

The Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) . . . Exposed (Courtesy of Michael Wiederman, Columbia College)

Once upon a time, if a student wanted to be a counselor or psychotherapist, the student probably was looking at a doctoral degree in clinical or counseling psychology. Sure, there were marriage and family therapists and clinical social workers providing counseling with their masters degrees, but within psychology the only road to independent practice involved a doctoral degree. Legally, to practice psychology, and to call oneself a psychologist, a person has to be licensed as a professional psychologist within the state he or she intends to practice. This license requires a doctoral degree in clinical or counseling psychology, a specified number of hours of supervised counseling after the doctoral degree is completed, and a passing score on the national exam for psychologists (which measures knowledge of all areas within psychology). Each state has their own requirements for the number of hours of experience and the score required on the exam. These requirements still hold for the license to practice as a psychologist. However, few people now go that route because of a more recent option in each state.

Each state now provides a license for professional counseling at the masters degree level. In SC the title is Licensed Professional Counselor, or LPC. Such a license allows the individual to practice counseling independently, and to bill insurance companies for services provided. Because doctoral programs in clinical or counseling psychology tend to be more difficult to get into, have a relatively heavy research component, and take a minimum of 5 years, most students with an interest in becoming a counselor of some type opt for a masters program that meets the requirements for the LPC.

In SC the requirements for the LPC include a graduate degree consisting of at least 48 credit hours. The name or type of degree is not important, as long as the content is mainly psychology-related and it includes the following courses:

- Human Growth and Development
- Social & Cultural Foundations
- Helping Professions (basically counseling theories and skills)
- Groups (understanding group dynamics, group therapy)
- Lifestyle & Career Development (the foundations of career counseling)
- Appraisal (basically psychological assessment and testing)
- Research and Evaluation
- Professional Orientation (basically professional issues, ethical principles)
- Psychopathology (basically Abnormal Psychology)
- Diagnostics (basically how to assess and diagnose psychological disorders)

In addition to course work, the degree must include a minimum of 150 hours of supervised practical experience. Students who intend to work with a serious mental disorders (it is unclear what that term includes, but it is better to be safe and assume you will be working with such disorders), the minimum number of practical hours is 600. After completion of the degree requirements, students take either the National Counselor Examination or the National Clinical Mental Health Counseling Examination (whichever the student chooses) and obtain a passing score. Both of these exams are similar and are based on questions about the material covered in the courses listed above.

With a completed degree and a passing national exam score, the student applies for a LPC intern license. This allows the intern to work as a counselor under the supervision of a licensed LPC supervisor. The supervisor does not need to work in the same building, but must be available if a crisis should arise requiring the intern to seek help. So, the intern is able to make a living while accumulating the 1500 supervised hours required to obtain the LPC. These 1500 hours must include 150 hours of supervision (meetings with the supervisor, either individually or as a small group) and must be spread over at least 2 years. If the student met the requirements for working with severe mental disorders, the student is allowed to work with such disorders as a LPC intern. Once this internship period is completed, the intern applies for the LPC, after which she will be able to practice independently.

When researching possible masters degree programs, the important thing is to examine whether the program meets the requirements for the LPC. The program might only require 45 credit hours for the degree, but you can still take 3 more credits while a student in the program (to make sure you have the required 48 credits to apply for the LPC). Similarly, you want to make sure that courses in each of the required areas are offered as part of the program, and that you will be receiving the minimum number of hours of supervised experience. Realistically, completion of such a masters program will take two years of full time study (but may not require summer courses).

In addition to examining the extent to which a program prepares you for the LPC, cost is an important factor. Some programs offer a limited number of graduate assistantships. These are essentially work-study employment opportunities in which the student works with professors as graduate assistant (research or teaching or both). The assistantships generally are half-time, meaning up to 20 hours a week (but in reality the student often works fewer hours). As payment for the assistantship, the student receives a small stipend (pay check) that might be something like \$7000 for the school year (paid monthly) and either free tuition or a substantial reduction in tuition. Unfortunately, assistantships are limited in number, and are usually awarded based on merit (grades and standardized test scores).

Masters Programs in Counseling within a Few Hours Drive of Columbia

Traditionally, on many university campuses, graduate programs for counseling existed in the departments of education (probably because they were geared toward preparing students to become school guidance counselors). At the same time, psychology departments offered graduate programs in clinical or counseling psychology, but with more emphasis on research and continuing through a doctoral program to become a professional psychologist (or researcher or professor). As states created licensing to allow masters-level counselors to provide services to people in general, many masters programs in counseling expanded to offer two tracks or two separate degrees: one in school psychology counseling and one in community counseling. School psychologists obtain their own specific license, and typically (but not always) work in school systems. Those obtaining community counseling degrees obtain the LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor). The specific type of degree [Master of Education (M.Ed.), Master of Science (M.S.), or Master of Arts (M.A.)] doesn't matter, as long as the program meets all of the requirements to allow students to be eligible to take the state licensing exam.

There appear to be several solid masters programs in the region (they are listed on the other side, in no particular order *be sure to type in web addresses exactly as shown*). Some of these programs offer the possibility for graduate assistantships, whereas others do not. Most are geared toward full-time study for two years. Each of the listed programs claims to prepare students for the LPC in their respective state, and each is also accredited by the Council for Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). CACREP is one of the major accrediting associations for counseling education. If you are interested in considering other CACREP-accredited masters programs in the U.S., their directory (*which includes links to each program's web site*) is available online: <http://www.cacrep.org/directory.html>

Governmental data on counselors (how many there are, projected need, salary range, etc.) are available at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos067.htm>

Winthrop University (*Rockhill, SC*) M.Ed. in Counseling and Development,
Community Counseling track
<http://www.winthrop.edu/graduateschool/default.aspx?id=3644>

University of North Carolina, Charlotte (*Charlotte, NC*) M.A. in Counseling
<http://education.uncc.edu/counseling>

University of North Carolina, Charlotte (*Charlotte, NC*) M.A. in
Clinical/Community Psychology (*only admits 10 students out of about 150
applicants, must have greater than 1100 combined Verbal/Quantitative scores on
GRE to be seriously considered*)
<http://psych.uncc.edu/graduate-programs.html>

The Citadel (*Charleston, SC*) M.A. in Clinical Counseling
<http://www.citadel.edu/psyc/>

Clemson University (*Clemson, SC*) M.Ed. In Community Counseling
<http://www.grad.clemson.edu/programs/CounsEd/>

University of South Carolina (*Columbia, SC*) Ed.S. in Marriage, Couples and Family
Counseling
http://edpsych.ed.sc.edu/edst/ce/EdS_MCFC.asp

Georgia State University (*Atlanta, GA*) M.S. in Professional Counseling
<http://education.gsu.edu/cps/1058.html>

University of Georgia (*Athens, GA*) M.Ed. in Community Counseling
(*highly ranked program, only admits 12-15 students, must have greater than 1100
combined Verbal/Quantitative scores on GRE to be seriously considered*)
<http://www.coe.uga.edu/chds/communitycounseling/program.html>

Augusta State University (*Augusta, GA*) M.Ed. in Counselor Education, Community
Counseling track
<http://www.aug.edu/clinical/programs/counseling/Welcome.html>

Western Carolina University (*west of Asheville, NC*) M.S. in Community Counseling
<http://www.wcu.edu/6396.asp>

Doctoral Degrees: Ph.D. vs. Psy.D.

At the doctoral level, there are two options for individuals who want to perform counseling or clinical work. Traditionally, the only option was a Philosophical Doctorate (Ph.D.) degree, which includes an emphasis on research and learning to be both a scientist and a clinician. Because not everyone is interested in becoming both a scientist and a practitioner, eventually an alternative was developed. The Psychological Doctorate (Psy.D.) degree is for those individuals who want to be eligible for licensure as a doctoral-level psychologist but who do not want the emphasis on research. For example, students in Ph.D. programs must complete a doctoral dissertation, which entails designing and completing a major research project. Instead of a doctoral dissertation, students in Psy.D. programs typically must complete a major paper that entails reviewing and evaluating the existing research literature on a particular clinical topic that the student chooses. Typically, the type of clinical training and experiences students in Ph.D. programs and Psy.D. programs receive is comparable, although students in Psy.D. programs may receive more clinical training and experience in many cases.

If you are interested in graduate study in psychology, which degree is best for you? It depends. If you want to be a professor, a Ph.D. degree is necessary. If you want to perform research or conduct clinical or counseling work, an Masters Degree or Psy.D. might be appropriate depending on the level at which you wish to function. Those with doctoral degrees typically earn more money and work with greater independence compared to those with masters degrees. However, it is much more difficult to gain acceptance into a doctoral program, and it takes five or more years to earn a doctorate compared to two years for a masters degree. One option is to enter a masters degree program and decide later whether you have the interest and ability to compete a doctoral program afterwards (students typically receive credit for their masters degree when subsequently entering a doctoral program).

What about the Ph.D. degree in clinical or counseling psychology compared to the Psy.D. degree? For most students who are interested in working as a counselor or clinician, the Psy.D. option appears most appropriate. For one, Psy.D. programs accept many more students, so it is easier to gain admission. However, there are some disadvantages. Psy.D. programs admit more students compared to Ph.D. programs because Psy.D. programs rely on student tuition to keep going. So, getting financial assistance is rare in Psy.D. programs. In contrast, Ph.D. programs typically admit few students because most or all of the students are awarded financial assistance (often total payment of tuition plus a small wage to live on in exchange for working with a professor).

Even Ph.D. programs in clinical or counseling psychology vary widely in the relative

emphasis they place on research versus clinical or counseling training they provide. So, when considering a particular program, read their materials closely to determine the type of training they provide and the type of student they are looking for. There is no point applying to a program whose aim is to train future researchers if you want to become a practicing counselor or clinician.