

**GRADUATE STUDY IN PSYCHOLOGY**  
**Your Guide to Success**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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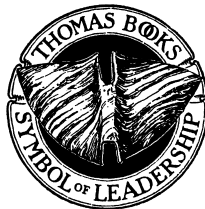
# GRADUATE STUDY IN PSYCHOLOGY

Your Guide To Success

*By*

**TARA L. KUTHER**

*Western Connecticut State University*



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## PREFACE

Psychology is one of the most popular majors for undergraduate students today. Each year, more than 75,000 students in the United States earn bachelor's degrees in psychology. Many students consider graduate study, but are unsure of what it entails, what preparation it offers, and how to apply. As a professor of psychology, I've spent many hours in my office with students who were considering whether to go to graduate school. I've spent countless more hours researching the admissions process and providing advice about graduate school for the readers and subscribers of my website, About Graduate School, at About.com (<http://gradschool.about.com>). The advice in *Graduate Study in Psychology: Your Guide to Success* is largely derived from conversations and correspondence with my students and on-line readers.

This book will take you on an in-depth tour of the graduate admissions process. You'll learn how to decide whether graduate school is for you and how to apply to graduate school. We'll discuss:

- the differences between master's and doctoral programs
- differences among Ph.D. and Psy.D. degrees
- what graduate school is like
- how to locate graduate programs
- how to evaluate and choose programs
- what admissions committees look for in applicants
- how to improve your credentials for graduate school admission
- how to obtain research and applied experiences during college
- the timetable for applying to graduate school
- how to seek financial aid to fund graduate school
- the Graduate Record Exam
- how to write a compelling personal statement or admissions essay
- how to ask for letters of recommendation
- how to prepare for admissions interviews

- how to evaluate and accept offers
- what to do if you're rejected
- how to make the transition from college to graduate school
- how to succeed in graduate school

Each chapter of *Graduate Study in Psychology: Your Guide to Success* contains advice based on research, my own experiences as a professor, and tips from current graduate students. Boxes within each chapter present tips from students who've been there—successful students share what worked—as well as what didn't. The Appendix at the end of this book lists recommended readings and websites to help you at each stage of choosing, applying to, and succeeding in graduate school. Note that the websites are linked at my home page: <http://tarakuther.com/grad/downloads.html> Check the web page for frequently updated links and new resources. Also, as you progress through the admissions process, I invite you to share your experience, tips, and advice with me. Send an email to me at [tk@tarakuther.com](mailto:tk@tarakuther.com) to share your graduate admissions experiences.

—Tara L. Kuther

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## Chapter 1

### CONSIDERING GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PSYCHOLOGY AND RELATED FIELDS

Each year, over 74,000 students earn bachelor's degrees in psychology (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Although a bachelor's degree in psychology prepares graduates for a variety of careers, a graduate degree provides additional opportunities for professional advancement, respect, and financial security. By obtaining a graduate degree, you'll become an expert in your field. You'll gain the confidence and communication skills to disseminate what you've learned and improve your life and possibly the world around you.

Of course, graduate school isn't for everyone. Is it for you? How do you know? What is graduate school like? In this chapter we'll explore these questions and more. You'll learn about the various degrees that you may obtain through graduate study in psychology and related fields, how to decide if graduate school will advance your career, and how graduate school is different from college. If you're thinking about attending graduate school in psychology or a related field, your first step is to determine which degree is for you. You've got two basic choices: a master's degree or a doctoral degree. Let's take a closer look at master's and doctoral degrees.

#### THE MASTER'S DEGREE

The master's degree is shrouded by myth, as faculty often know little about master's degrees and master's-level careers (Actkinson, 2000). Despite faculty biases, master's degrees are very popular. About 13,000

students earn master's degrees in psychology each year (Hays-Thomas, 2000). Many more earn master's degrees in related fields like social work and counseling.

A master's degree will enable you to change career fields. For example, let's say that you've earned a bachelor's degree in English, but have decided that you want to become a counselor—complete a master's degree in counseling. You don't need a bachelor's degree in psychology to apply to graduate school in psychology and related fields. A master's degree will allow you to develop expertise in a new area and enter a new career. Typically, earning a master's degree requires two years of graduate study beyond the bachelor's degree, but those additional two years open the door to many career opportunities that are personally, professionally, and financially fulfilling. The most common master's degrees are the master of arts (M.A.) and master of science (M.S.). Note that whether you earn an M.A. or M.S. depends more on the school you attend than the academic requirements fulfilled; the two are different only in name, not in educational requirements or status. Master's degrees are offered in a variety of fields (e.g., psychology, mathematics, biology, etc.), just as bachelor's degrees are offered in many fields.

### **What Does a Master's Degree Entail?**

Most master's degree programs in psychology require students to complete a master's thesis, or an extended research paper. In your master's thesis, you will pose a research question, review the relevant literature, and design and carry out a research study to address your question. More specifically, you'll identify a research question, use surveys, interviews, and other procedures to collect data about your question, analyze the data you've collected using statistics, draw conclusions, and make recommendations for future research. Some master's programs offer alternatives to the master's thesis, such as written comprehensive exams or other written projects that are less rigorous than theses. In service-oriented fields like clinical, counseling, and school psychology, master's degrees usually include a practicum, internship, or other applied experience (e.g., conducting therapy under supervision; Kuther & Morgan, 2004).

## **Master's Degrees in Psychology and Related Fields**

If you're interested in helping people, you're not limited to a master's degree in psychology. There are a variety of other areas in which you can earn a master's degree and have the opportunity to work with people. Let's take a look at the range of master's options that may be of interest to psychology students.

### ***Clinical and Counseling Psychology***

A master's degree in clinical or counseling psychology prepares graduates to provide basic psychological services, including psychological assessments and therapy. Master's-level clinicians work in community mental health centers, schools, psychiatric hospitals, nonprofit organizations, and group practices. If you desire a master's degree in clinical or counseling psychology to establish an independent practice, recognize that master's level clinicians often must be supervised by licensed doctoral-level psychologists (Actkinson, 2000; Kuther & Morgan, 2004). In some states, master's clinicians meet requirements for licensure as a counselor or marriage and family therapist (discussed later in this chapter). Before enrolling in a master's program in clinical or counseling psychology, consider your interests and goals, and do your homework so that you're not surprised or disappointed later. Some alternatives to master's degrees in clinical and counseling psychology, such as social work, counseling, and marriage and family therapy, provide a greater range of practice opportunities than master's degrees in psychology.

### ***School Psychology***

A master's degree in school psychology prepares graduates to provide psychological services to children and adolescents within school settings. School psychologists assess students' learning aptitude, diagnose learning disabilities, assess special needs, and promote the overall development of children and adolescents (Himelein, 1999). School psychologists work with school personnel and with parents to determine classroom placements, to develop interventions to help deal with problematic behavior, and to promote adaptation within the school set-

ting. Although many graduates obtain positions with master's degrees in school psychology, national certification as a school psychologist by the National Association of School Psychologists requires a specialist's degree, which is an advanced degree between the master's and doctoral degrees. The specialist's degree requires an additional year of graduate education beyond the master's degree, but will improve your competitiveness in the job market because three-quarters of nondoctoral-level school psychologists hold the specialist's degree (Himelein, 1999).

### ***Industrial and Organizational Psychology***

A master's degree in industrial/organizational psychology prepares graduates to apply psychological principles to the workplace. Industrial/organizational psychology training prepares graduates to engage in a variety of activities, including employee selection and placement, employee training and development, performance evaluation, policy formation and enforcement, team building, management advisement in issues of leadership and decision making, and organizational development (Kuther & Morgan, 2004). Master's degree holders in industrial/organizational psychology work in business, private organizations, corporate settings, and government.

### ***Social Work***

The master's degree in social work (M.S.W.) is a respected degree whose graduates are highly competitive for careers as therapists and clinicians in hospitals, clinics, schools, correctional facilities, nonprofit agencies, and private practice (Actkinson, 2000). Social workers help people to adapt and function in their everyday environments. A master's degree in social work requires two to three years of study (including training in human growth and development, social policies and programs, methods of practice, and social research) and a supervised internship of at least 900 hours of fieldwork. The M.S.W. allows degree-holders to practice therapy independently, as social workers are eligible for licensure or certification in all 50 states and the District of Columbia (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002).