among other items, a complete database with links to every program that is accredited. CACREP also accredits some doctoral programs, but it is important to note that these programs do not allow one to sit for licensure as a psychologist. They are often designed to give the student additional training in higher-level skills such as counseling supervision.

b. **Costs**

Given the small number of applicants accepted into Ph.D. programs, many programs (but not all) provide full tuition waivers and even a small (emphasis on small) stipend for students to live on. Often the number of applicants accepted is determined by how much funding the university has in a particular year. The funding is generated through research. What this means is that while tuition may be waived, extra work is required. Ph.D. students are often required to complete research and teach undergraduate classes in addition to completing their coursework. This can make for some very long work weeks (think 60+ hours) and should be considered carefully before applying. It should be noted that not all Ph.D. programs “fund” their students. Some schools provide only “half funding” in certain years and others require students to find outside graduate assistantships doing various work on campus that are competitive and not guaranteed to all students accepted into the program. In these cases, students could end up paying full, or near full tuition should they fail to secure an assistantship. It is recommended that you clearly understand a school’s approach to funding Ph.D. students prior to accepting any offer for admission.
Most Psy.D. programs are housed in private universities in “schools of professional psychology.” What this means in short is that internal funding for students is scarce. Moreover, given that many of these programs are in private universities it also means that the cost of tuition is quite high. All told, students are often on the hook for tens of thousands if not one hundred thousand dollars over the entire course of study which, on average, lasts between 3-5 years. The financial commitment necessary to attend such a program should be calculated and seriously weighed prior to pursuing admission.

Very few scholarships or other sources of internal funding are typically available for Masters level students. Often students end up funding the degree themselves through student loans or other external monies. However, since the average course of a Masters program is 2-3 years, students end up having fewer years to fund than they would in a doctoral program.

c. **Online programs: are they worth it?**

There has been a recent proliferation of online colleges and online learning in general. While this can be an effective way to learn in some contexts, for students wishing to become counselors and work closely with living and breathing humans, it is likely not ideal. A quick rule of thumb: if it appears too good to be true, it probably is. For example, if a school promises that you can get your entire degree while completing classes at home in your underwear and go into the world and start practicing as a counselor upon completion, you should probably be skeptical. Becoming a skilled counselor requires year’s worth of work with people and live supervision from mentors. Doing this online is simply impossible. If a program offers the ability to take a course or two online that is likely no problem and to be expected in the digital world we live in. However, if your desire is to take the entire program online it might be wise to reexamine whether the field of clinical and counseling psychology is the best fit for you and whether you can dedicate the time it takes necessary to get the training required of a good clinician.
IV. **Employment outlook:**

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics ([http://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/psychologists.htm](http://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/psychologists.htm)), the employment outlook for psychologists over the next decade (2010-20) is very bright. The BLS predicts a 22% growth in the number of jobs available to psychologists. Prospects are expected to be most positive for candidates holding a Doctoral degree. Additional information can be found on the APA website (see [http://www.apa.org/careers/resources/guides/careers.aspx](http://www.apa.org/careers/resources/guides/careers.aspx)).

V. **Licensure**

Regardless what type of training you pursue after graduation, it should be done with an eye towards licensure. The types of mental health licenses and certifications—and the requirements to earn them—vary from state to state, so if you plan to leave Colorado it will be important to check the requirements in your destination state. The following are the types of credentials necessary to practice in the mental health arena in the State of Colorado.

a. **Licensed Psychologist**

In Colorado, to become a licensed psychologist you must obtain a doctoral degree (PhD or PsyD) from a program accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA), or from a program equivalent to an APA-accredited program (this is much more challenging to prove than APA accreditation!). Included in the doctoral program will be a year-long, full-time internship and—for those in PhD programs—completion of the doctoral dissertation. Once you’ve obtained your degree, you’ll need 1500 hours of post-doctoral experience practicing psychology under supervision. Before you can earn the license, you’ll need to pass both the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP) and the state jurisprudence exam.

Psychologists are able to provide the kinds of services described for the other licenses (individual, group, couple, and family therapy in independent practice),
but are more likely to engage in additional professional duties such as assessment/testing, teaching, and supervision.

b. **Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)**

If you wish to hold the title of Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in Colorado, you must first get a Master of Social Work or Doctorate of Social Work degree from a CSWE- (Council on Social Work Education) accredited university or college. You then will need to apply for your Licensed Social Work (LSW) title and earn your supervised clinical social work experience. You’ll need to provide verification of a minimum of two years (3,360 hours) of supervised work experience in the practice of clinical social work, supervised by an LCSW. You’ll also need to receive a passing score on the Clinical Level Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) exam. In addition, as with all of the Colorado licenses, you must pass the open-book jurisprudence exam.

Licensed Clinical Social Workers impact people on societal, individual, and family levels. They are able to practice independently, providing mental health services to a wide variety of people, often with a particular emphasis on underserved populations such as people contending with poverty, homelessness, child abuse, domestic violence, etc.

c. **Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)**

To become a licensed professional counselor, you will need education at the master’s or doctoral level. Your program must either be CACREP-accredited or substantively equivalent. CACREP is an independent agency that accredits master's degree programs in addiction counseling, clinical mental health counseling, marriage and family counseling, and school counseling. Once you graduate, you’ll need to work under supervision for a specified period. The length of time depends on your educational level – the requirement is 2,000 hours of post-master’s work or 1,000 hours of post-doctoral work. If you’re completing 2,000 hours it needs to be spread out over a period of at least 2 years; if you’re
completing 1,000 hours, it needs to be spread out over a twelve-month period. You’ll also need to take two exams. One is the National Counselor Examination administered by the NBCC (National Board for Certified Counselors), and the other is the Colorado jurisprudence exam, which is an open-book exam required of all psychotherapists in the state.

Once you earn an LPC, you are able to practice independently, to perform individual and group therapy, to accept insurance reimbursement, and to provide services across a broad range of problem areas.

d. **Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT):**
   To become eligible for a Colorado marriage and family therapist license, you must have a master’s or doctoral degree from a program accredited by the COAMFTE (Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education). After completing the master’s degree program you must then complete at least 2000 clock hours of experience over a minimum of two years. Of the 2000 experience hours 1500 of the hours have to be face-to-face in direct contact with a client. At least 1000 of the hours have to be working with couples or families in diagnosing, assessing and intervention. For those who have completed a doctoral program, the experience requirement is slightly different: 1500 clock hours of direct contact with clients over a minimum of one year, with at least 1000 of the hours involving families and couples for the purpose of diagnosing, assessing, and treatment. As with the other professional licenses, the LMFT requires passing a nationwide exam (in this case, the MFT exam) as well as the state’s jurisprudence test.

As an LMFT, you can practice independently, accept insurance reimbursement, and work with individuals, couples, and families to help better the relationships within the family dynamic.

e. **Certified Addictions Counselor (CAC)**
If you are interested in working in the area of substance-related disorders and their treatment, CAC credentialing is an important consideration. There are three different levels of certification for addictions counselors in Colorado. Like the registered psychotherapist designation, CAC I and CAC II levels require only a high school diploma or GED in terms of academic achievement. Unlike the registered psychotherapist designation, the CAC designations do require specific training in order to earn the certification. To earn a CAC I, you must complete at least 112 hours of training in such areas as addiction counseling skills, client record management, professional ethics, and pharmacology. In addition, the CAC I requires 1000 hours of clinically supervised work experience in addictions. These work and training hours can often be obtained on-the-job at a treatment center. The CAC II builds on all of the CAC I criteria, and requires an additional 126 hours of specific training and an additional 2000 hours of supervised work experience. In addition, to earn a CAC II you must pass a national examination. The top level of addictions counselor certification, CAC III, cannot be reached without at least a bachelor’s degree, and requires an additional 56 hours of training and an additional 2000 hours of supervised work experience.

Because the certifications in addictions counseling demand significant levels of training and experience, they are respected designations. Some professionals who are licensed in other areas (e.g., licensed psychologist, licensed clinical social worker) also earn and maintain their CAC credentials to indicate a specialization in addictions treatment.

f. **Registered Psychotherapist**
Colorado has liberal statutes regarding who may provide psychotherapy. It is not mandatory to have an advanced degree or to earn licensure. In fact, individuals with no specific training or education may call themselves therapists and provide counseling services as long as they register their credentials in a statewide database. The requirements for registered psychotherapists in Colorado include earning a high school diploma or GED, passing a statewide jurisprudence exam
(an open-book test covering the laws and rules of mental health practice in Colorado), and composing a brief statement describing therapeutic orientation and listing years of experience. While this is the quickest and least expensive way towards becoming a mental health professional, there are some obvious disadvantages. Psychotherapists who lack licensure may also lack the competence to provide effective services, are ineligible to accept third-party reimbursement (insurance payments), and will not likely be hired by mental health organizations, agencies, or hospitals.

VI. Colorado Graduate Programs in Clinical/Counseling Psychology and Related Fields

a. Adams State University  [www.adams.edu/gradschool/counselored](http://www.adams.edu/gradschool/counselored)
   i. MA in Counseling
      1. Addiction Counseling
      2. Clinical Mental Health (CACREP accredited)**
      3. School Counseling (CACREP accredited)
   ii. Ph.D. Counselor Education (CACREP Accredited)

b. Argosy University  [www.argosy.edu/denver/programs](http://www.argosy.edu/denver/programs)
   i. MA, Clinical Mental Health Counseling (CACREP accredited)
   ii. MA, Forensic Psychology
   iii. MA, Marriage & Family Therapy
   iv. MS, Human Services
   v. EdD, Counseling Psychology
   vi. EdD, Counselor Education & Supervision (CACREP accredited)
   vii. EdD, Pastoral Community Counseling
   viii. DMFT, Marriage and Family Therapy

c. Colorado Christian University  [www.ccu.edu](http://www.ccu.edu)
   i. MA, Counseling (CACREP accredited)

d. Colorado State University  [www.colostate.edu](http://www.colostate.edu)
   i. Ph.D., Counseling Psychology (APA accredited in Counseling Psychology)*
ii. M.S.W., Social Work

iii. M.A., Career Counseling (CACREP accredited)

iv. M.A., Student Affairs, College Counseling (CACREP accredited)

v. M.A., School Counseling (CACREP accredited)

e. **Denver Seminary**  [www.denverseminary.edu](http://www.denverseminary.edu)
  i. M.A., Clinical Mental Health Counseling (CACREP accreditation)

f. **Metropolitan State University of Denver**  [www.msudenver.edu/socialwork](http://www.msudenver.edu/socialwork)
  i. M.S.W., Social Work

g. **Naropa University**  [www.naropa.edu/gsp/grad](http://www.naropa.edu/gsp/grad)
  i. M.A. Transpersonal Counseling Psychology
  
  ii. M.A. Somatic Counseling Psychology
  
  iii. M.A. Contemplative Psychotherapy

h. **Regis University**  [www.regis.edu](http://www.regis.edu)
  i. M.S. Criminology
  
  ii. M.A. Marriage and Family Therapy
  
  iii. M.A., Community Counseling (CACREP accredited)
  
  iv. M.A. Counseling
  
  v. Post-Graduate Certificates:

  1. Counseling Children and Adolescents
  2. Counseling Military Families
  3. Marriage and Family Therapy
  4. Transformative Counseling

i. **University of Colorado, Boulder**  [www.psych.colorado.edu](http://www.psych.colorado.edu)
  i. Ph.D. Clinical Psychology (APA accredited in Clinical Psychology)

j. **University of Colorado, Denver**  [www.ucdenver.edu/academics](http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics)
  i. M.A. Counseling

  1. Clinical Mental Health
  2. Community Counseling (CACREP accredited)
  3. Couple and Family Counseling (CACREP accredited)
  4. Multicultural Counseling
  5. School Counseling (CACREP accredited)
k. University of Colorado, Colorado Springs  [www.uccs.edu](http://www.uccs.edu)
   i. Ph.D. Clinical Psychology with Geropsychology emphasis (APA accredited in Clinical Psychology)
   ii. M.A. Clinical Psychology
      1. Psychology and the Law
      2. Trauma Psychology
   iii. M.A. in Counseling & Human Services
      1. Clinical Emphasis in Addictions
      2. Clinical Mental Health Counseling
      3. Community Counseling (CACREP accredited)
      4. School Counseling (CACREP accredited)
      5. Counseling and Leadership

l. University of Denver  [www.du.edu](http://www.du.edu)
   i. Ph.D., Clinical Child (APA accreditation in Clinical Psychology)
   ii. Ph.D., Counseling Psychology (APA accreditation in Counseling Psychology)
   iii. M.A., Counseling Psychology
   iv. Psy.D., Clinical Psychology (APA accreditation in Clinical Psychology)
   v. M.A. Forensic Psychology
   vi. M.A. International Disaster Psychology
   vii. M.A. Sport and Performance Psychology
   viii. Ph.D. Social Work
   ix. M.S.W., Social Work (Accredited by the Council on Social Work Education)

m. University of Northern Colorado  [www.unco.edu/grad](http://www.unco.edu/grad)
   i. M.A., Clinical Counseling: Couples and Family Therapy (CACREP accreditation)
   ii. M.A., Clinical Mental Health Counseling (CACREP accreditation)
   iii. M.A., School Counseling (CACREP accreditation)
   iv. Ph.D., School Psychology (APA accreditation in School Psychology)
v. Ph.D., Counseling Psychology (APA accreditation in Counseling Psychology)

vi. Ph.D., Counselor Education and Supervision (APA and CACREP accreditation in Counseling Psychology)

vii. Ed.S., School Psychology Specialist

n. University of Phoenix www.phoenix.edu

i. M.S. in Counseling
   1. Clinical Mental health Counseling
   2. Marriage, Family and Child Therapy
   3. Mental Health Counseling
   4. School Counseling

o. University of the Rockies www.rockies.edu

i. M.A. in Psychology
   1. Criminology and Justice Studies
   2. Health and Wellness
   3. Marriage and Family Therapy
   4. Mediation and Conflict Resolution
   5. Mental Health Counseling
   6. Sport and Performance Psychology

ii. Psy.D., Clinical Specialization
   1. Clinical Neuropsychology
   2. Forensic/Correctional Psychology
   3. Health Psychology
   4. Marriage and Family Therapy
   5. Sport Neuroperformance

*APA accreditation applies to doctoral level programs in Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychology. The APA accreditation information provided for each institution refers only to the specific programs, not all of the programs listed for that institution.
*CACREP (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs) accreditation is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to accredit master’s degree programs in various areas of counseling.
References

