

Careers in Counseling and Psychotherapy

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(also see the online Counseling Career Selector at www.selectsmart.com/plus/select.php?url=counsel)

Congratulations on your decision to explore a career in the helping professions! However, as you are probably beginning to realize, many types of professionals (including psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers) may practice psychotherapy, each having its own unique educational requirements and areas of specialization. This document will allow you to compare the different types of helping professionals with one another. This document also provides suggestions for selecting and applying to graduate programs in the helping professions. While the information provided below may begin to answer some of your questions, we strongly encourage you to discuss this information further with a faculty member in the Psychology Department.

Where's the Money Coming From?

You may be surprised to discover that anyone can charge another person for advice or helping! You require no special education or certification to hang out a sign calling yourself a "professional advice giver" or "personal consultant." However, if you want to call yourself a "Psychologist" or "Clinical Social Worker" or any of several other state-regulated titles, you need to meet the requirements for the appropriate certification in your state.

Why then, would you ever want to bother with getting this certification? Well, aside from the obvious answer (so that you know what you're doing!), the other reason has to do with money. Most clients in therapy do not pay their therapists directly, but instead pay through *third parties* (such as insurance companies, Medicare, HMO's, etc.). Such third parties have strict regulations about whom they will be willing to pay for psychotherapy services. These regulations vary somewhat, depending on which third party you are trying to get to reimburse you. However, only providers who conform to these regulations will be reimbursed. This means that if you do not conform to these regulations in your background and licensure, you will need to be under the direct supervision of a professional who does conform, to whom the third party will make payments. Thus, your earning potential and your professional freedom are less restricted if you have a state-certified credential that is recognized by third party payers. Otherwise, you can accept only self-paying clients, or must work under the supervision of others (for example, as a psychiatric technician/aide in a psychiatric hospital). Some people without such state credentialing may also work in institutions that are government funded and do not depend on third party payments (for example, as a caseworker in a social service agency).

Types of Mental Health Professionals

Different types of mental health professionals vary in terms of background and training, the types of clients they work with, the kind of work they do, and the level of reimbursement that they receive. The following list of mental health professionals is roughly organized from the professions that provide the most flexibility (and generally require the most training) to the professions that provide the least flexibility. Note that licensing requirements for different professions are generally state-mandated. The information provided below applies to Illinois requirements; requirements in other states may differ somewhat. Local and national salary data from 2014, as well as information on projected job growth, are presented in Table 1 for each field.

Table 1. 2014 Salaries and Projected Growth of Field (2012-2022), as listed on O*Net

Profession	National Data			Chicago-Joliet-Naperville Area Data			Growth
	Low 10%	Median	Top 10%	Low 10%	Median	Top 10%	
Psychiatrists	61,600	181,900	187,200	42,900	111,900	187,200	18%
Psychologists - Clinical, Counseling, and School	40,100	68,900 ^t	113,600	34,700	65,200	99,000	11%
Social Workers - Healthcare	32,100	51,900	76,900	31,600	53,200	78,400	>22%
Social Workers - Child, Family, and School	27,500	42,100	72,500	27,800	48,600	89,800	18%
Social Workers - Mental Health and Substance Abuse	25,800	41,400	70,300	21,900	35,900	74,600	>22%
School Guidance Counselor	32,000	53,400	86,600	31,200	60,600	103,800	11%
Marriage and Family Therapist	30,500	48,000	78,900	29,400	38,000	53,300	>22%
Mental Health Counselors	26,000	40,800	66,900	26,100	39,400	75,500	>22%
Psychiatric Aides	18,800	26,200	42,300	20,000	26,500	42,400	5%

Note: Data retrieved July 2015 from O*NET Online (www.onetonline.org), an excellent resource on the requirements and rewards of various occupations. t – While the O*NET data does not distinguish between Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychologist salaries, the 2009 Report of the APA Salary Survey suggests some differences. In 2009, median salaries reported for licensed School, Clinical, and Counseling Psychologists were \$90,000, \$87,015, and \$81,000 respectively.

Psychiatrists

Overview. Psychiatrists are medical doctors, and as such, are the only mental health professionals able to prescribe medications (although there is currently some discussion about training psychologists to have limited prescription privileges). Psychiatrists may also perform psychotherapy, although they often focus more on medication due to their more extensive training in this area. Earning potential is higher than other mental health professionals (see Table 1), although less than medical doctors in most other medical specialties.

Training. After obtaining a bachelors degree, psychiatry trainees spend four years in medical school earning a general MD. They then complete a four-year residency in psychiatry (residencies on child psychiatry generally require an extra year of training). While undergraduates may major in any field, certain science courses are recommended to help them prepare for the MCAT (medical school admission test). These include at least 8 hours of general, inorganic chemistry, 8 hours of general biology, 8 hours of organic chemistry, and 8 hours of physics. Many medical schools are also requiring one year of composition and courses in calculus and behavioral science.

Clinical and Counseling Psychologists

Overview. Clinical and counseling psychologists have doctoral level training. This training prepares these psychologists to do psychotherapy and psychological assessment (along with school psychologists, clinical and counseling psychologists generally do the bulk of psychological assessments). Historically, clinical psychologists were trained to work with people with more severe psychopathology and counseling psychologists were trained to work with people with more “normal” problems (including adjustment problems, career counseling, etc.). However, the distinction between clinical and counseling psychology is not as clear as it once was, and today both clinical and counseling psychologists work with clients with a variety of problems (Halgin, 1986).

Training. After obtaining a bachelors degree, it generally takes about six years to complete a Ph.D. in clinical or counseling psychology. Five of these years are spent in school taking courses, doing research (including a dissertation), and working part-time with clients at various practicum sites. The last year of the program is spent in a predoctoral internship, which may be at any of a variety of sites across the country (for licensing purposes, it is generally preferable to intern at a site that has been accredited by the APA or by the APPIC, the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers). This year is spent doing clinical work full time. To be licensed as a psychologist in the state of Illinois, a student must also do a year of full-time supervised postdoctoral practice before sitting for the licensure exam.

Types of Graduate Programs. Ph.D. programs are generally designed to train psychologists as “scientist-practitioners” – that is, to be experts both in helping skills and in understanding research. While some Ph.D. programs focus more on the “scientist” part and others focus more on the “practitioner” part, all such programs require a minimum competence in both areas. John Norcross and his colleagues have found that, compared to more research-oriented programs, more practice-oriented Ph.D. programs in both clinical (Norcross, Ellis, & Sayette, 2010; Sayette, Norcross, & Dimoff, 2011) and counseling (Norcross, Evans, & Ellis, 2010) psychology tend to be less selective and to provide less financial aid.

An alternative doctoral degree, the Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology), is designed to train psychologists primarily as practitioners (or “practitioner-scholars”). Because of the de-emphasis on research skills, these programs generally take about a year less time to complete than a Ph.D. program. Some of these Psy.D. programs are situated within a university setting; however, many of them are based in freestanding “institutes of psychology.” While these Psy.D. programs can provide excellent training, there is a great deal of variability in the quality and reputation of these programs, more so than for Ph.D. programs. Some Psy.D. programs in institutes of psychology have been criticized as being “diploma mills,” processing a large number of graduate students while providing substandard training. Norcross, Ellis, and Sayette (2010) found that Psy.D. programs on average were less selective and provided less financial assistance than Ph.D. programs of any type. Among Psy.D. programs, those within university psychology departments were more selective and provided better financial assistance than those within university professional schools, which in turn were more selective and provide better financial assistance than free-standing Psy.D. programs. The same study found that students from free-standing Psy.D. programs were less likely than any other clinical doctoral students to receive an APA or APPIC internship (66.3%, vs. 85.4% for all clinical programs combined).

Social Workers

Overview. Practicing social workers generally have master’s level training. Licensed social workers can practice psychotherapy in a variety of settings; however they are not trained as thoroughly as psychologists in assessment or research. For students wanting to practice psychotherapy with master’s level training, this is probably the most flexible path.

Training. While there are bachelors degree programs in social work, in order to be licensed as a clinical social worker in Illinois, one needs a master's degree (MSW). MSW programs generally require two years that include both class work and practicum experiences. Different MSW programs often have different tracks, including clinical social work, school social work, and administrative social work. While administrative social workers are trained primarily in managing social service programs, clinical and school social workers get more extensive training in providing psychotherapy. After graduating from an MSW program, a student may immediately apply for an LSW (Licensed Social Worker) license. This license allows one to practice social work, but not in an independent practice. LSW's are also available to graduates of Bachelors Social Work degree programs after they have completed three years of supervised professional experience. To practice independently, one needs a LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) license. MSW's may apply for the LCSW after receiving 3000 hours of supervised clinical work following the master's degree (NASW Illinois Chapter, n.d.). School social workers must complete two school years (2160 hours) full time supervised work (post-MSW) as a school social worker to meet the specialty certification in school social work.

School Psychologists

Overview. School psychologists are trained to do a variety of clinical activities, but psychological assessment is usually a key part of the school psychologist's job (school social workers often handle the bulk of psychotherapy within the school setting). School psychologists can also consult with teachers and provide direct counseling services to students. Most school psychologists work in public or private school systems. School psychologists also have the benefit of being on a school schedule (with summer vacations, holidays, etc.)!

Training. While most graduate programs in school psychology are housed in education departments, some are housed in psychology departments. While training requirements vary from state to state, Illinois requires at least master's level training and one year of supervised experience (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). Beyond the master's level, some school psychologists earn a Ph.D. or may earn a specialization certificate (midway between master's and doctoral level).

Marriage and Family Therapist

Overview. Although psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers can all do family therapy, marriage and family therapists choose to specialize in this particular type of psychotherapy.

Training. To be licensed as an MFT in Illinois, one must complete at least a master's degree from an accredited MFT program, followed by at least two years of supervised experience in marriage and family therapy, including at least 200 hours of supervision.

Professional Counselor

Overview. Illinois licenses professional counselors, who are eligible to perform psychotherapy.

Training. There are two levels of licensure in Illinois, the LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor) and the LCPC (Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor). An LPC license requires either a masters degree in psychology or counseling OR a bachelors degree in an approved human services department and the equivalent of 5 years of supervised experience. An LCPC requires a master's degree in counseling or psychology, and the equivalent of two years supervised experience subsequent to the degree. Note that this is the only license for which one is eligible with a masters degree in psychology.

For this reason, I often recommend that students who want to practice with a masters degree get an MSW instead of a masters in psychology.

School Guidance Counselor

Overview. Guidance counselors work with school-aged children, helping them to better understand themselves and to plan for their futures. They do different things at different grade levels, but are generally concerned with student developmental needs, emotional adjustment, and career planning and preparation.

Training. Guidance counselors hold both a standard teaching certificate and a Guidance Specialist endorsement. They must hold a master's degree from a recognized teacher education institution, and complete a graduate program of 39 semester hours in coursework. This includes a variety of supervised experience, including a 600-hour internship for students with no previous teaching experience (300 hours for students with two or more years of teaching experience).

Other Related Professionals

The above list is by no means complete. A variety of other professionals work with people facing psychological problems, including psychiatric nurses, substance abuse counselors, occupational therapists, art therapists, forensic psychologists, and others. Other professionals, such as community psychologists and organizational psychologists, may work to prevent psychological problems, often by consulting to workplace or community settings to create more mentally healthy environments.

Tips on Applying to Graduate Schools in the Helping Professions

1. Spend your first few college years wisely. Take courses that will help you to explore different areas in which you might be interested (courses that might help you think about these issues include Personality, Psychological Assessment, Abnormal Psychology, Child Psychopathology, and Counseling Psychology). Do well in your courses; a high GPA is required for many graduate programs in the helping professions. Get to know several faculty members well enough that they can write you meaningful letters of recommendation. Get involved in research, internships, and other applied experiences. Use the career development center (www.luc.edu/career) to help you explore your career options.
2. If, towards the end of college, you don't have a reasonably clear idea about your career direction, consider delaying your application to graduate school. While graduate school can be an interesting experience in its own right, for most students, it is a means to an end (a particular career). Without a good idea of the "end" that you are pursuing, it is difficult to make a good decision about the appropriate "means." If you haven't already done so, use the career development center (www.luc.edu/career) to help you explore your options. Consider using "time off" from school to help you explore jobs and research opportunities that are related to your career interests. Some graduate programs actually prefer applicants that have gained new relevant experiences between undergraduate and graduate school.
3. However, if you are reasonably clear about your career goals, it might be a bad idea to take "time off" from school just to save up money for graduate school. Your financial aid for graduate school is determined partially by your current finances, and might actually be reduced if you have much money saved up. Further, your earning potential with a BA is likely much lower than your earning potential after your graduate degree, meaning that it might make more financial sense to take out student loans (if necessary), and pay them back once your earning potential is higher.

4. Be wary about applying to masters programs as a “back door” to doctoral programs. If your long-term goal is a doctorate, it is often preferable to apply directly to doctoral programs. Masters programs are generally easier to get into, and might offer you an opportunity to improve on a less-than-stellar undergraduate GPA, which might improve your chances of subsequently getting into a doctoral program. However, doctoral programs are often stingy about transferring credit from another school’s masters program, meaning you might have to repeat many courses. Further, even if you apply to a doctoral program in the same department as your masters program, there is no guarantee of your acceptance. Finally, as a masters student in a program that is primarily oriented toward doctoral students, you might find yourself to be a fairly low priority when it comes to research and teaching opportunities, funding, and access to faculty.

5. Decide which graduate schools most interest you.

- a. To avoid potential problems with licensing, apply only to graduate schools that are accredited by the appropriate governing body (e.g., the American Psychological Association or the Counsel on Social Work Education). A list of APA accredited programs in clinical, counseling, and school psychology is available at <http://www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/programs/> and also in the book *Graduate Study in Psychology* (APA, 2015). The Counsel on Social Work Education has a searchable directory of accredited social work programs at <http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation.aspx>.
- b. Browse program websites or send email to schools to request information on the programs and application materials. Many schools have applications that you can download on their websites.
- c. Find programs that fit with your interests. Look for faculty that share interests with you or for affiliated practicum sites that will give you the experiences that you want. Many programs have different “tracks” that allow you to specialize in a particular area within your chosen profession.
- d. Remember that the reputation of a university does not necessarily tell you much about the reputation of a particular program at that university. Some excellent programs exist at otherwise mediocre schools. Look more to the reputation of the faculty in your field than at the name of the school.
- e. Weigh the professional and personal costs and benefits of each program. For example, particular geographic locations may give you better access to friends and family. However, limiting yourself geographically will also limit the available number of programs that fit your needs.

6. Apply to a sufficient number of graduate programs. For more competitive programs, such as clinical psychology Ph.D. programs, you may want to apply to 6-8 schools in order to increase your chances of acceptance (the same is true if your credentials are not stellar).

7. Look to see what the requirements are for the particular programs that interest you (see the book *Graduate Study in Psychology* for information on specific psychology programs). In particular, many will require you to take exams, such as the GRE-General test or the GRE-Psychology test. If such exams are required, be sure that you study thoroughly for those exams before taking them. Buy one of many available preparation books for the General test, and work through the problems. Discipline yourself and spend some time on this (15-20 hours / week for a month is not too much); you can greatly improve your scores by preparing. For the GRE-Psychology test, you may buy a preparation book, or alternatively,

review the chapters in a recent good introductory psychology textbook. More information on GRE preparation along with free preparation software is available at the GRE web site at <http://www.ets.org/gre>.

8. Other important criteria may vary. Norcross, Kohout, and Wicherski (2004) found that, in doctoral level psychology programs (across all psychology fields), *letters of recommendation*, *GPA*, and *personal statement* are weighted the most heavily (followed by *interview*, *research experience* and *GRE scores*, and, to a lesser degree, *clinically related public service*, *work experience* and *extracurricular activity*). Again, make sure that you get to know a few of your teachers well enough that they can write meaningful letters for you. When you ask for a recommendation, consider using the phrase, “Do you think that you know me well enough that you can write me a *strong* letter of recommendation?” This phrasing allows teachers to back out gracefully if they could only write you a mediocre letter (which you don’t want). Undergraduate clinical and research experiences are especially valued if you can refer to them in your personal statement and explain how they have influenced your interest in graduate school. Your personal statement itself will be read carefully, and should thoughtfully explain why you are a good fit with the program to which you are applying. Study up on the program before writing this statement, and describe specific faculty that you would like to work with and specific opportunities that appeal to you, and why. Tailor each letter to the program to which you are applying.

9. When evaluating a particular graduate school, you might consider asking yourself (and representatives of the program) some of these questions:

- a. What % of graduate students who begin the program complete it? In how many years?
- b. How well do the students compete with other students for practica/ internships?
(or, more specifically for clinical/counseling psychology programs,
what % of the students get into an APA or APPIC accredited predoctoral internship?)
- c. What % of students pass the (relevant) licensing exam on the first attempt?
- d. What is the average class size and the faculty: student ratio?
- e. How many advisees does each faculty member have, on average?
- f. What opportunities are there to gain money/experience as a research/teaching assistant?
- g. What other kind of financial aid is available? Is it mainly grant-based or loan-based?
- h. What kind of jobs do students from the program typically go on to get?
- i. Is the program fully accredited by the relevant accreditation group?
- j. Are there several faculty here who share my research/clinical interests?
- k. What amount and type of clinical supervision is available? Are there supervisors available that share my preferred theoretical orientation(s)?

Closing Thoughts

We hope that this document has been helpful in describing some of the main differences among mental health professionals. We strongly encourage you to get more information by talking to faculty members in psychology and by exploring some of the references listed below. You are choosing a career that can be very rewarding, but you have some important decisions to make about how to tailor that career to your personal interests. Good luck!

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