

# Careers in Psychology

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A strong background in psychology is valuable for many types of occupations, and not just in the helping professions. Employers in business look for graduates who can apply their communication, logical reasoning, and analytic skills to the workplace. A psychology major is well-prepared for such endeavors.

Many students ask when is the right time to begin thinking about graduate school or a career in psychology. The simple answer is: now! If you are considering a career in psychology or if you have questions about how you might become a researcher, mental health service provider, or any other kind of professional in the field of psychology, be proactive. Speak with your faculty advisor or other members of the psychology department, read the relevant sources listed below, chat with family and friends, and pay a visit to the Career Resource Center.

## Career Resource Center

The [Career Resource Center \(CRC\)](#) is located in the Humanities Building (HUM 105). Office hours are Monday-Friday from 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM. Walk-in counseling hours are Monday-Thursday from 1:30 PM to 3:30 PM, and Wednesday mornings from 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM. You can call the CRC for assistance with your career issues and concerns at 257-3265.

It is important to gather information about yourself and about the world of work before selecting a career, choosing a major, starting a job search or deciding to attend graduate school. The Career Resource Center offers services, programs, and resources to help you...

- research potential occupations
- create or refine your résumé
- write a cover letter
- prepare for an interview
- locate a job
- apply to graduate school
- find an internship
- network
- strategize

CRC services are available to all SUNY New Paltz students and alumni and are designed to meet your needs at any point in your career planning and preparation. The CRC can also help you develop skills and gain experience that will make you more employable throughout your working years.



## Internship Program

The SUNY New Paltz Internship Program gives students a structured educational experience integrating academic studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to their major or career goals. An internship allows students to acquire essential practical skills, by being exposed to the worked of work. With departmental approval, students may receive fieldwork credit for internships. The CRC receives hundreds of internship listings each year related to all fields and majors.

## Vocational Inventories

The CRC can help you explore your career interests through vocational interest inventories and other assessment exercises. Visit the CRC for more information.

## Seeking and Accepting Satisfying Employment

The CRC supports SUNY New Paltz seniors, graduate students, and alumni in their candidacy for jobs or graduate school programs. They can help you create a credentials file containing letters of recommendation and your résumé .

## What Do Psychologists Do?

Some psychologists conduct research in laboratories, the workplace, schools, clinics, or hospitals.

Some psychologists provide psychotherapy and assessment services. Clinical and counseling psychologists treat a wide range of mental, emotional and behavioral disorders. They diagnose and treat patients with such disorders as phobias, depression, and schizophrenia. They can also help people with marital problems or to cope with the death of a friend or relative.

Some psychologists study and contribute to the work environment. Psychologists are hired by companies to design programs for selecting, placing, training, and evaluating workers. They also investigate what makes employees good workers, effective, motivated and satisfied with their jobs. They study morale, safety and productivity in the workplace. Psychologists help design products, and even help to make changes in how organizations are structured.

Some psychologists promote physical and mental health. They often work with other health care providers - physicians, nutritionists and physical therapists, in a variety of settings such as hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and mental health care

centers. The focus of health psychology is the promotion of health, the prevention and management of illness, research, teaching, and consulting activities.

Some psychologists help people learn. Many study how to improve teaching and learning by studying motivation and cognitive processes in the classroom. They also work in schools to promote learning and prevent violence. School psychologists help students with learning disabilities, learning or behavior problems, and cognitive deficits. They also provide counseling and crisis intervention to students and their families.

Some psychologists work in the community, in courts, prisons, and community centers. Psychologists work with law offenders to help modify their behavior to keep them out of jails. They also provide counseling within jails so that once released, former inmates will have effective coping skills.

## How Do People Become Psychologists?

Employment prospects for psychologists with advanced degrees are brighter than for those who stop at the B.A. If you are considering applying to graduate school, see the next section below. There are a variety of graduate programs to consider, depending on your particular interests and career goals.

The most common route to becoming a psychologist is to earn a doctoral degree in the form of either a Ph.D. or a Psy. D. The Ph.D. is a research degree, requiring a dissertation based on an original investigation, while the Psy.D. is a degree obtained by psychologists who are less likely to do research and more likely to practice professionally. Completion of a Ph.D. or Psy.D. typically takes four to six years. The practice of psychology is regulated at the state level. Each state has requirements for individuals to meet before they can advertise themselves as psychologists. Most states require the Ph.D. degree and one or two years of experience in order for a candidate to be eligible to take a licensing examination. There are some states that license psychologists who have obtained the master's degree.

While most psychologists have a doctoral degree, about a third have a master's degree. Master's-level psychologists may teach, work in industry as a consultant or as a human resource specialist, conduct research under the supervision of a doctoral level psychologist, or work in a specialized program dealing with drug abuse or crisis intervention. Career opportunities are somewhat more limited for those with a master's degree than for those with a doctorate. Many states license school psychologists and mental health counselors when they obtain the master's degree.

Although it does not fully prepare one for professional work in psychology, an undergraduate major in psychology provides worthwhile background for a variety of occupations. Many people in business, nursing, law, social work, and other professions report that majoring in psychology as an undergraduate proved invaluable in their careers.

# Recommendations for Students Interested in Graduate School

Many careers in Psychology require a graduate degree. To get you thinking about graduate education there are some initial factors you should consider:

1. Seriously examine your capabilities. Is your anticipated final GPA 3.0 or above? Have you managed (or can you manage) good grades in the social sciences, especially in psychology?
2. Have you identified your career goals sufficiently early so that your undergraduate courses are appropriate? Usually, preparation for graduate study should begin in the sophomore year. Often, students decide to pursue graduate study at a later date and additional semesters may be needed to complete preparation. Discuss your plans with your major advisor.
3. Do you have geographical mobility so that you do not have to limit your opportunities for study to any one location?
4. Can you enrich your preparation by doing independent research, fieldwork, or perhaps volunteering in a clinically relevant area (e.g., working on a crisis phone line, working with substance abusers)?

In applying for graduate school there are two steps that you will need to complete. First, you need to select the programs to which you will apply. Then, you need to put together a competitive application.

## Selecting Graduate Programs

Locating graduate programs requires narrowing your focus. First, you will have to select a field of psychology. The most common fields are clinical, cognitive, counseling, developmental, industrial/organizational, physiological, school, and social psychology. Other fields include consumer, sport, health, forensic, and quantitative psychology. To explore graduate programs in psychology, visit the Undergraduate Advising Office (JFT 302). We have a recent copy of the *APA Guide to Graduate Study* as well as guidelines prepared by faculty on how to get into graduate school.

It is also beneficial to identify a specific area of research in that field that you want to pursue. For example, in industrial/organizational psychology, you might be particularly interested in work motivation. In selecting the programs you wish to apply for, you will want to identify professors who specialize in your particular area of interest. Ideally, at least one faculty member in that program will have published research in your area of interest.

Once you've identified the programs that specialize in your area, you need to do some homework to determine whether each program fits with your career goals. For example, some clinical programs tend to be more research oriented, whereas others tend to be

more practice oriented. Some programs balance research and application (e.g., the scientist-practitioner model). Also, you need to research whether your background, skills, and abilities are suited for that particular program. (See the section below on putting together a competitive application for further information).

Generally schools charge an application fee to apply to one of their programs. It will also cost you money to take the GREs and to send your GRE scores and transcripts to the programs in which you are interested. Although this process can be expensive, you will want to apply to as many quality programs as you can afford to because competition is often stiff and many good students are not accepted to all or even most of the programs to which they apply. However, do not apply to a program unless you feel it would provide you with the right education.

Psychology Professor Glenn Geher ([glenngeher.com](http://glenngeher.com)) has put together helpful information on the graduate school application process for students – this document is found here:

<http://www.newpaltz.edu/~geherg/undergrad/advise/advice.htm>

## Putting Together a Competitive Application

Graduate admissions committees rely on several sources of information to judge the quality of candidates and to make their selection decisions. They focus primarily on an applicant's past performance and future ability. Some common sources of information used to evaluate applicants include: your grades, your Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores, your statement of interest, your letters of recommendation, and your résumé. Each of these sources will be briefly discussed here but we recommend that interested students carefully review the reference sources listed at the end of this guide.

### Grades

Graduate admissions committees rely on the GPA (Grade Point Average) as an indicator of an applicant's past performance. They weigh GPAs very heavily in their decisions. Some schools will set a minimum GPA for admission. If your GPA is below this minimum, your application will not be considered. This makes it important for you to research the programs that you are applying to thoroughly. The American Psychological Association (APA) publishes a book of graduate programs in Psychology. This book provides information on minimum and average GPAs for all of the graduate programs listed. Other sources also provide this information (See the reference sources at the end of this guide).

You may be asking how high a GPA is necessary. It is difficult to say because it depends on the level of competition for a particular program. A good rule of thumb, however, is that to get into a masters-level program, you should have at least a 3.0 GPA and to get into a doctorate level program, you should have at least a 3.3 GPA. As an illustration, the preferred GPA at the top 5 doctoral programs in clinical psychology (which is

especially competitive) was 3.5 and several boasted that the mean GPA for their incoming class was close to 3.9.

Due to the weight GPA carries in the selection process, it is important to do well in each and every course. Often, junior and senior level students are dismayed by how difficult it is to improve their GPAs even a fraction of a point.

Does having good grades assure you a spot in a graduate program? No, it doesn't. There are many students with high GPAs who want to go to graduate school. Successful applicants need to distinguish themselves with more than just good grades.

## GRE (Graduate Record Examination) Scores

The GRE is required for admission to almost all graduate programs in Psychology. These tests are interpreted as indicators of a student's intellectual capability and likelihood for success in graduate school. There are two different and distinct types of GRE exams: the GRE General Test and the GRE Subject tests. The General Test measures students' ability in three areas: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning (math), and analytical writing. The Subject Tests cover many different areas, but for graduate programs in Psychology you might be required to take the Psychology Subject Test. This test has 3 scores: 1) experimental (including learning, cognition, perception, and physiology), 2) social (including personality, abnormal, developmental, and social), and 3) total (a combination of your experimental and social scores).

- GRE General Test Information:  
<http://www.ets.org/gre/>
- GRE Psychology Subject Test Information:  
<http://www.ets.org/gre/subject/about/content/psychology/index.html>

We advise students to study for the GRE in order to reduce anxiety and to increase familiarity with the test's format. Several review books and computer programs are available. You can also order GRE test preparation materials from the Educational Testing Service (<http://www.ets.org/gre/general/prepare/>). Copies of the GRE application, which lists how, where and when to take the tests and how to purchase old exams, are available in the Psychology Department and the Career Resource Center. You may also benefit from taking a refresher course in math. The best way to prepare for the Psychology subject test is to accumulate a broad background in Psychology through your classes in Psychology. Reviewing good textbooks from Introductory Psychology and History and Systems courses may also be helpful.

## Statement of Interest/Autobiographical Statement

Most graduate school applications ask students to write a statement that describes: (a) their interests in Psychology and how they came to have those interests, (b) their career and professional goals in Psychology, and (c) how those goals can be achieved by getting a degree from that particular program. It is important to keep in mind that this

statement is both a sample of your writing and a way for the admissions committee to assess how well you will fit with their program. Time and effort must be put into writing a well-written statement. There are books available on this topic from the Sojourner Truth Library and the Career Resource Center located in the Haggerty Administration Building, 705. Check the reference sources below for helpful hints for writing a successful personal statement.

## Letters of Reference

Almost all graduate programs require at least 3 letters of recommendation. These letters are extremely important! Your recommenders will be asked to comment on your research ability, oral communication skills, written communication skills, emotional maturity, interpersonal skills, and motivation. Imagine what a letter of recommendation might look like, coming from a professor you had to remind that you were in his/her 40 person psychology course two years ago, especially if you never spoke up in class. How persuasive a letter do you think it will be? Usually, all the instructor will be able to report is how well you did on tests and other graded assignments.

The best letters of recommendation come from professors who know you well and have ample knowledge of you in terms of the aspects listed above. If you want to get good letters of recommendation, you have to get involved in psychology: participate in class discussions, enroll in independent studies or fieldwork, stay after class to discuss course material, and visit your professors during their office hours. This strategy will improve your chances of getting strong letters of recommendation.

Psychology Professor Glenn Geher ([glengeher.com](http://glengeher.com)) has put together helpful information on preparing information for your letter-writers. This document is found here:

<http://www.newpaltz.edu/~geherg/letters.htm>

## Résumé / Vita (also called “Curriculum Vitae”)

Students should assemble a current résumé and update it at least once a semester. For graduate school applications, your resume should look like a vita. A vita is a brief sketch of your professional experiences. It includes a summary of your educational history, professional positions, and scholarly activities. Your faculty advisor may be willing to share his or her vita with you to give you an idea of how it is structured and what is included.

The purpose of maintaining an up-to-date résumé as you go through college is that when it comes time to complete your applications, you will be asked to describe your research experiences, relevant skills, career goals, clinically relevant experience, and academic interests. Having this information already summarized on a résumé will come in handy for filling out the applications. When you're a senior, remembering all of the necessary information regarding some specific experience you had as a sophomore, will be very difficult!

Believe it or not, you will also be asked to list any possible publications and/or conference presentations at psychology conferences you may have done as an undergraduate. What may be even more surprising is that you will be competing against other applicants who actually have these on their résumé. This is one reason why independent studies focusing on research improve your chances of getting into your preferred graduate programs. Students should focus their efforts on gaining professionally relevant experience that will add to their vita.

## Reference Sources

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Mayne, T. J., Norcross, J. C., & Sayette, M. A. (1994). *Insider's guide to graduate programs in clinical psychology (1994/1995 Edition)*. New York: Guilford Press.

Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Inc. Graduate training programs in Industrial/Organizational Psychology and related fields. An updated version of this document can be found online at <http://www.siop.org>

Stelzer, R. J. (1989). *How to write a winning personal statement for graduate and professional school*. Princeton, N. J.: Peterson's Guides.

## Internet Resources

Very helpful information can be found on the Internet. There is everything from research, discussion, resources, job information, and much more. Here are just a few websites:

- **American Counseling Association (ACA)**  
<http://www.counseling.org>. This organization is dedicated to the growth and development of the counseling profession.
  
- **American Psychological Association**  
<http://www.apa.org>. This is the official APA site, which has information on graduate schools and links to the many division of APA.

- **Association for Psychological Science (APS)**  
<http://www.psychologicalscience.org>. This organization is dedicated to the advancement of scientific psychology.
  
- **PsychGrad.Org**  
<http://www.psychgrad.org>. This site has links to hundreds of other web sites related to psychology, and discusses topics such as doing well in school, applying to graduate school, and getting a job.
  
- **Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP)**  
<http://www.siop.org>. This is Division 14 of APA and the primary organization for I-O Psychology. Extensive information on all graduate programs (master level and Ph.D.) in the field can be found on this site.
  
- **Glenn Geher's website** <http://www.glenngeher.com>. This site links to many important sites on campus (including the Psychology Department site – <http://www.newpaltz.edu/psychology>) and includes a sections dedicated to advising of students regarding the graduate school application process.