Applying to Doctoral Graduate Programs

Should You Get a Master’s First?

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A sk any university faculty member about graduate school and most will give the advice that if a doctoral degree is your goal, you should apply directly to doctoral programs instead of applying to terminal master’s degree programs first. Getting a master’s first can certainly lengthen the time to complete your education and increase repeated course work. However, when I was applying to graduate schools, I believed that a master’s program would suit me best because I didn’t have a clear idea of my career goals or research interests. I wanted a degree that would prepare me for doctoral study, but would also give me the knowledge to pursue a career if I chose not to pursue a doctoral degree.

The application process for master’s programs isn’t as rigorous as those for doctoral programs. Most master’s programs don’t require psychology GRE scores and some don’t even require general GRE scores; they rarely require an interview. Most programs will not expect the student to know exactly what their interests and goals are, unlike doctoral programs. In general, master’s programs are less competitive than doctoral programs too. Even if a doctoral degree is your goal, applying to both master’s and doctoral programs may be a wise choice. Although you may be qualified for the doctoral programs you are applying to, there is a good chance you may be denied admission for a variety of reasons beyond your control (e.g., limited space, lack of a research match).

Completing a master’s degree first may also make you more competitive for a doctoral program. Master’s programs are more general than doctoral programs, have fewer requirements, and offer a broad range of classes. This flexibility allows you to explore different fields of psychology in contrast to most doctoral programs, which require students to focus on a psychology specialty.

Most master’s programs require students to complete a thesis. This process is a valuable experience, particularly since doctoral programs look favorably upon students who have completed a piece of independent work, whether it involves data collection or an in-depth literature review. The completion of a thesis will show that you have spent considerable time working in a particular area of psychology, gaining appreciation for the nuances of research, and improving your knowledge of a particular topic. Some master’s programs give the student a choice of either writing a thesis or completing a certain amount of hours at a practical setting, such as a social service agency. These practical experiences are terrific if the student decides that the master’s degree will be a terminal experience and is more interested in applied work than pursuing a doctoral degree.

Most importantly, a master’s degree will help you decide if you want to pursue a doctoral degree. After getting a “taste” for graduate school at the master’s level, some students decide they would rather gain work experience, or realize that a doctorate is unnecessary for them to attain their career goals. There are a variety of opportunities for master’s level psychologists in both research laboratories and social service agencies.

On the other hand, there are certain difficulties that arise with completing a master’s degree before pursuing a doctoral degree. The two biggest considerations are time and course work. While a terminal master’s program may add several years to your education, the lost time is minuscule compared to the benefits gained. A master’s program can help a student realize his/her interests and goals and may increase his/her chances of getting into a doctoral program, particularly if he/she had limited research experience as an undergraduate. My experience as a master’s student allowed me to give insight into why I was applying to doctoral programs as well as to express my goals and interests. Being able to communicate such personal desires to faculty members is paramount in having a successful application and interview experience.

When applying to doctoral programs as a student with a master’s degree, it is crucial that you investigate each program’s policies for waiving credits and course work. For example, Fordham University (my current school) will waive 30 credits and any individual course work to curb class repetition. Other universities may do nothing of the sort. Still, it is important to save major papers, class notes, and most importantly, syllabi, as faculty members will use these materials to gauge whether certain courses should be waived.

Obtaining a master’s degree first was an important step for me in my preparation for doctoral programs. I would particularly recommend master’s programs to students who are unsure of their specific research interests or career goals. A terminal master’s degree program should be helpful in making those critical decisions.

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