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A Career in School Psychology: Selecting a Master's, Specialist, or Doctoral Degree Program that Meets Your Needs

If you are reading this fact sheet, *congratulations!* Selecting the right career is an important step and deserves your careful consideration. This fact sheet provides prospective graduate students with important information on the differences between master's, specialist, and doctoral degree programs, and explores the benefits and drawbacks associated with those degrees.

What Are Your Career Goals?

An important question prospective graduate students ask themselves is, "What are my career goals?" Answering this difficult question requires self-exploration: identifying your interests, accepting your weaknesses, and capitalizing on your strengths. In addition, it is important to identify short-term and long-term goals in relation to personal interests and aspirations, matching these goals to the various kinds of training programs. School psychology programs generally emphasize the scientist-practitioner model of practice (Fagan & Wise, 2007). The scientist-practitioner model is not aimed only at training future researchers and academicians but, particularly, at giving practitioners the tools they need to be informed consumers of research. The model promotes sufficient understanding of research methods to allow the practitioner to effectively evaluate procedures and outcomes in the school setting and to promote empirically based practices. Broadly, school psychologists tend to fall mostly in one of the following career paths:

Practitioner in School Psychology: Regardless of degree held, credentialed school psychologists apply the principles, research, and methods of school psychology in school settings. Services are often directly provided to clients as assessment, counseling, intervention, and prevention or indirectly as school and parent consultation, program development and evaluation, crisis prevention and intervention, wellness promotion, and school-based research. Many state credentialing agencies require the equivalent of a specialist degree in school psychology and, in a few states, attaining the NCSP and/or graduating from a NASP-approved training program.

Administration and Policy Development: Some school psychologists, particularly those with practitioner experience, may assume supervisory and administrative responsibilities within school districts and/or community and government agencies. Their responsibilities include direct supervision of school psychologists and other personnel, administrative tasks such as hiring, staff evaluation, budgeting, and policy development. Often such positions require an administrative or supervisory credential from the state.

School Psychology Faculty: These school psychologists spend the majority of their professional time training a new generation of school psychologists and conducting research in an area or areas of related interest. As trainers their emphasis is typically on transmitting the theories, research, and clinical practices of school psychology to learners, overseeing field experiences, providing exposure to research methods, and introducing them to the methods and issues of daily practice. As researchers they devote their time to studying issues related to student achievement, behavior, and mental health in order to help establish strategies that lead to improved outcomes for children and youth. Faculty members are generally required to hold a doctoral degree and should have some practical experience in school settings prior to attaining an academic appointment.

A specialist degree will typically serve as an entry level to careers as a practitioner or administrator, while a doctoral degree will usually be needed for careers in research and academia. Individuals who want to pursue or at least leave the door open to pursuing academic teaching and/or research are advised to seek training programs offering doctoral degrees and direct research experience, as these programs will prepare school psychologists for any of the listed career paths. Individuals committed to school-based practice who are not interested in the research requirements of most doctoral programs should seek training programs offering high standards for the attainment of specialist-level degrees with faculty and program emphases in areas of particular interest, such as early childhood, adolescent mental health, consultation, etc.

The Letters in Your Degree

Have you ever wondered what the differences are between master's, specialist, and doctoral degrees? Rest assured you are not alone! It is important to become familiar with the career opportunities, advantages, and disadvantages associated with each degree, since this information can assist in guiding your program and degree decision process.

Definitions of Terms

MA	Master of Arts	PsyD	Doctor of Psychology
MS	Master of Science	EdD	Doctor of Education
MEd	Master of Education	PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
EdS	Education Specialist		
PsyS	Specialist in Psychology (only offered in a few programs)		
SSP	Specialist in School Psychology (typically offered in programs located in the southern states)		
CAGS/ CAS	Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study ó typically awarded in conjunction with Masters degrees of 60 semester credits or more in programs located in the North Eastern/Eastern United States		
NCSP	Nationally Certified School Psychologist ó Awarded only to school psychologists who have completed a minimum of a specialist-level program, 1,200+ hour internship, and obtained a passing score on the Praxis II exam in school psychology.		

Master's Degree (of Less than 60 Semester Credits)

- Minimum graduate entrance requirements: bachelor's degree
- Completion time: Three years of graduate coursework including an internship or fieldwork for state certification.
- Advantages:
 - Practice-related coursework is often similar to specialist-level programs.
- Disadvantages:
 - Certification as a school psychologist typically requires a minimum of a specialist-level degree (i.e., master's of 60 credits or more).
 - Several states are requiring students to have graduated from NASP-approved programs or those whose content has been determined to be at a NASP-approved level.
 - The NCSP credential is only awarded to those individuals who have completed a minimum of a specialist-level program.
 - Non-doctoral level graduates are not recognized under the title of "psychologist" by the American Psychological Association (APA); however, this is generally only a problem in independent practice.
 - Employment opportunities may be significantly limited to states that accept "psychometrists" or school psychologists that graduated from programs of less than 60 semester credits.
 - Acceptance of previous graduate coursework from non APA-accredited and non NASP-approved programs towards specialist or doctoral degrees may be limited and will vary by graduate programs.

Specialist Degree or Equivalent (e.g., Master's Degree Totaling 60 Semester Credits or More)

Please note: Many programs award a master's degree after completing the 3rd year internship, while other programs award a master's degree after two years of coursework prior to internship. As long as the program is a minimum of 60 credits and requires a minimum of a 1,200 hour internship, these programs are considered "specialist equivalents." To simplify hereafter, all specialist and specialist-equivalent programs will be referred to as "specialist -level" programs.

- Minimum graduate entrance requirements: bachelor's degree
- Completion time: Typically three years; however, a few programs require four years of graduate coursework including a year-long internship for certification.
- Career opportunities:
 - According to NASP, a specialist degree is considered the entry-level position for school psychology. A specialist degree in school psychology is generally accepted for certification as a school psychologist across the states, allowing for full professional practice within a public school setting. Some states also require attainment of the NCSP and/or graduation from a NASP-approved graduate program regardless of the degree awarded or hours completed.
- Advantages:
 - Specialist-level graduates are eligible for national certification in school psychology (NCSP). Note: Graduates of NASP-approved programs are assured eligibility for the NCSP, pending successful completion of the 1,200-hour internship and a passing score on the ETS School Psychology Praxis II exam.
 - Practice-related coursework is often similar or identical to coursework required in

- school psychology doctoral programs.
- Specialist programs are shorter in duration than doctoral programs, and many students have fieldwork or practicum opportunities in the schools during the first year of coursework.
- Typically training programs accept more specialist-level students than doctoral-level students on a yearly basis.
- A specialist degree may allow for non-tenure track university positions such as lecturer or adjunct faculty member.
- After three years of full-time employment, school psychologists with master's or specialist degrees are eligible to provide field-based supervision to school psychology trainees and interns.
- Schools psychologists with specialist degrees are well respected in the field and comprise the majority of currently employed school psychologists in the nation.
- Disadvantages:
 - Most programs require full-time educational plans beginning in the fall semester.
 - Admission to specialist-level programs is competitive.
 - It may be more difficult to obtain higher-level administrative positions in a school district without a doctorate and/or administrative credential.
 - Attending specialist programs that are not approved by NASP can make it difficult to obtain positions nationally if the program has lower standards that preclude state certification.
 - A few states make it difficult to obtain a school psychology credential if the specialist-level program is not NASP-approved.
 - Assistantships, grants, and fellowships to pay for graduate education tend to be more limited than those of doctoral programs.
 - Career opportunities outside the school setting may be limited depending on the state.
 - Non-doctoral level graduates are not recognized under the title of "psychologist" by the APA, thus restricting opportunities for independent practice.
 - If you decide to pursue a doctoral degree, your doctoral program may require additional internship experience and may not transfer all of your previous graduate coursework (number of credits transferred varies greatly across programs).

PhD, EdD, PsyD: What Are the Differences?

In the field of school psychology, there are typically three different doctoral degrees awarded: the PhD, EdD, and PsyD, with the majority of programs awarding the PhD. Currently, there are 64 doctoral level programs approved by NASP. Of those, 45 are accredited by APA with an additional eight APA-accredited programs considered "combined" professional programs. Of the APA-accredited doctoral programs in school psychology, six offer the PsyD. Of these programs, four are also NASP-approved. *Note: APA does not accredit specialist or master's level programs.*

A few main distinctions among the three different doctoral degrees in school psychology are mentioned below. These distinctions are specific to the field of school psychology and describe what is generally known about the APA-accredited and/or NASP-approved programs currently in existence.

In graduate school: The number of required credits varies across programs and is unrelated to the type of doctoral degree. Generally speaking, EdD training focuses on skills and theory directed towards educational practice. For the PsyD, training typically focuses on areas of clinical work, and is preferred by students with less interest in research. PhD coursework tends to be more theoretical and experimental in nature. While all types of doctoral degrees in school psychology require a dissertation, the type of dissertation will vary in focus, depth, and breadth according to the degree orientation.

In academia: The PhD is notably considered the research degree, and the majority of individuals in academia hold this distinction. Universities and research/testing publishing firms typically employ individuals with a doctoral degree (PhD, EdD, PsyD) and related experience.

In the schools: In the school setting, the type of doctoral degree earned does not typically differentiate pay scale or job opportunity. Additionally, in the school setting a doctoral degree *does not guarantee* a differentiation in pay from that of a fellow non-doctoral school psychologist. *If* a doctoral stipend is offered to a practicing school psychologist, it is usually offered to anyone holding a doctorate. Lastly, positions such as an administrator (e.g., special education director) are typically held by individuals holding an appropriate administrative credential and any of the above doctorates.

In clinical and private practice: Information from state psychology licensing boards supports the conclusion that minimum requirements of a doctoral degree for practice are not specific with regard to the type of doctoral degree needed. However, each state licensing board specifies a minimum number of hours of internship, practice, types of experience, specific coursework, and the need to have graduated from an accredited program in order to obtain licensure. In addition, some states require training in specific fields of psychology (e.g., clinical, counseling psychology) for private practice. Regardless of what type of school psychology doctoral degree, it is important to examine state requirements to ensure that the program of interest meets the minimum requirements for state board licensure.

Some states allow for private practice with a specialist-level degree. Please see your state's psychology board for the specific credentialing/licensing requirements.

Doctoral Degree

Minimum entrance requirements: bachelor's degree

- Completion time: Typically five to seven years of post-baccalaureate study, including a year of internship.
- Features:
 - A dissertation is required.
 - Programs incorporate research training into program objectives.
 - Training in a variety of theoretical orientations is available.
- Career opportunities:
 - Prepares students for careers as either academicians or practitioners.
 - Helps prepare students to sit for the state licensing exam for independent practice as licensed psychologists in a variety of settings.

- Advantages:
 - Opportunities for advanced research experiences (e.g., a dissertation).
 - Doctoral designation in practice (e.g., *öDr. Smithö*) may be regarded as increasing credibility in some settings.
 - Doctoral-level graduates are recognized as Full member psychologists by the APA.
 - Most doctoral students obtain assistantships and other forms of financial assistance.
 - At a state level, graduates are eligible for licensure as an independent psychologist if they complete the appropriate coursework, document supervised hours of clinical experience, and pass the national licensing examination. Additional requirements vary by state.
 - In addition to public schools, many doctoral-level graduates may work in a range of settings including mental health centers and clinics, hospitals, universities, research firms, testing companies, or private practice.
- Disadvantages:
 - Most programs require full-time educational plans beginning in the fall semester.
 - Admittance to doctoral programs is very competitive.
 - Attending doctoral programs that are not APA-accredited or approved by NASP can make it difficult to obtain academic positions as APA-accredited or NASP-approved programs typically require faculty to have graduated from an APA-accredited or NASP-approved program.
 - Attending doctoral programs that are not APA-accredited or approved by NASP can make it difficult to obtain positions nationally if the program has lower standards that preclude state certification and licensure.
 - Psy.D. programs typically offer little or less financial assistance in comparison to Ph.D. programs.

A Note on Training Standards

Both specialist and doctoral programs may receive NASP program approval. NASP-approved school psychology programs provide the education and training aligned with NASP's training standards, giving applicant's confidence that the curriculum and sequence of training meet the goals of the national association. This is important because NASP provides support and essential guidance to the profession. However, programs without NASP approval are not necessarily of lower quality. Some programs choose not to go through the approval process even though they would likely qualify for NASP approval. Additionally, newer programs require time to develop a track record, demonstrating that they meet NASP standards.

Many employers prefer individuals who graduate from NASP-approved programs. In addition, graduates from NASP-approved program typically have an easier time becoming Nationally Certified School Psychologists (NCSP). The NCSP is a national standard that is viewed as a measure of professionalism by potential employers and other professionals. Currently, 29 states accept the NCSP as an alternative route to state credentialing as a school psychologist.

References & Resources

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Suggested Websites

[American Psychological Association: Applying to Grad School](#)
[Becoming a School Psychologist](#)

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