

Advice for Psychology students: the major, careers, graduate school

If you are considering a major in Psychology, you probably have a number of questions such as: What is Psychology? What are the career options? Do I need a graduate degree? What can I do with a BA?

This overview of Psychology covers the following points in addressing those questions:

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1. What is Psychology?

The humorist Dave Barry offered one view: “Psychologists are obsessed with rats and dreams...If you like rats or dreams, and above all, if you dream about rats, you should major in psychology.” Although amusing (?), Barry’s pithy comment does highlight a couple of stereotypes about psychologists – the interest in dreams being a staple of the Psychoanalytic school of Psychology in which dreams are viewed as safety valves that permit the display of unconscious conflicts and desires that would be threatening if consciously acknowledged; whereas the supposed obsession with rats being a legacy of Behaviorism which relied heavily on laboratory rats to study how the environment shapes organisms. Other simplistic stereotypes about Psychology are perpetuated in the entertainment media. For many unacquainted with modern Psychology, the psychologist is someone you see on television dispensing advice whether it be in the guise of a reality show (e.g., Dr. Phil) or a situation comedy (e.g, Bob Newhart show or Frasier). (Actually, the brothers, Frasier and Niles, were psychiatrists, not psychologists, but that distinction is often muddled by the lay public.)

In reality, the field of Psychology is quite broad and cannot be fully described by a few catch words such as “dreams” and “rats.” One way to begin partitioning the field is to distinguish between researchers and practitioners. The former largely focus their efforts on the generation of knowledge about the relationships among people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions and how those constructs relate to the operation of the brain and body. Practitioners are chiefly concerned with the application of research based knowledge to the social world outside the lab. Psychologists engaged in therapy (clinical and counseling psychologists) constitute about half of all psychologists and focus on the treatment of dysfunctional thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In addition, there are practitioners who are involved in business, criminal justice, and education.

Psychology today is an interdisciplinary field of study that intersects with biology and neuroscience (study of the physical nervous system), computer science and philosophy (study of how the mind or brain represents and interacts with the world), the social sciences such as economics and political science (study of how people interact with one another in society), and the health professions (study of how people become dysfunctional and what treatments can improve their lives).

2. Why major in Psychology?

There are a number of reasons to choose Psychology. To begin with, Psychology is intrinsically interesting. You learn about yourself and others. Who hasn't wondered at some time about the source of their thoughts and feelings, how their actions both influence and are influenced by those around them, the relationship between their bodies and minds...and a multitude of other related questions. Even if you do not intend a career in Psychology, a background in this discipline offers you an information base and skill set that will be useful for other careers. Psychology helps you understand how you and others think and behave, how to identify and analyze patterns in data, how to write up reports based on observations, and how to design research to answer questions about why and how people act.

Of course, many students major in Psychology in order to become a psychologist, whether a practitioner, a researcher, or both. Some of you may be drawn to Psychology out of a desire to enter the helping or mental health professions. Others among you may be attracted to Psychology because you want to understand how the mind and brain work -- how and why people behave as they do. There is much to be said about the many pathways to a career in Psychology, but all share the necessity of training beyond the BA. I will dive into that pool later.

Suppose you are not sure that Psychology is right for you. What should you do? Here are some steps that may help you make a decision.

- a. Take some psych classes in a variety of areas; even if you ultimately decide that Psychology is not your major, these courses will enrich your undergraduate experience.
- b. Talk to Psychology majors in your psych classes; reach out to members of the Psych Alliance which is the undergrad association of Psychology majors. Contact information:

<https://psych.rutgers.edu/psi-chi-a-psych-club/472-psych-alliance>

- c. Get involved in research; this is a good way to meet faculty and fellow psych students and to get a sense of whether a career in Psychology is right for you.
- d. Attend a few Psychology department talks. Most of these are open to undergrads. Particularly useful are colloquia and job talks by candidates for faculty positions. These can give you a firsthand sense of what psychologists do, particularly those involved in research.
- e. Consult with Psychology advising: advisor@psych.rutgers.edu
- f. Search online for descriptions of careers and pathways to those careers. APA (American Psychological Association) is the oldest and largest association of American psychologists; APS (Association for Psychological Sciences) is a newer organization that is mostly populated by researchers and academics (Many psychologists belong to both APA and APS.) Psi Chi is the national honor society for psychology undergraduates. Links to those organizations:
 - i. American Psychological Association (APA) www.apa.org
 - ii. Association for Psychological Sciences (APS) www.psychologicalsciences.org
 - iii. Psi Chi www.psichi.org
 - iv. If you are interested in social psychology, take a look at the following site: www.socialpsychology.org
 - v. Another site with information on a psych career is: <https://sites.uni.edu/walsh/linda1.html>
- g. Talk with professionals who are already in the jobs that interest you

3. Planning a Psychology major

Suppose you say that Psychology is right for you. How then should you proceed to complete the major?

A. Timeline for the major: The following timeline can be used as a guide for attaining the Psych BA. Consider this to be a flexible timeline.

- a. Years 1 and 2 of college
 - i. Begin sampling courses in different areas of Psychology even if you entered college with a strong sense of what you want to do. Students often change our minds as we become more acquainted with the range of career possibilities.
 - ii. The four major core areas of Psychology at Rutgers are clinical, cognitive, neuroscience, and social psychology. Take a course from each of these areas in your freshman and sophomore years.
 - iii. It is never too early to talk with Psych advising about career interests and options and which courses are most relevant to your interests.
 - iv. Develop a flexible plan for completing the major; the emphasis is on flexibility as you may not be able to take all the courses you are interested in during specific semesters. Fortunately, the Psych major at

Rutgers is relatively horizontal; that is, many of the classes can be taken in any order.

- v. To meet and acquire information from other psych students, get involved in the Psych Alliance (student organization for students interested in Psychology). <https://psych.rutgers.edu/psi-chi-a-psych-club/472-psych-alliance>

b. Year 3

- i. Build your resume; if you are planning on going to grad school, you will most likely apply in the Fall of your senior year, so the junior year should focus on laying the groundwork for an attractive resume.

Activities that are useful to that end include:

1. Participation in research in a professor's lab
2. Fieldwork courses
3. Internships – whether internal (offered by the Psych dept) or external

- ii. Consider whether your career interests necessitate obtaining a graduate degree. If you want to practice Psychology, the answer will be yes. You should begin a search of graduate programs well before the end of your junior year to ensure that you will be ready to apply in your senior year (unless you plan to take a gap year).

- i. Applications for grad programs will usually be due by the end of the Fall semester of your senior year.
- ii. Most grad programs will require the GRE (Graduate Record Exam) which is similar to the SAT you took for college admission.

- iii. Plan to take the GRE exam no later than the Summer before your senior year so that you have time to retake the exam if necessary.
- iv. Line up letters of recommendation. Most programs will require 3 letters, at least 2 of which should be from faculty who can comment on your academic ability.

c. Year 4

- i. Begin job search if you are not planning on grad school. Use Rutgers Career Services as a resource for preparing resumes as well as arranging contacts with employers. <https://careers.rutgers.edu/>
- ii. If you plan to go directly to graduate school, applications are generally due by December or January. Put together a resume and personal statement by October. Have friends or faculty proofread your materials before sending them. Also make use of relevant workshops by Career Services.
- iii. If you plan to take a gap year, consider doing something that will enhance your resume. This could be working or volunteering in a research lab or an external internship.

B. Selection of Psychology courses for the major. Which Psychology courses should you take? Obviously, it depends on what you want to do with your Psychology degree. You are likely to fit with one of the following three scenarios:

- a. You are taking Psychology courses or double majoring in Psychology because you find the subject matter interesting, but Psychology is peripheral rather than central to your future career. In this case advice is easy and fits with common sense. Take psych courses that appeal to your interests or may complement skills that you need for your career. (To note a couple of examples, relevant courses for a career in human resources would include social, personality, or organizational psychology; relevant courses for a medical career might include neuropsychology, physiological psych, or drugs and human behavior.)
- b. Psychology is your primary major and you plan a career as an applied psychologist (where applied could be clinical, counseling, industrial/organizational, or school psych). You do not intend a career in teaching or research. You should take a few courses related to the direction you wish to pursue, but you should not sacrifice breadth for depth this early in your education. In other words, loading up on courses in a specific subarea is not going to enhance significantly your prospects of gaining admittance to grad school in that subarea of Psychology. Rather, as an undergrad this will be your last time to sample

broadly from psych courses that may not be central to your career focus, so you should take advantage of that opportunity. Also, psych courses that may appear to be unrelated to your career interests can stimulate you to make connections and see your interests in a different light. Once you begin graduate school, your courses will be highly focused in your area of specialization.

- c. Psychology is your primary major and you plan a career in university teaching and research. Two strong recommendations:
 1. Get involved in research in a professor's lab as an undergraduate. This provides you with direct experience of what graduate school at a research university is like and may either cement your choice of career direction or, perhaps, cause you to change your mind and flee.
 2. Take additional methodology and statistics courses when they are available. Regardless of what subarea of Psychology you may want to focus on for your career, the more background you have in research methods and statistics, the more prepared you will be for a research based graduate program.

4. Enhancing Employment and Grad school prospects

- a. Get to know faculty -- Rutgers is a large university and most of your psych classes will be good sized. When it comes time for obtaining letters of recommendation for grad school or employment, faculty will be unable to say much about you other than your grades unless you have some interaction with them both in and outside of class. In addition, faculty are good resources of information about the grad school experience as all of them have been to a Psychology (or related) graduate program.
- b. Take advantage of resources outside of the classroom – A large research university like Rutgers offers a wealth of resources including a career services unit, faculty research labs, and multiple student organizations and clubs. These provide opportunities to learn about possible career paths from a variety of sources including experts in preparation of credentials (Career Services), experts in the many fields of Psychology (faculty and graduate students), and peers who can provide information and social support as they navigate the same paths as you in pursuit of their careers.
- c. Build your resume outside the classroom by volunteering and joining campus or community organizations. For example, the Psychological Alliance is a student funded organization for psychology majors that puts on programs for undergraduates such as bringing in speakers or putting together panels of grad students to discuss how to apply to graduate school: <https://psych.rutgers.edu/psi-chi-a-psych-club/472-psych-alliance> For those interested in counseling and clinical psych, consider the Scarlet Listeners which is a peer counseling and referral hotline staffed by undergrads for undergrads: <https://rutgers.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/scarletlisteners>
- d. Another way to build your resume and gain useful information about whether a career is right for you is to participate in an internship program.

- i. The Psychology Department offers an internship for credit (830:493/494) that is available to psych majors:
<https://psych.rutgers.edu/academics/undergraduate/internships/76-academics/undergraduate/course-descriptions/932-830493494-internship-seminar-in-applied-a-community-psych>
 - ii. Information about external internship opportunities (unaffiliated with the Psych department or Rutgers) are posted in psych advising announcements. Information about external internships can also be found at Career Services.
- e. Once you decide on a career path, check to see if there are any courses that will be deemed essential by prospective graduate programs or employers.
- i. For example, if you intend to get a job in human resources with your BA, you might supplement the Psychology courses with a few relevant ones from the business program, labor management studies, or do a minor in human resource management.
 - ii. If you intend to apply to a Psychology grad program, you should look carefully at programs you are considering to see if there are any specific courses that they require. This should be done before the senior year so that you have time to pick up any that you lack. In general, this is not going to be an issue as most grad programs will require the standard classes found in Psychology majors at most universities. These include a lab class, a statistics class, and a sampling of the main content areas of Psychology. Grad programs do not expect you to come in already fluent in what they will teach you. However, you may run across a program that recommends two labs or two semesters of research courses (research methods plus statistics).

5. To Grad School or not to Grad School, that is the question

f. Overview:

- i. Graduate school is a major commitment of time and resources – financial, mental, and social. Some programs are structured so that students are part-time but these are generally Master's programs and, of course, will take longer to complete than a full-time Master's program. Most doctorate programs are full-time. Completing a full-time Master's program generally takes about 2 or 3 years; a doctorate (PhD or PsyD) anywhere from 4 to 7 years. Some graduate programs provide students with financial aid in the form of fellowships or teaching and research assistantships. However, many programs do not, so going to grad school can be at least as costly as obtaining a BA. Also full-time graduate programs often require more time and energy than some students experience as undergraduates. The point of this rather depressing paragraph is not to dissuade you from graduate study but to point out that it should be entered into only after a thorough consideration of whether it is useful for your career plans.
- ii. You will need a graduate degree if you want to practice Psychology as a licensed therapist or business consultant. You will need a graduate degree if you want to teach or do research as a psychologist.

- g. Graduate degrees in Psychology: The 3 graduate degrees offered by Psychology programs are Masters (either MA – Master's of Arts or MS – Master's of Science), PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), and PsyD (Doctor of Psychology). They differ not only in content and program length but also in what career opportunities they offer. The following sites offer a good introduction to careers and grad programs in Psychology:

www.apa.org

<https://careersinpsychology.org/>

- i. Master's degree: There are many Psychology Master's programs from which to choose.
 1. In general, the more specific their training, the more likely they will be useful for your career. To cite a few examples, Master's programs in school psychology, industrial/organizational psych, guidance counseling, rehabilitation counseling, marriage counseling, or child counseling will give you the training necessary to practice in those specific areas.
 2. There are some programs that offer a non-specific, general Master's degree in Psychology. Because these programs do not provide the specific training and supervision for licensing, they should be viewed as a stepping stone to another degree. The only time I recommend a general Master's in Psychology is if a student has finished the BA with relatively poor academic credentials. Obtaining a general Master's can be a means of creating a better academic record that can be used for subsequent applications to other graduate programs. Generally speaking, a Master's will only be useful if it includes specific training in an area of Psychology for which you can be licensed or certified for practice.
- ii. PhD degree: If your goal is university teaching and research, then you will want a PhD. PhD programs provide training in both content and research methods used in Psychology. Emphasis is on the student developing a research program that frequently forms the basis for their subsequent careers in research and teaching at a college or university.
 1. PhD programs in Psychology are generally organized by subareas such that one applies to earn a PhD in a specific field of Psychology. Examples of subfields of

Psychology: clinical, cognitive, developmental, health, industrial/organizational, neuroscience, social. Grad student training combines course instruction with research.

2. In many PhD programs the student is admitted to work with a particular faculty member, so part of the selection process is guided by the applicant's interests as well as their academic credentials. Consequently, students planning to seek a PhD should carefully look at the faculty at prospective PhD programs to see if they are doing research that is a reasonable fit with the student's career interests.
 3. Students graduating from a PhD program are equipped to seek college and university faculty positions, post-doctoral positions, or enter directly into a non-academic career in business, counseling, clinical, or school psychology.
- iii. PsyD degree: If your goal is to be a clinical, school, or industrial/organizational psychologist, then either the PhD or the PsyD degree will provide you with the necessary tools.
1. If you plan to be a university professor, or think you might want that as a career option, you should go for the PhD with its generally greater focus on research training. (Note, there is considerable variation among PsyD programs in their emphasis on student involvement in research. For example, the PsyD offered by the Grad School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers, which is independent of the SAS Department of Psychology, has a strong research component to its PsyD program.)
 2. Many PsyD programs are organized as professional schools within universities and function much like

schools of Business, Law, and Medicine. As such, you should expect to have to finance your education (unless the faculty have research grants that fund grad students). By comparison, many PhD programs are part of undergraduate Psychology departments. Grad students in these programs generally receive financial support in the form of teaching assistantships, university fellowships, or research assistantships funded by faculty grants. These stipends cover all or a majority of their graduate education expenses.

- iv. Certification and Licensing: States set certification standards to permit psychologists to practice. For any program you apply to, whether Master's or doctorate, it is advisable to check to see if the program provides all that you need to be licensed or certified to practice in the state where you plan to work. Information on licensing procedures and requirements for New Jersey can be found at the following sites:
<https://www.psychologydegree411.com/licensure/new-jersey/>
<https://www.psychologynj.org/about-us>

- h. What do graduate Psychology programs look for in applicants? The most important factors that graduate programs consider are the following, roughly in order of impact:
 - i. Grades: Because grad programs receive more applicants than they have space for, they will generally use grades and standardized test scores to screen applicants. The rationale is that grades and test scores are somewhat predictive of a person's likelihood of successfully completing a graduate program. Most programs will first look at a student's overall GPA (grade point average). Some schools also give weight to the GPA in the student's major area.

1. Although many schools set a minimum GPA for applicants (at least 3.00), in reality the GPA of successful applicants is usually substantially above the minimum.
 2. For Master's programs the median for accepted students is around 3.4 (meaning half of the admitted students have a GPA above 3.4; half below).
 3. For doctorate programs, the median overall GPA is around 3.6 and the median Psych GPA around 3.7. If your grades are not great, that can be offset partially by excellent standardized test scores.
- ii. Standardized tests: Most grad programs will require you take a standardized test, the most common being the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS): <https://www.ets.org/gre> Some schools will have data at their web sites indicating scores of successful applicants.
1. Mean GRE scores (combined verbal and math) for successful applicants are around 300 (new scoring system) or 1200 (old scoring system) for doctorate programs and around 285 (new score) or 1050 (old score) for Masters programs. But, please note, these are rough averages based on a sample of Psychology grad programs. Areas of Psychology that are especially attractive to many undergraduates are correspondingly more competitive and may require GRE scores above these averages.
 2. Some graduate programs may also require the Psychology Subject Test which is also administered by ETS: www.ets.org/gre/subject/about/content/psychology or the Miller's Analogy Test: <https://www.pearsonassessments.com/graduate-admissions/mat/about.html>

3. Plan your application timeline carefully so that you have adequate time to prepare for these tests (as well as to retake one or more if your initial results are disappointing).
 4. Preparation for standardized tests:
 - a. Rutgers offers a GRE Preparation Course (01:090:180) through SAS:
<https://odasis.rutgers.edu/academics/undergraduate/gre-preparation-course>
 - b. The Rutgers Learning Centers also offer information to help prepare for the GRE:
<https://rlc.rutgers.edu/news/preparing-gre>
 - c. There are private companies that offer prep courses for these exams. Although these can be expensive, they may be worthwhile if you have difficulty finding the time or motivation to study on your own.
 - d. At minimum, you should take practice exams, online sample questions, or purchase self-tutoring software.
 - e. For the Psychology subject test, you should review an introductory psychology text and your class notes to re-familiarize yourself with the major theories, concepts, findings, and names. Do not schedule the GRE and Psych subject test (or Miller's Analogy Test) for the same day.
- iii. Letters of recommendation: Letters should not only come from people who will say positive things about you but from those who know you well enough to be able to write a personal and

detailed letter. A professor who writes that you earned an A in a course adds no information beyond what is already in your college transcript.

1. Although grad programs may vary somewhat in who the letter writer should be, as a rule of thumb, most programs will require three letters, two of which should come from professors with whom you have had courses or done research. A detailed letter from a faculty member outside of Psychology or someone outside the university (such as an employer) is better than a perfunctory letter from a third Psychology professor.
 2. You may find this alarming if you have never talked to a faculty member. This is another reason why research courses, field work, and seminars can be beneficial. They put you in settings where you can become known to faculty. If you have done exceptionally well in a course, it may be worth stopping by to have a chat with the faculty member to see if a letter of recommendation can be arranged. This should be done no later than when you finish the course. If you wait a semester or more to return to the professor, you will be likely to have been forgotten.
 3. If you are going to apply a year or two after graduation, you should obtain your letters before leaving Rutgers. Otherwise you risk faculty forgetting you, retiring, or moving to another university in the interim. Career Services recommends that you use Interfolio as a secure storage site for letters: <https://www.interfolio.com/>
- iv. Relevant experience outside the classroom: One way to distinguish your application from others with similar academic credentials is to obtain some relevant experience beyond lecture based classes. This includes

1. Research experience – working in a professor’s lab or doing an honors thesis or independent study. Even if you do not intend a career in research, having this experience will be regarded favorably by graduate programs.
 2. Specialized courses – enrolling in classes that have a non-classroom component such as fieldwork (autism, child care, foster care) or the department’s internship program in applied, school, and community psychology.
 3. Professional experience – doing an external internship, shadowing a professional, or working in a job relevant to Psychology.
- v. Personal statement: Attending graduate school is a major decision for both you and the programs considering your application. Admissions committees want to be sure that you have a genuine interest in their program and a commitment to see it to completion. The personal statement provides you with an opportunity (a) to explain why you are a good fit with the program, (b) to highlight your accomplishments (e.g., honors, volunteer work), (c) to address any weaknesses in your record (e.g., pointing out that your GPA began poorly but once you settled on your career direction, it rebounded and has remained high), and (d) to demonstrate your writing ability. Because the personal statement is a piece of the application puzzle that you have complete control over, it is important that it be well-written (clear, concise, and grammatically correct). The personal statement can make or break an application because it not only reflects your goals in seeking a graduate education but also your ability to communicate that message to the admissions committee. It is a good idea not to submit a personal statement without first receiving comments on it from others, whether they be faculty or friends. Career Services offers advice on preparing the statement:

<https://careers.rutgers.edu/students-alumni/pursue-your-goals/consider-graduate-school/write-your-personal-statement>

6. Pathways outside of Psychology programs:

There are pathways outside of Psychology for some of the careers in Psychology. Two examples:

- a. Social Work: A Master's of Social Work (MSW) can qualify you for some areas of counseling and psychiatric social work. See the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) homepage: <https://www.socialworkers.org/>
- b. Medicine: An MD with a specialization in psychiatry is the medical route for a career comparable to a clinical Psychology PhD/PsyD with a couple of important differences:
 - i. Having an MD allows the psychiatrist to prescribe medications for clients. In most states the clinical psychologist does not have that privilege (even though most clinical training includes information on drug treatments)
 - ii. For a career in psychiatry you must first complete the full requirements of the general MD degree. Thus, the total post-BA years in training is at least 8 (4 years medical school and 4 years residency).

7. Timeline for applying to graduate school

a. Freshmen and Sophomore years

- i. As noted in section 3 above (Planning a Psychology major), explore a variety of Psychology courses. Do not start with the assumption that you have to be a “x” psychologist (where x = clinical, research, counseling, human resources, and so forth). The major requires you to take courses in different core areas of Psychology to encourage you to explore outside your initial interests. That is a good means of determining whether your initial interests are genuine.
- ii. Begin a dialogue with other psych students, advisors, and professors about career possibilities and what you can do with your interests. One way to do this is to become involved in psychology campus organizations such as the Psych Alliance or Scarlet Listeners. Also, talk with teaching assistants for your psych courses. They are graduate students in the department’s PhD program and can be a useful source of information about the application process and what life is like in graduate school.
- iii. If you have decided on grad school, consider applying to work in one of the faculty research labs for credit. For some of the labs there are more students who want to take part than there is space, so you may have to apply multiple times. The earlier you begin, the better are your chances for getting into a lab. Also, do not restrict your search to a single lab that looks the most attractive to you. It is better to have some research experience than none even if that means working in a lab that is not your first choice. Information about faculty labs and how to apply:
<https://psych.rutgers.edu/academics/undergraduate/research-opportunities>

- iv. Be on the lookout for external internships, summer jobs, or volunteering opportunities related to your career path. If you are a declared Psychology major or minor, you will receive periodic announcements from psych advising that include requests from labs for research assistants and internship opportunities. If you are not a declared major or minor, you can sign up for the mailing list at:
https://email.rutgers.edu/mailman/listinfo/psych_advising

b. Junior year

- i. Keep working on points ii, iii, and iv above.
- ii. If relevant to your career path, take a fieldwork course (autism – 382/383, child development – 388/389, foster care – 380/381) or apply for the internship course (internship in applied and community psychology – 493/494) for the 2nd semester of your junior or 1st semester of your senior year.
- iii. If you are interested in an academic career (PhD program), then consider doing Honors in Psychology. This is a 9 credit set of classes for senior majors (GPA in Psych 3.4 and above; 3.0 overall) consisting of a 3 credit seminar that can be used for the 400 level major requirement and 6 credits of honors research. Students do a piece of research, write an honors thesis, and graduate with Honors in Psychology. This is very much like doing a Master's thesis and is a plus for the resume. To do honor's research you must first acquire a faculty mentor. That's best done by working in a lab in your junior year or earlier so that you can establish rapport with the faculty member.
- iv. If you intend to enter graduate school the semester after graduation, then you need to plan for the application process (which is going to be much like the travails of applying to

college when you were in high school). Here is an outline of what it involves:

1. Select a pool of graduate programs that you would be willing to attend. Some factors to consider once you have decided on the type (e.g., counseling) and level (Masters or doctoral) of program include:
 - a. Accreditation and licensing – does the program give you a complete package that allows you to pursue your career without further schooling? Some programs may provide course work but not supervision for those going into counseling and clinical areas.
 - b. For PhD and PsyD programs with a significant emphasis on research, look at the faculty in the program before applying.
 - i. Are any of the faculty engaged in research that is a fit with your interests? If so, you should draw attention in your application to how you would be a good match with those faculty members. That generally improves the likelihood that your application will be attended to closely and, in turn, may aid your overall chances of admission.
 - ii. If the faculty are not doing research that interests you, you probably should not apply because, even if admitted, you are not likely to be happy there.
 - iii. Before applying to a program to work with specific faculty members, contact them to see if they will be accepting

students for that year. If a faculty member is not taking a new student or is on leave, then your chances of being admitted will drop significantly unless there is someone else in the program who can serve as a good fit with you.

- c. Resources of the program – does it provide financial support to students? If you are interested in a research career, does the program have the material resources (labs and equipment) to support active research programs by its graduate students?
 - d. Track record of the program – what happens to graduates? Is there information on how the graduates have fared after obtaining their degrees?
2. Work backward from the application deadlines to create a timeline for submitting your packet. Mark the steps on your calendar, phone, computer, datebook, or with strings around your fingers.
3. Include time to prepare and then take the GRE exam twice in case the first attempt results in unfavorable scores. Taking the GRE exams in the Summer between your junior and senior years will give you adequate time for preparation and a retake if necessary. There are multiple resources that include practice GRE tests online as well as several private companies that offer prep courses. As an example, ETS (Educational Testing Service) offers online practice exams for their GRE:
https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/powerprep/

4. Much like the SAT, the GRE tests you on information that you have likely been exposed to but have seldom used, so a good review is necessary. Similarly, if you are required to take the Psychology Subject exam, you should, at minimum, review the material from a basic introductory psych course.
5. Contact persons who will be writing letters of recommendation to ensure that they are willing to write letters in the Fall of your senior year.

c. Senior year

- i. Summer between junior and senior year – take the GRE exams (and any other required standardized tests).
- ii. Fall – put together your application packet; many will be due in December or January. (Some programs have rolling admissions but those are the minority; most grad programs are on a traditional academic calendar with the year beginning in the Fall.) Application packets will vary, of course, but almost all will include:
 1. Personal Statement: discussed above in section 6.
 2. Course transcripts from your college
 3. Standardized tests: discussed above in section 6.
 4. Letters of recommendation – discussed above in section 6. Obtaining detailed letters of recommendation can be a challenge at a large university like Rutgers. This is why it is important to get faculty to know you by attending their office hours, speaking up in class, and getting involved in research and department activities (such as attending department talks and programs).

d. More about the Senior year and a Gap year

- i. If you apply to grad schools in the Fall of your senior year, it is unlikely that they will see your senior grades before making a decision about your application. If you want to ensure that something (whether a course, research, or activity) will be considered, you have to initiate it before you apply. In short, your strongest credentials need to be in place by no later than December of your senior year. This is why so much emphasis has been placed on your getting involved in research, internship, and extra-curricular activities in your sophomore and junior years. That does not mean that the senior year has no impact. Certainly, if you are doing honors research (which is only in the senior year), that will appear on your record when you apply to grad schools even though it will be unfinished.

- ii. If you take a gap year, then you can pull in any new contacts and experiences from later in your senior year. Consequently, a gap year may be advisable for students who have not assembled an impressive resume by the beginning of their senior year or for students who did not decide on Psychology until their junior year and, therefore, have not had the time and opportunity to amass experience and contacts. Taking a gap year will not adversely affect your attractiveness as a candidate for graduate study and can be helpful if you devote some of that time to enhancing your credentials.

8. Selecting a Graduate program

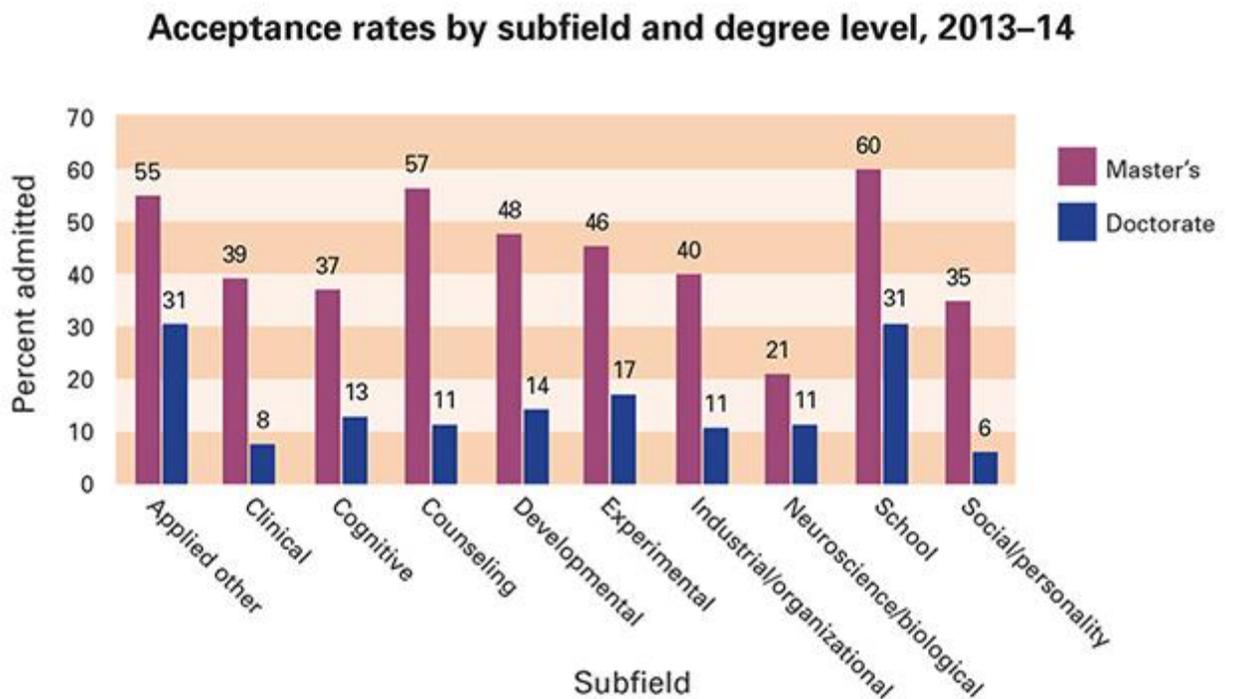
When you consider the time required to complete an application and the application fees, you will want to limit your applications to some reasonable number. Most students apply to at least 4 or 5 schools, and some may branch out to as many as 10 or 12. Beyond that, you are grasping at straws.

- e. Generating a short list of programs:
 - i. Look at research articles that are especially interesting to you and finding out where the authors are.
 - ii. Ask one or more faculty members in the relevant area of Psychology. Consult Psych advising for suggestions on whom to contact for suggestions.
 - iii. There are also some excellent reference sources available on the web such as PsychologyInfo site:
<http://www.psychologyinfo.com/> as well as
<http://www.gradschools.com/> and
<http://www.allpsychologyschools.com/>
- f. Contact prospective programs for application materials. A good rule of thumb is to obtain application materials from a few schools that are a bit too competitive for you to expect admission (stretch schools), from a fair number of schools that offer good programs that you have a reasonable expectation of getting into, and from a few schools that you may have to settle for (safety schools.) For example, if you are applying to six programs, select 1-2 stretch schools, 3 reasonable ones, and 1-2 safety schools.
- g. Financing Graduate school:
 - i. In general, students attending a Master's or a PsyD program will have to finance the cost themselves. There are, of course, exceptions. For instance, PsyD programs sometimes provide research assistantships to students if their faculty are doing research supported by grants.

- ii. Most good PhD programs offer tuition remission to full-time students and provide teaching assistantships, research assistantships, or fellowships for nearly all students they admit. This is because most Ph.D. programs are part of an undergraduate institution and receive funding for graduate training through a combination of undergrad tuition and research support generated by the faculty. (For example, grad students in the Rutgers Psych Department Ph.D. program are supported through university fellowships, teaching assistantships, and faculty grants.) The graduate stipend will not be enough to live in luxury but is usually sufficient for the life of the frugal student.
-
- h. Grad school interviews: Interviews have become more common as part of the selection process, particularly in doctorate programs. Interviews run the gamut from formal face-to-face meetings on campus to audio only phone calls. Interviews enable admissions committees to get a sense of whether the applicant is a good fit for their programs.
 - i. Although there is no standard set of questions for these interviews, it is likely that you will be asked about your undergraduate experience (e.g., Tell me about the research you were doing. What did you find challenging about your internship experience?) as well as your career and grad school plans. (e.g., How does this program fit with your career goals? How likely will you attend if admitted?)
 - ii. From your perspective, the interview can give you a sense of what the program is like and how faculty interact with graduate students. Be sure to talk with some of the current grad students about their experiences in the program.

9. Grad school admission data

How tough is it to get into a Psych grad school? The following graph shows data from a few years ago on the percentage of applicants who were admitted to Master's and doctorate (PhD and PsyD) programs; these data were gathered from over 200 schools.



As you can readily see, Master's programs admitted a greater percentage of applicants than did doctorate programs. That difference is due to a number of factors including the more stringent requirements for the doctorate programs as well as the greater number of Master's programs. There are a couple of points to take away from these sobering data.

- i. First, regardless of your area of interest, a minority of applicants are accepted for most grad programs. Consequently, not only must you carefully prepare the strongest application package you can, but you must also not put all your eggs in a single basket as the old saying goes. You will need to apply to multiple programs.

- j. Second, you need to be strategic because applications require substantial time, energy, and money. There is little point to chasing programs that are clearly out of your reach (based on information about the credentials of accepted applicants when available at the websites of grad programs). Similarly, it makes no sense to apply to a safety school unless you are fully willing and able to attend it should you not get into a preferred school.

10. What to do if you don't get into grad school?

Consider politely contacting the schools to see if you can get a sense of why you were not admitted. You may not receive specific, useful responses, but it is worth the relatively minimal effort. Your options are as follows:

- a. Take a gap year to work on improving your credentials. Your BA record is, of course, fixed, but if your GRE scores were problematic, then the remedy may be better preparation and a retake of that test. If the problem was either the letters or experience, then use the year to work in a related area or do research in a lab as a volunteer or paid research assistant. That can give you both more experience for the resume and a fresh letter of recommendation.
- b. In deciding whether or not to apply to the same schools the following year, consider how close you were to being admitted on the first attempt. Making to the interview stage indicates that you were a near miss, so things may work out the second time around with a different pool of other applicants. If you did not receive any indication of interest, then it makes sense to widen your range of schools on your second attempt.
- c. Rethink the level of the program. If you were applying only to doctoral programs and your academic credentials were marginal, you might want to lower your sights the second time around and include some

Master's programs. Of course, you have to consider this carefully, but success in a Master's program can sometimes open the door to doctoral programs that may have been out of reach based on one's undergraduate record.

- d. Rethink the career direction. This is the most drastic response and should not be taken without careful thought and consultation with those whom you know and trust. For example, you may have had your heart set on a clinical PsyD program but after applying to multiple schools, you did not come close to the final cut. Moreover, suppose you applied to a different set of schools the following year with the same outcome. You might then consider approaching the career goal of becoming a therapist from a different direction. One possibility would be to go the MSW (Master's of Social Work) route. Another might be to decide to do a Master's in counseling. Of course, any change in career direction will likely impact how you practice Psychology (as well as your financial rewards).

11. Career options with a BA in Psychology

As has been noted several times, to have a career in Psychology you need professional training beyond the BA. However, that does not mean you can't use a Psych BA to do work in areas related to Psychology. If you decide to go into the job market after your BA, whether or not you want a job related to Psychology, advice on how to prepare a resume and plan for job interviews is readily available through Rutgers Career Services. Please make use of their services rather than fly blindly into the job hunt. For general advice: <https://careers.rutgers.edu/> For specific recommendations and samples of resumes: <https://careers.rutgers.edu/students-alumni/pursue-your-goals/resume-correspondences/resume-samples>

a. Before discussing what a Psychology major with a BA can do, let's begin with data to provide some context.

i. More than 100,000 Bachelor's degrees are awarded in Psychology every year in the United States. Over a million Psychology majors have graduated from colleges and universities during the past decade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

- i. Approximately 25% of majors attend a graduate program in Psychology.
- ii. Nearly 20% attend a graduate or professional program outside of Psychology.
- iii. Around 55% of Psychology majors go directly into the workforce. Hence, the majority of Psychology majors do not go to graduate school.

b. What happens to these graduates? Are they doomed for a life in their parents' basements or a Walmart blue smock? Hardly; despite

what your parents may fear, there are plenty of careers a graduate can pursue with a Psychology major. These include occupations in the health, administrative, and professional service areas. Overall, less than 5% of graduates with a Bachelor's in Psychology report being unemployed.

c. Regardless of your major and career interests, employers are looking for the following skills which form part of the Psychology major:

- i. Communication fluency (written and oral)
- ii. Interpersonal acumen (can work with others, teamwork)
- iii. Flexibility (can readily pick up requirements of a new job)
- iv. Analytical skills (can summarize information and understand basic statistics)

d. Many students attracted to Psychology want to go into a career that involves helping others. Although you cannot practice clinical or counseling without an advanced degree, with a BA you can be employed in a variety of areas which involve mental health and social services; the following are some examples:

- i. Social service settings including residential care (e.g., group homes for special needs populations), hospitals, nursing homes, correctional facilities, community mental health centers
- ii. Business careers including human resources, public relations, sales, marketing, restaurant and hotel industries
- iii. Education related jobs such as childcare, teacher's aide, teacher (with education requirements for certification), admissions office, career services, and residential life

- iv. Criminal justice options such as corrections officer, juvenile intake coordinator
- v. Scientific research including survey researcher, marketing researcher, jury consultant

<https://www.learnpsychology.org/psychology-major-job-guide/>

b. Career Services has generated a list of jobs that Rutgers Psychology majors have obtained with a BA. Some examples:

- i. Employment in the private sector (in alphabetical order): adoption, advertising, child care agencies, correctional and financial institutions, labor unions, management consulting and market research firms, mental health institutions, newspapers, publishing companies, radio and TV stations, religious organizations, hotel and retail stores, substance abuse clinics, and social service agencies.
- ii. Employment in the public or government sector: civil rights commission, consumer affairs office, federal bureau of prisons, federal communications commission, foreign service, health and human services, labor department, National Science Foundation, Peace Corps, youth and family services, Veterans Administration.

12. Career options with a BA in Psychology and graduate training outside of Psychology

What about using Psychology as a launching pad for professional careers outside of Psychology? To help answer that question, consider the findings from a survey of nearly 360,000 psych majors who chose not to continue for graduate education in Psychology. These majors pursued post-BA training in the following areas:

- a. Nearly a third of them (31%) went on to grad schools in education to become elementary and secondary school teachers.
- b. About 28% obtained administrative positions in the education, health care, and social services sectors.
- c. 13% took managerial jobs in business.
- d. 11% attended medical school
- e. 10% entered law school
- f. 7% went into nursing

<https://www.learnpsychology.org/psychology-major-job-guide/>

Regardless of whether you choose to enter the workforce with your BA or continue on for a professional degree, you should consult Rutgers Career Services for assistance in your job search.

<https://careers.rutgers.edu/>

Finally, you may have decided on a career direction but wish to take a gap year before continuing. Aside from using the gap year to enhance career credentials (as noted in section 9d above), a gap year can provide an opportunity to engage in pro-social work that might

otherwise not be central to one's career path. Here are a few organizations that offer that experience:

1. Peace Corps (2 year commitment)
www.peacecorps.gov
2. Americorps Vista
<https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/amicorps/amicorps-programs/amicorps-vista>
3. Cross-cultural Solutions
www.crossculturalsolutions.org
4. Idealist www.idealist.org
5. National Assembly of Health and Human Services Organizations has links to jobs and internships: www.nassembly.org

