

WHERE SHOULD YOU GO: SELECTING THE RIGHT PROGRAM

Determining A Specialty Area

For those who know they want to go to graduate school in psychology, but have not determined a specialty area, some strategies for determining an area of interest are listed below.

- Make a list of the courses you most enjoyed. By reviewing your course notes and text, you may identify topics or areas in psychology on which you would want to gather more information.
- Talk to professors, graduate students, or professionals who are engaged in activities in which you might like becoming involved. Try to determine what training and experiences are necessary in preparing you for a similar position.
- Obtaining research or fieldwork experience can also give you an idea of what psychologists can do and a sense of what graduate school is like.
- Take advantage of the resources available in the USC psychology department. There are handouts below and guidance books available in the undergraduate psychology office. During advisement, talk to your advisor about your interests. S/he may be able to indicate faculty you may want to meet.

Choosing a specialty area helps guide your selection of programs to which you will apply and helps selection committees determine if there is a match between your special interests and the opportunities at that prospective program.

SPECIALTY AREAS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Clinical -- Primary focus: diagnosis and treatment of mild to severe mental and emotional disorders. Some Clinical psychologists specialize and provide direct services to specific populations such as people with developmental disabilities, neurological disorders, chronic mental illnesses, etc. Clinical psychologists work in universities, clinics, hospitals, prisons, and private practice.

Counseling -- Primary focus: using various therapies to improve human functioning. This may involve helping individuals, couples, or families solve interpersonal problems, adjust to new or difficult situations, or cope with daily stress. Counseling psychologists work in universities, clinics, health care settings, and human service agencies.

Community -- Primary focus: improving the quality of life by modifying aspects of social settings and systems. Community psychologists often work to prevent

psychological disorders in groups of people. Universities and mental health centers are two common work settings for community psychologists.

School Psychology -- Primary focus: helping educators, parents, and others to promote the intellectual, social, and emotional development of children. The roles of school psychologists are varied including: psychoeducational assessment, staff and parent training, counseling, consultation, and organizational development. School psychologists often work in schools, hospitals, and universities.

Experimental Psychology -- Primary focus: conducting controlled research. Most experimental psychologists specialize in one area of research and work in academic settings or research institutions. Some of the subspecialties of experimental psychology are listed below.

Developmental Psychology -- Primary focus: human development across the life span. The research in this area may attempt to explain age-related changes in behavior or describe factors that affect cognition, perception, socialization, etc. Developmental psychologists work in academic or applied settings and may engage in consultative activities.

Social psychology -- Primary focus: investigating issues related to the behavior of individuals in social situations. Attitude formation and change, motivation, leadership, social perception, and attraction are a few common research interests of Social psychologists.

Neuropsychology/Psychobiology -- Primary focus: studying the relationship between biology and behavior. Roles of the Neuropsychologist include evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment of disorders associated with the central nervous system. Often, Neuropsychologists work in laboratories, hospitals, or universities.

Industrial/Organizational Psychology -- Primary focus: studying organizations and people in work settings. I/O psychologists may help organizations develop programs related to employee selection and placement or improving worker productivity and satisfaction. I/O psychologists work for the government, industry, consulting firms, at universities, or may be self-employed.

Selecting Graduate Programs

Applying to graduate programs is time consuming and expensive. When attempting to select programs to which you want to apply, start broadly. Gather materials on many potential programs paying close attention to the admission criteria and program descriptions. You will probably want to review Graduate Study in Psychology published by the American Psychological Association. This book lists the admission requirements, programs and degrees offered, financial assistance available, and addresses of over 600 programs. Copies of this book are available in the undergraduate psychology office.

Once you have a list of **at least 10 but no more than 40** potential programs, write to these schools and request information about the specific programs in which you are interested. Psychology departments often have a number of graduate programs and degrees, so you must specify from which particular graduate program you would like to receive information.

Read the materials as you receive them, eliminating programs that are not for you. Reread information on the remaining programs, noting any **unanswered** questions you may have. At this point, you may write or call program directors to obtain more detailed information. Program directors are busy people who usually do not mind answering thoughtful questions. They may become impatient, however, if the information you request is provided in the materials you have received.

After you have reviewed admission criteria, and gathered and read information on a number of programs, you are ready to apply to the programs in which you are interested and have a reasonable chance of being accepted.