

# Thinking about Graduate Study in Clinical or Counseling Psychology?

Glenn M Callaghan, PhD  
San Jose State University

## CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY: PSYCHOTHERAPY AND RESEARCH

The area of clinical psychology is concerned with the understanding and treatment of psychological distress. Clinical and counseling psychologists work in the field of mental health to assess and treat people with psychological problems. There are many ways to engage in the mental health profession as it relates to clinical psychology. With an undergraduate degree in psychology individuals can be involved in some administration tasks in mental health, and with additional certification, engage in limited delivery of therapeutic services as a paraprofessional (e.g., as a substance abuse counselor) in a variety of community health agency settings.

Practicing psychotherapy requires a license (e.g., Marriage and Family Therapist, Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor, or licensed Psychologist). Getting a license allows one to practice therapy independently in California, but you need to have a graduate degree and the necessary hours of experience after that to get licensed.

Different graduate degrees (those earned after you complete your undergraduate degree) allow individuals to become eligible for these licenses. These mental health professionals and clinical scientists may act as therapists for people experiencing normal psychological crises (e.g., grief) or for individuals, couples, and families suffering from chronic psychological disorders. Some clinical psychologists are generalists who work with a wide variety of populations, while others work with specific groups like children, older adults, or those with specific disorders (e.g., depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or schizophrenia). These professionals may be found working in academic settings, hospitals, community health centers, or in private practice.

While clinical psychology overlaps with other professions, it is unique in its focus on alleviating human suffering and working with people with problems. This is in contrast to a focus on social welfare and helping connect individuals to essential community resources as found in a social work graduate program (leading to becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker) or a school guidance counselor who works primarily with individuals through their academic career to effectively adjust to education in order to make well-informed and positive choices for their vocation.

## GRADUATE DEGREES RELATED TO CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

In California, you can practice psychotherapy independently with a license. Licensure requires the completion of an acceptable graduate degree and the required 3000 hours of clinical experience. Graduate degrees can be either from Masters programs or doctoral programs. When thinking about graduate school, it will be important to consider the following carefully as you decide which degree fits you best:

- **Your goals** – Do you want to be primarily a psychotherapist, a professor, or a researcher?
- **How much you can afford** – Public schools will cost much less than private or professional schools.
- **How much time you can commit** – Masters programs take 2-3 years of coursework, while doctoral programs take 6-8 years to complete. Remember you need post degree clinical hours for licensure for both!

*Masters*

## **Masters degrees in Clinical or Counseling Psychology: The path of the psychotherapist**

These Masters degrees lead to state licensure as Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) or Licensed Professional Clinical Counselors (LPCCs) in California and other states. Licensure requires a minimum of 2 years of graduate training and usually around 2 years of supervised clinical practice post-masters. A Masters degree is best for those who wish to provide direct therapy services to individuals, couples, and families in community agencies and who do not wish to go on to become researchers or professors.

We strongly recommend that undergraduate students interested in a Masters degree in clinical psychology and later licensure as an MFT, LPCC (or other health professional) complete some type of volunteer or paid placement or enroll in fieldwork study to obtain professionally supervised experience serving clinical populations. Students interested in completing a fieldwork course can contact a faculty member and enroll in: **PSYC 186, Fieldwork Studies**.

***The Clinical Masters Degree (MS) in Psychology at San Jose State.*** San Jose State University offers an excellent Masters degree in Clinical Psychology (the MS in Clinical Psychology). The MS program in Clinical Psychology is an excellent choice for those who wish to become Masters-level practitioners of psychotherapy and are seeking licensure as either an MFT or LPCC. The MS in Clinical Psychology at SJSU is renowned for its excellent preparation of graduates for clinical practice. This is not a program that prepares students for pursuing a doctorate in Clinical Psychology (PhD), as it does not provide the direct research experience necessary to get into that type of program (i.e., publishing research studies while a graduate student).

Students interested in the MS in Clinical Psychology program at SJSU should thoroughly review the information at SJSU website at <http://www.sjsu.edu/psych/Graduates/clinicalpsych/index.html>

*PhD*

## **Doctoral degrees (PhDs) in Clinical or Counseling Psychology: Research and Teaching**

Doctoral degrees prepare graduates for careers in research, teaching, and administration in hospitals, community agencies, and higher education. PhDs in Clinical Psychology can become licensed Psychologists and provide psychotherapy services, but they tend to focus more on research than practice. Professors, health care outcome researchers, treatment program designers and evaluators, and clinical scientists often have PhDs in Clinical Psychology. Individuals with a PhD in Clinical Psychology sometimes go on to specialize in forensic psychology (psychology's interface with the legal system) and neuropsychology (a focus on the relation of neuroscience in clinical settings). Other specialties are also available (health psychology, clinical child psychology, among others).

A PhD in Clinical Psychology typically focuses on empirical research while a doctorate in Counseling Psychology typically focuses more on practice. Additional coursework in statistics and research methods are highly recommended for those pursuing research-oriented graduate degrees (such as a PhD or MA in general or experimental psychology). It is also highly recommended that students work with a faculty member in his or her research lab to provide the experience and training necessary for this type of graduate study.

***The Masters Research and Experimental Psychology (MA) at San Jose State.*** San Jose State University does not offer a PhD degree in Psychology. However, many students are now obtaining a Masters degree in Psychology as preparation for their doctoral training and to increase the likelihood of getting into a PhD program. The most appropriate Masters degree at SJSU for preparation to go on for a

PhD in Clinical Psychology is the MA program in Research and Experimental Psychology. For more information visit <http://www.sjsu.edu/psych/Graduates/experimentalpsych/index.html>

*PsyD*

## **The Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) degree in Clinical or Counseling Psychology**

There is a third graduate study option for students interested in clinical psychology. The Psychology Doctorate (PsyD) provides students with doctoral level training without an emphasis on developing a career devoted to conducting empirical research. Private and free-standing professional schools offer these degrees. Tuition tends to be much more expensive at these schools (\$120,000 to \$220,000) because they are not typically associated with state funded universities. The PsyD is more appropriate for those who wish to provide direct therapy services to individuals, couples, and families in community agencies. Individuals who earn a PsyD do not typically go on to careers in academics or research, as the training is more focused on clinical practice.

### **DOCTORATE OR MASTERS? A VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION**

Professionals who deliver psychological services independently in California (e.g., as psychotherapists with an MFT or LPCC licensure) are not required to have a doctorate (i.e., PsyD or PhD).

Students should make several important considerations before applying to a doctoral program concerning tuition cost and loans, marketability of their degree, and the current status of accreditation of the doctoral program to which they apply. With respect to accreditation, some private and professional school PhD and PsyD programs lose and then regain their status of accreditation by the APA on an on-going basis. These issues require careful consideration and investigation on the part of the applicant to be certain that the programs to which they apply will meet their immediate and longer-term career goals as well as being able to graduate from a program and pay off school debt.

PhD programs offered at public schools often include a waiver of tuition and a stipend in exchange for teaching or research services provided by the student. This varies significantly by school, but generally PhD students at public schools graduate with less debt than PhD/PsyD students at professional schools because there are stipends offered at public schools for activities like teaching psychology courses or working on a faculty member's research project.

The issues related to the tuition cost for students investigating private and professional schools for a Masters degree in clinical or counseling psychology are similar to those listed above with respect to accruing large amounts of debt due to tuition and being able to reasonably repay this given one's earning potential after graduate school and licensure as a psychotherapist.

### **COURSEWORK CONSIDERATIONS FOR CLINICAL PREPARATION**

The undergraduate major in Psychology provides students with a comprehensive education. From this breadth of understanding, each student may choose to focus his or her degree by identifying a special area of interest within psychology. In addition to the courses required for the Psychology major, the following is a list of upper division courses to consider.

The courses listed here are especially relevant to educational development in Clinical or Counseling Psychology. While your major requirements take precedence, if you are interested in a career in the mental health profession, we suggest you consider additional choices from the options provided below.

The following courses are recommended for those individuals seeking a career in fields related to clinical psychology. Remember, students must take the courses required for their major. Often times, graduate school will require prerequisite coursework. Those classes with marked by \* are typically required to apply for graduate study.

**PSYC 30 Psychobiology**  
**\*PSYC 110 Abnormal Psychology**  
**PSYC 117 Tests and Measures**  
**PSYC 125 Group Dynamics**  
**\*PSYC 120 Research Methods**

**PSYC 126 Drugs, Brain, and Behavior**  
**PSYC 139 Psychology of Personality**  
**PSYC 142 Child Psychopathology**  
**\*PSYC 160 Introduction to Clinical Psychology**  
**\*PSYC 165 Theories and Methods of Counseling**

Every graduate program is slightly different and has different requirements for the prerequisite coursework needed to get in to their graduate program. You are encouraged to look at the admission criteria of graduate schools you may wish to attend in advance so that you can take those prerequisite courses while you are a student here at SJSU.

## **MINORS RELEVANT TO CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

The Psychology Major allows you to choose a minor. The following areas are those that would provide additional education and training for Clinical Psychology:

Atypical Child Studies  
Biology  
Child Development  
Communication Studies  
Criminal Justice Administration

Gerontology  
Health Science  
Philosophy  
Recreation  
Social Work

When choosing a minor, think about balancing what would be interesting to learn with what might give you a broader education that informs your focus on psychology. For example, if you think you might like to work with children in the future, you may find child development courses to be very useful. If you are interested in neuropsychology, taking additional coursework in biology would help prepare you for advanced study in the field.

## **LEARN MORE ABOUT CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Be sure to talk to undergraduate faculty advisors and other faculty members in the Department of Psychology about your interests. They may have some good ideas about how to pursue your goals with your undergraduate degree. They may be able to suggest good people to talk with or develop strategies that will help you pursue your goals and dreams related to clinical psychology.