

Guide To Applying to Graduate School Clinical Psychology PhD

Note: this is only based on one individual's experience in 2010.

The Clinical Psychology PhD has become the most competitive graduate degree, more so than med school, law school, etc if you look at the numbers and statistics. Most of the top programs average about 300-500 applications per year for only 2-8 spots. This allows professors to essentially hand pick the **one** student that they want to work with for the next 5-6 years. Because of this unique process, credentials are important, but they only get your foot in the door. The most important thing for most professors is so called "match" or "fit." More on that later.

1. Is a Clinical Psychology PhD for you?

It is important to know what you're getting into. Graduating Wesleyan, I did not know all the steps to getting a PhD in clinical psychology. It's a long haul with several milestones along the way. Most programs include:

A first year research project

A second year research project that culminates in a MASTERS THESIS

Oral defense of master's thesis

Qualifying exams (often in the form of a grant proposal or enormous literature review)

Dissertation Proposal

*******PRE-DOC INTERNSHIP***** (more on this later)**

Dissertation

Dissertation Defense

Post Doc Internship

This is, of course, on top of classes, practicum and lab responsibilities. It's intense. Average time to completion is usually 6 years. Is this program for you? Are you interested more in a practice than in research? There are MUCH easier ways to achieve this end goal.

2. Finding programs

This was one of the most time consuming and overwhelming steps in the process. It's not as easy as saying "oh, X,Y,Z are the top three programs in clinical psychology, I'll apply here!" There are multiple factors that go into this process. Here are some factors to consider:

1. **Does the school have APA accreditation?** If not, you need to seriously consider whether or not you will apply to this program.

2. **Is the school fully funded?** Partially funded? Most of the top programs are able to waive tuition and provide a stipend. If the school is unable to do this, you may want to consider the reasons why. (Are the researchers not pulling in enough grants? does the administration not prioritize grad students? are there no undergrads to help subsidize grad school costs through Teaching Assistantships?)

3. **PRE-DOC Internship match rate.** This was the most important factor for me. An APA approved Pre-Doc internship is a REQUIREMENT to graduate from any Clinical Psychology PhD program. The catch: there are more PhD clinical psych students than there are approved internships. In your fourth year, you have to go through another rigorous and competitive application process. All the schools I looked at had 100% match rates. I want to know that if I do a good job in grad school, then I won't have to stress too much about match day. If a school has less than 100%, you need to inquire why. Sometimes it's just that one student had very specific match requirements, or a student applied prematurely and without the department's approval. Either way, you worked really hard for 4 years to get to this point, you don't want to be thwarted at this step.

4. **Paradigm background.** Are you interested in CBT? Psychoanalytic? DBT? Object theory? "Evidence based practices?" If you do not want a psychodynamic training, then make sure you're not looking at psychodynamic programs (for example, Yale, most of the NY schools, Northwestern Feinberg, American etc).

5. **Lab Match.** If the first four points check out, then you need to look at the labs and research interests of each faculty member. Is there a mentorship model or a cohort model of training. In the mentorship model, you apply to the school and list the 1 or 2 faculty members you want to train under. You are applying specifically to his or her lab. So if you want to study pediatric neuropsychology, you better make sure that your school has a pediatric neuropsychology lab/professor working there. The more specific you can be, the better.

Another note on this: it's not enough to just have an interest in a population or a phenomenon. You need experience with it too. You need to really think about what you've done and what you are trying to do. I was extremely surprised by how much specificity is expected of students in this process. It's often not enough to have "research and lab experience" -- you really need to try to get *relevant* research and lab experience.

6. **Are the professors of interest (POI) taking students?** After identifying a school and a professor that you are interested in working with EMAIL THEM!!!! Many professors do not have the funding to take a new student every year. It is VERY important to email a professor in the fall to find out if they are taking a new student. Also, it's generally just a good idea to let them know who you are, what you're interested in and that you will be applying. This gets your name out there. But most importantly, you don't want to waste a \$60 application fee applying to work with a professor who has NO intention of taking a new student in the fall.

Okay! So you have figured out a list of schools that fit your needs and professors who fit your interests who are taking students in the fall. It's time to apply. I can't offer too

much advice on this section - it's a straightforward application. Your personal statement should reflect who you are, who you want to be, and why what you have done makes you ready and certain of these facts.

Interviews

If you are successful, you will receive interviews from a few schools. If you do not get an interview, you will not get into the school. Professors usually interview 1-6 people for each slot, so if you get an interview, you are still in the game! You need to be well prepared for these interviews. You need to ask questions - about the program, about the lab, about the practicums, about what people do when they graduate, etc. Always have scores of questions ready.

Also, different schools asked for varying degrees of specificity regarding research interests. One professor asked what a potential dissertation topic might be. Another professor asked more generally what types of things I would be interested in studying. Either way, spend some time really thinking about this. It will help you as you look for professors of interest as well as in your personal statement.

That's it. This is the process. It is drawn out and stressful, and from what I gather, it takes many people more than one try. Don't give up. Here are things that you can do to make yourself as competitive an applicant as possible:

1. Research experience!!!! This is the most important thing you can do between graduating college and applying to grad school. If you can, do not take any old lab job. Find a lab job researching something directly related to what you want to study in grad school. I cannot stress this enough.
2. If you've snagged a great lab job, see if you can get your name on a poster or a publication. This will make you stand out.
3. GREs – take them as early as possible. It only gets harder as you get farther away from school. Take the psych subject GREs too – a lot of schools require it, and you don't want to not apply to schools simply because you didn't sit for this test.
4. Volunteer or intern in a clinical setting. It shows dedication to the field and will get you some really good experience to boot.
5. Write a senior thesis. If you can do original research, even better.
6. If you know you are interested in a particular school, it's not a bad idea to try to get a research position at that school or even with your professor of interest. Often a professor will prefer to “promote from within.”

GOOD LUCK!