

Considerations When Choosing a Graduate Program in School Psychology

Selecting an appropriate specialist-level or doctorate graduate preparation program will be one of the most important decisions you will make in joining the profession of school psychology. There are approximately 240 universities offering school psychology graduate programs across the United States, reflecting considerable diversity in what the program prepares you to do as a school psychologist and how they prepare you to do it.

PROGRAM APPROVAL OR ACCREDITATION

NASP approves and accredits programs at both public and private universities. NASP maintains a [program database](#) with information about the programs and their student enrollment, financial support, student outcome data, and faculties.

[NASP-approval/accreditation](#) indicates that the school psychology program demonstrates consistency with NASP standards based on peer review. Graduates from NASP-approved/accredited programs have an easier time obtaining their Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) credential and, in many states, their credentials to practice as school psychologists. The American Psychological Association (APA) also accredits school psychology graduate programs, though only at the doctoral level.

If you decide not to attend a NASP-approved program, you will want to ask some critical questions to the program director, as getting the appropriate credential to practice may be more difficult. These questions could include: how many of their graduates have earned credentials out of state; how many have earned the NCSP; why is the program not NASP-approved/accredited; and do they intend to pursue NASP approval/accreditation in the future.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Prospective students may also want to consider program design, program philosophy and goals, the faculty, admission requirements, location and cost of living, and other factors when choosing a program. NASP offers additional guidance and information on how to [select the best graduate program for you](#).

FINANCING YOUR EDUCATION

Choosing a graduate program will likely be one of the most important financial decisions that you make in your life, so it's vital that you collect all of the information you possibly can in order to make an informed decision.

Information About Institutional Aid

Institutions and school psychology programs will sometimes offer financial aid packages to prospective students to assist them with financing their education. These packages could include scholarships, grants, fellowships, and/or assistantships—which usually do not require repayment, like a loan.

One of the most common ways that graduate students finance their education is through graduate assistantships. Assistantships are jobs where students work 10–20 hours a week, often doing research, teaching, or administrative work within their field of study. In exchange, the student workers are paid a salary/stipend and receive financial aid to cover the cost of a certain number of credits/courses each semester.

Be sure to ask potential programs about the types of aid they offer, if assistantships may be available, and if you are allowed to seek assistantships or employment outside of the department.

Information About State Residency

You may also want to examine opportunities to acquire residency in states with institutions you are considering attending. In some states, the requirements and process are minimal, and you may be able to obtain state residency and in-state tuition for your graduate program relatively easily, which may yield significant savings even if it takes a year to earn that status.

Information About Student Loans

If you are not able to finance your education and living expenses while in school through institutional financial aid and your own funding, you may need to take out student loans. Please note that the information below *should not* be construed as financial advice. It is the responsibility of each borrower to understand the terms of their loans and repayment options—be sure to check the promissory note on your loan to fully understand your financial obligations when taking out loans to cover the cost of your graduate program.

Types of Loans

There are generally two types of loans that you can take out to cover the cost of attendance for your graduate program: public loans and private loans. *Repayment terms will differ based on the loans you select.*

Public loans are backed by the federal government and are, generally, considered to be safer and more financially viable, as the interest rates are more stable/fixed and the loan is backed by the federal government. Eligibility for public loans—and other grants or scholarships—is determined by the information that you provide in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The types of public loans available for graduate students are:

- Direct Unsubsidized Loans (\$20,500 max annually; fixed interest rate of 6.08% as of February 2020)
- Grad PLUS Loans (can borrow up to your cost of attendance minus other aid; fixed interest rate of 7.08% as of February 2020)

Note that interest rates for public loans do change; check the [Department of Education's website](#) for the most up-to-date information.

Private loans are issued by financial entities. Unlike public loans, private lenders offer both fixed and variable interest rate loans. Often, with private loans, you have to enter repayment while you're still in school, though some lenders have programs to minimize these payments. In addition, federal loan forgiveness programs like the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program (PSLF) *do not* currently offer forgiveness for private loans.

Information About Loan Repayment

Most student loans have a 6-month grace period after graduation, during which you are not required to make payments on your loans. After these 6 months expire, you will be required to begin making monthly payments on your loans, based on the repayment plan that you select. The federal government offers a number of loan repayment plans through its loan servicers—standard plans that will ensure you pay off the entirety of your loans within a certain time period, and income-based plans that adjust your monthly payment based off of how much money you are making.

Loan Forgiveness

The most common loan forgiveness program that school psychologists are generally eligible for is the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program (PSLF). PSLF is administered by the Department of Education, and graduates are eligible to apply for loan forgiveness for certain types of public loans after 120 qualified payments (10 years worth) have been made while in a job through a qualified employer. Generally, school psychologists who practice in public school or university settings are eligible for this program. NASP offers a number of resources and guidance to guide its members through the process of earning forgiveness through this program. Some states administer their own loan forgiveness programs as well, which school psychologists are eligible to apply for.

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