



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS

## **Specializing Within Your Training: Make the Most of Your Coursework, Electives, and Fieldwork**

Graduate programs in school psychology are dense with coursework. NASP recommendations specify competencies in numerous areas including assessment, consultation, counseling, special education, and professional issues. In accordance with best practices, many university programs have added required courses in new areas of interest such as crisis management, supervision, and cultural competence. With coursework, practica and research, there is often little room in graduate curricula for individual choice. However, there are numerous ways for you to augment your training and form an area of specialization within school psychology.

### **How Much Choice Do I Have?**

Due to the extensive NASP training standards as well as department of education requirements for school psychology training, many students have few, if any, possibilities for electives. This is particularly the case for specialist-level students who typically have a strict sequence of required coursework. Students pursuing a doctoral degree, on the other hand, often take several electives although programs may restrict the choices by requiring that a certain number be taken in specific departments such as special education and statistics. Therefore, opportunities for electives will vary according to the level of program you are in as well as your program's coursework requirements.

Taking elective courses is only one way for graduate students to acquire specialized knowledge and training within their programs. Many programs allow specialized interests to be incorporated into required courses. For example, you might decide to research and present on a particular area of interest in class. Additionally, students may explore a specialized interest through research, practica, and/or internship experiences. Students might request a field placement with a particular age range, ethnic/cultural population, type of disability group, or create specific opportunities while on internship.

### **Make an Informed Decision**

Regardless of how you decide to work toward a specialization in your training, here are a few guidelines to consider.

***Talk to professors.*** Professors in your school psychology program are likely familiar with the professors teaching courses in other related departments. They can provide information about their colleagues' teaching style, possible research projects, and the content of relevant courses. Faculty members are likely to also know areas of expertise of potential supervisors in the field that might fit with your interests. Your adviser can also help you consider your professional and research interests and choose courses that fit with them.

***Talk to students.*** One of the greatest resources that you have for almost every decision that you will make in graduate school is your fellow students, particularly the ones who are more advanced in your program. Ask about the courses that they have taken or placements they have had. Encourage them to be honest in recommending options to you. Also, contact former students who are on internship or in the workforce and ask them what courses they wish they had taken or opportunities they wish they had had while in graduate school.

***Talk to the instructors of elective courses.*** Most instructors are happy to speak with students about the courses they teach. At the least, most are willing to send you a copy of the syllabus for the course. Other instructors would be happy to listen to your reasons for taking the course and help you decide if this is the right fit for you. Instructors in other departments are often excited about the diversity and unique perspective that you will bring to their course.

### **Goals to Consider in Your Decision**

Don't look at your elective courses or field placements as mere additional credits you have to take to meet your requirements. Think about what you want to accomplish with each course and field placements. Some possible goals to consider in making your decision are described below.

***Forming an area of specialization.*** Although all graduates of NASP approved school psychology programs will be qualified to work with all K-12 students, many graduate students choose to form an area of specialization within the profession. You may have a mental picture of an alternative placement where you plan to work that may require knowledge in a particular area of practice. Other school psychologists choose a particular topic area in which to specialize (i.e., behavioral disorders, developmental disabilities). Still others may choose to further develop a general area of school psychology such as assessment (pre-school, severe disabilities, English language learners) or counseling (crisis, anger management etc.).

***Becoming familiar with a particular age group.*** Many psychologists prefer to work with certain age groups of children (i.e., early childhood, adolescence). If you already know the age of students you prefer, you might choose elective courses or field placements to broaden your knowledge of that age group. Young children and adolescents provide unique challenges that may not be covered in general school psychology curricula.

***Building knowledge around research interests.*** Your master's thesis or doctoral dissertation research may present the opportunity to seek out courses that are related to your area of interest. For example, you may choose a course in statistical analysis to expand your competency to evaluate specific types of data (i.e., qualitative analysis, program evaluation). Additionally, other

departments may present different perspectives on your area of interest that could expand your knowledge base and result in a more substantive piece of research.

***Expanding your education.*** Many practicing psychologists note that there are areas of competency necessary to function in schools that are not included within most graduate curricula. Some elementary practitioners recommend increasing your knowledge base in reading instruction, learning disabilities, and diagnosis of developmental disabilities. Practitioners that work with older students often recommend courses in emotional management, advanced group counseling, and the diagnosis of emotional disorders. Experiences related to these areas may also be obtained through observations and interviews at schools.

***Providing mental health services in schools.*** The field of school psychology is always evolving. While it is virtually impossible to incorporate every trend into the core graduate curriculum, elective courses can serve to expand the competencies of future school psychologists. Many students choose courses such as program evaluation or school-wide systems change in order to keep up with new initiatives and suggestions for the provision of services in the field.

### **Departments to Consider for Electives**

- Special Education
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Psychology
- Educational Policy
- Counseling
- Human Development

### **Some Suggestions for Specialization Areas**

- Reading Instruction
- Emotional Disorders
- Crisis Management/Intervention
- Autism/other Developmental Disabilities
- Early Childhood or Adolescence
- Behavior Intervention

### **Conventions: Great Opportunities to Augment Your Training**

Don't forget that electives and coursework are not the only way to pursue a particular interest or augment your required training. The NASP annual convention, state association conventions and local association workshops, offer excellent opportunities to obtain training in research and practice on a wide range of issues, often from the leading experts on the topic. Most training programs recommend attending conventions to expand your training, get exposed to professional issues, and become familiar with state and national leadership. Student registration fees are very reasonable for members and are usually waived for students who volunteer to work at the convention.

*This fact sheet was developed by NASP graduate assistant Andrea Cohn, in collaboration with the NASP Student Development Workgroup and other NASP leaders. This fact sheet was updated by Anna Peña, NCSP*