Alternatives to Clinical Psychology for Those in Human Services

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Because of its long history, clinical psychology has often been viewed by undergraduate students as the major career direction for those who are interested in employment in the human services. However, despite the increasing number of available clinical psychology programs, admission rates continue to be rather small. Many of the programs in clinical psychology are highly selective in their admission procedures. It is not unusual for students who have very good credentials to be rejected by the majority of programs to which they apply. It is against this background that the original program at SEPA was organized. This presentation addressed programs in the areas of counseling psychology, professional counseling, marriage and family therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and art therapy. Because of time and space limitations, my comments here are intended to be general in nature and may not apply to a specific program.

Counseling Psychology

Let's start with counseling psychology. Like clinical psychology, these programs require completion of the doctoral degree. These programs are accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA) with new programs being added regularly and previously accredited programs being reviewed on a regular basis. A list of these programs is provided annually in the December issue of the American Psychologist. According to the December 1993 issue, there were 63 such programs. Two of these 63 programs (University of California—Santa Barbara; University of Massachusetts) were no longer accepting new students due to their being phased out in favor of an APA-accredited program in combined professional-scientific psychology. A third program (University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill) was just being phased out. Thus, there currently are 60 such choices available to students.

Students from traditional psychology departments tend to notice several things about these counseling programs when they go to the list. One point is the degree offered. Most of these programs culminate in the PhD degree. Three of these programs (Boston University; Columbia University, which also offers the PhD; West Virginia University) offer the EdD degree. Many psychology students are unfamiliar with this degree and do not know whether or not it will lead them to their desired career goals. One program, University of Pittsburgh, offers the PsyD in addition to the PhD in its program. Thus, a starting point in evaluating the suitability of these programs to your needs is to read the program goals and see if they are appropriate for you.

Another point which often confuses students who are reading the description of these programs is the variety of department names where the programs are located. The current list includes:

- Department of psychology
- Department of psychology and education
- Department of counseling and counseling psychology
- Department of counseling psychology and guidance services
- Department of counseling, developmental psychology, and research methods
- Department of developmental studies and counseling
- Department of education

With such an array of department titles, students may begin to wonder whether or not there is a common theme across these programs and whether or not their background in psychology will prepare them for the coursework required. My experience has been that there is a common thread which is part of the APA accreditation process. Regardless of the department in which the program is located, it must meet the same criteria in order to be accredited by APA. The only way you will know whether or not the program's goals are consistent with your own is to read the program description.

What about admission criteria for these programs? Just like clinical programs, these criteria will vary somewhat by program. Some will be more selective than others. I have found, however, that these programs, as a group, are more likely than clinical programs to place strong emphasis on your practical experience. What does this difference in emphasis mean in terms of your probability of admission? First, if your program offers a field experience in which you can spend time in a mental health facility, you really need to take this course. If your program does not offer this course, then it is important for you to obtain such experience in some other way. One option is to volunteer for such community programs as crisis lines. I tend to advocate this type of experience because they typically provide you with both training prior to beginning work and supervision while you are working. Many of these crisis lines also provide the type of flexible hours which integrate well with students' class schedules. You can often do your volunteer work during evening and weekend hours.

Another option for gaining experience is to obtain either a summer job or part-time work as an aide in a psychiatric hospital. The requirements for these positions vary with the facility and some facilities will require a college degree for employment. If you are planning to take some time away from school between your undergraduate studies and the start of graduate school, such a job could assist you in admission to a counseling psychology program. Keep in mind, however, that these are doctoral programs which are going to require that you conduct research for a thesis and a dissertation and that they are going to expect quality undergraduate grades and GRE scores for admission. Traditionally, these programs have not been quite as competitive as clinical programs and thus have gained popularity in terms of applications. Advanced students in some of these programs obtain predoctoral internships in clinical settings, and studies have indicated that graduates of many of these programs are indistinguishable from clinical psychologists in terms of their employment settings five years after they have graduated.
PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING

Professional counseling programs are often terminal master’s degree programs. They tend to be designed to enable their graduates to obtain a credential as a licensed professional counselor or similar title depending on the state in which they are located. Like counseling psychology programs, they are located in a range of academic departments such as psychology, education, and counselor education. Because of their orientation of training practitioners, they tend to place less emphasis on the “basic science” side of the training but rather focus on the applied skills their graduates will need to function effectively. Practical experiences, called by such names as “practicum” or “externship” are a major part of the degree program.

What are you trained to do when you complete such a program? The answer to that question will vary somewhat depending on your state of residence and the specific program. In general terms, you may work in a psychiatric facility or in a private practice setting. You probably will need to work in a setting where someone else can qualify for reimbursement from insurance companies. Although you may do some psychological assessment, the nature of this assessment may be limited by the laws of the state. You are most likely to be doing intellectual, educational, and vocational assessments. In terms of therapy, your work may involve individual, couples, family, or group work. Some programs have a specialty focus, such as schools or mental health services, while others are more generic in nature.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY

Closely related to these counseling programs are the programs which train marriage and family counselors. Some states credential these individuals under the licensed professional counselor provisions while others have a separate credential for marriage and family therapists/counselors. As the name implies, the specialty here is working with dysfunctional relationships. Like the counseling programs, these training programs are offered in a range of departments including home economics.

In the APA publication Graduate Study in Psychology and Related Fields, the index uses both the terms “marriage and family” and “marriage and family therapy” to identify programs which might be of interest to students. To illustrate the importance of knowing about the rules of practice for the state in which you wish to live, note that many of the programs located in California have a specialty track which is designed to meet the state requirements to be licensed as a marriage, family, child counselor (MFCC). This credential is issued by the Board of Behavioral Science Examiners. These specialty master’s degrees often require more credit hours than other applied master’s degrees in the same department. For example, at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles the MA in general counseling requires 36 units, the MA in alcohol and drug studies requires 39 units, while the specialty track leading to the MFCC exam requires 48 units. At Cal State Bakersfield, students who are in the MFCC option are required to enroll for two terms in a traineeship setting under the supervision of a licensed professional. This traineeship experience is described as averaging at least 15 hours each week. For students who are planning to try to work while they are in graduate school or have family obligations it is important to understand the type of time commitments which are required by your chosen program. While some programs offer the doctoral degree in this specialty, the more common type of program in this area seems to be the terminal master’s degree.

PHYSICAL THERAPY

For students who are interested in pursuing a career in physical therapy, it is important that you have a strong interest in the sciences. While the required courses will vary somewhat depending on your specific program, these schools generally want the beginnings of a premed science background. They will expect you to have had lab courses in biology, chemistry, and physics. The competitive ones are also going to require an interview and will be highly selective. Physical therapy is a very “people-oriented” specialty. Physical therapists are most likely to be employed in a hospital or medical center setting. Some physical therapists are also employed in outpatient medical settings. They may be asked to develop individual programs for people who have a range of physical problems and are of any age. Some physical therapists specialize and therefore work with only one age group. For example, they may work in a children’s hospital or a department of pediatrics, centering their work with children. Others may become affiliated full-time with a specific type of program such as chronic pain or rehabilitation following traumatic brain injury. Your graduate work in this discipline teaches you the relevant human anatomy and physiology as well as the physics of the human system in order to remediate its dysfunction. Most physical therapists have a master’s degree. This is a master’s degree which requires several years of study with an integrated program of courses and practical experiences.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

My next area is occupational therapy. I find that this title is often used synonymously with recreational therapy. In some facilities the job description includes occupational and recreational activities. It may even include elements of creative arts therapy such as art therapy and music therapy. There are, however, specialized programs leading to the master’s degree in occupational therapy. There is also a national examination leading to certification in occupational therapy after you have completed a certain amount of supervised work experience. The required courses will vary depending upon the program to which you apply, but generally they want a solid liberal arts background. If you plan to focus on work in psychiatric settings, it would be helpful to have completed undergraduate courses in such areas as abnormal psychology and theories of personality.

What do occupational therapists do in the job setting? Let me describe the work of an occupational therapist with whom I worked and perhaps that will give you an idea of whether or not this is a possible career for you. She was employed in a VAMC. She was part of the treatment team for several programs within the department of psychiatry, including an inpatient program and a partial hospitalization program. She provided input on the strengths and weaknesses of patients who were admitted to these programs. She conducted formal evaluations in such settings as the crafts room and recreational activities. Patients were observed not only in terms of the final product they created but also in how they approached the task. She also evaluated how they handled a range of group activities. Her input was valuable in developing individual treatment plans for these patients.

CREATIVE ARTS THERAPY

To illustrate the relationship of creative arts therapy to occupational therapy, I will briefly make some comments about art therapy. The brochure for the art therapy program at Emporia State University describes this specialty as “a human-service profession that combines elements of art, art education, and (continued on page 16)
Graduate Admissions Criteria

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[The following article is an edited version of a talk given by Dr. Ford during the Psi Chi program at the Sixth Annual Convention of the American Psychological Society, July 1, 1994, in Washington, D.C.]

I would like to discuss the relative importance of some graduate admissions criteria, specifically, undergraduate coursework, research experience, clinical experience, GRE scores, and undergraduate GPA. Most of what I will cover is derived from the three journal articles listed as references.

UNDERGRADUATE COURSEWORK

Most graduate programs in psychology require or prefer the equivalent of a major or minor in psychology. Furthermore, the faculty in these programs prefer that the student receives a broad background in the principles of psychology and is exposed to a broad range of context areas. They tend to prefer that students wait until graduate school to “specialize” in clinical or counseling or developmental, etc.

Courses outside the psychology major in math and science are also desirable. Even for most clinical psychology programs, graduate selection committees are biased toward scientific and mathematical courses (Keith-Spiegel, 1991). In accord with this bias is the fact that the majority of graduate programs in clinical, counseling, and experimental require or recommend the statistics course (Smith, 1985). Experimental and clinical graduate programs also tend to regard the experimental psychology course and a psychology laboratory course as very important (Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz, 1989).

Experimental graduate programs tend to rank statistics, experimental, and learning as the most important undergraduate courses. Clinical and counseling graduate programs tend to rank statistics, abnormal, experimental, personality, developmental, testing, and learning, in that order, as most important. And educational graduate programs rank statistics, developmental, testing, experimental, abnormal, and personality, in that order, as most important (Smith, 1985). If you already know the graduate programs to which you are interested in applying, you can check the admission requirements of those specific programs in APA’s most recent Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields (APA, 1993).

Purdy et al. (1989) state that the ideal undergraduate program in psychology should require statistics, courses in introductory and experimental psychology, and at least one or two laboratory courses. They also concluded, however, that undergraduate coursework is not the primary basis for decisions about admittance to graduate school. They reported that letters of recommendation, GPA, GRE scores, and research experience are probably more important than undergraduate coursework.

UNDERGRADUATE GPA

Graduate programs in counseling tend to put more importance on GPA based on the last two years of undergraduate work than overall GPA. Counseling programs also tend to value previous graduate work as a plus. This is not so for experimental and clinical programs. Selection committees for these graduate programs look at overall GPA and usually prefer students without any previous graduate training (Purdy et al., 1989).

RESEARCH AND CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

Most clinical and experimental graduate programs regard research experience as very important, whereas counseling programs place more importance on clinical than research experience (Purdy et al., 1989; Smith, 1985). Undergraduate students who have authored a paper presentation at a convention or a published journal article stand out among the many applicants to graduate programs. However, it is common for graduate school applicants to list clinical fieldwork or practicum experience, so inclusions of that type will not help you stand out as an applicant. It is pretty much expected nowadays for applicants to clinical or counseling programs to have clinically related experience (Keith-Spiegel, 1991).

GRADUATE RECORD EXAM (GRE)

Most clinical and experimental graduate programs regard the quantitative and verbal sections of the GRE as very important. The analytical subtest and often the psychology subtest are viewed as less important than these other two. Counseling programs tend to regard GRE scores as moderately rather than very important (Purdy et al., 1989).

Couch and Benedict (1983) published an analysis of students actually admitted to graduate programs in 1980–81. They found that for master’s programs, the average GRE-Verbal score is 540 and the average GRE-Quantitative score is about 530. For doctoral programs, the average GRE-Verbal score is 604 and the average GRE-Quantitative score is just under 600 (597 or 598). Again, if you know the graduate schools to which you would like to apply, you can check the current Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields for the schools’ required and preferred GRE scores.

REFERENCES


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psychology to provide opportunities to explore personal potentials and pathways through visual and verbal expression. Art therapy, as a discipline, is relatively new. The American Art Therapy Association was founded in 1969. Among its activities are the accreditation of master’s degree programs in art therapy and the certification of art therapists. Art therapists use their understanding of imagery and symbolism to tap creative potentials in patients. In order to enter most of these programs, you must have a background in both art and psychology. Because art therapists are expected to be versatile, they must have a background in a range of media in addition to some art specialty. Since art therapists also work with emotionally distressed individuals, admission requirements in this field tend to include both abnormal psychology and theories of personality. Other frequently recommended courses are developmental psychology and psychological testing. Art therapy master’s degree programs tend to take two years to complete. In order to be accredited by the American Art Therapy Association, they must include at least nine semester hours of internship in addition to practicum experiences.

SUMMARY

I hope that this information helps to provide an overview of some of the alternative programs for students interested in careers in human services. Although there are only a limited number of openings in clinical psychology programs, there are a variety of other options and career choices available in related fields, including some of study in addition to the ones mentioned above.