A Career in School Psychology: Selecting a Master’s, Specialist, or Doctoral Degree Program

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, all while exploring the benefits and drawbacks associated with those degrees.

WHAT ARE YOUR CAREER GOALS?

Answering this difficult question requires identifying your interests, accepting your weaknesses, capitalizing on your strengths, and identifying short-term and long-term goals in relation to personal interests and aspirations. Your goals should ideally match to the various kinds of training programs. Broadly, school psychologists tend to fall mostly in one of the following career paths.

Practitioner in school psychology: 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.

Administration and policy development: Some school psychologists, particularly those with practitioner experience, may assume supervisory and administrative responsibilities within school districts or community and government agencies. Their responsibilities include direct supervision of school psychologists and other personnel, as well as 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 new school psychologists. As trainers, their emphasis is typically on transmitting current theories, research, and clinical practices to learners; overseeing field experiences; providing exposure to research methods; and introducing students 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 which lead to improved outcomes for children and youth.

A specialist degree will typically serve as an entry level to careers as a practitioner, while a doctoral degree will usually be needed for careers in research and academia. Individuals who want to pursue the option of academic teaching and/or research are advised to seek training programs offering doctoral degrees and direct research experience. Individuals committed to school-based practice who are not interested in the research requirements of most doctoral programs should seek training programs for the attainment of specialist-level degrees.
Several states require that students graduate from NASP-approved programs or those whose content has been determined to be at a NASP-approved level. NASP-approved school psychology programs provide appropriate education and training that meet the goals of the national association. However, programs without NASP approval are not necessarily of lower quality. Some programs choose not to go through the approval process. Additionally, newer programs require time to develop a track record demonstrating that they meet NASP standards. Moreover, 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.

**UNDERSTANDING THE LETTERS IN YOUR DEGREE**

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<tr>
<th>MA Master of Arts</th>
<th>MA Master of Science</th>
<th>MEd Master of Education</th>
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<tr>
<td>EdS Education Specialist</td>
<td>EdD Doctor of Education</td>
<td>PsyD Doctor of Psychology</td>
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<td>PhD Doctor of Philosophy</td>
<td>PsyS Specialist in Psychology</td>
<td>SSP Specialist in School Psychology</td>
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Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study (CAGS): Typically awarded in conjunction with Master’s degrees of 60 semester credits or more in programs located in the Northeastern/Eastern United States.

Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP): Awarded only to school psychologists who have completed all coursework in 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 (Less Than 60 Semester Credits)**

Completion time: A master’s degree typically requires 3 years of graduate coursework including an internship or fieldwork for state certification.

Advantages: The practice-related coursework is often similar to specialist-level programs.

Disadvantages: School psychology certification typically requires a minimum of a specialist-level degree. Employment opportunities may be limited to states that accept psychometrists or diagnosticians.

**Specialist Degree or Equivalent (Master’s Degree Totaling 60 Semester Credits or More)**

Please note: Many programs award a master’s degree either before or after completing the third year 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.”

Completion time: A specialist degree or equivalent typically requires 3 years; however, a few programs require 4 years of graduate coursework, including a year-long internship for certification.
Advantages: According to NASP, a specialist degree is generally accepted for certification as a school psychologist across the states, allowing for full professional practice within a public school setting. Practice-related coursework is often similar or identical to coursework required in school psychology doctoral programs. However, 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 nontenure track university positions such as lecturer or adjunct faculty member. After 3 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.

Disadvantages: Most programs require full-time educational plans beginning in the fall semester. Furthermore, it may be more difficult to obtain higher-level administrative positions in a school district or to pursue career opportunities outside the school setting without a doctorate and/or administrative credential. Assistantships, grants, and fellowships to pay for graduate education tend to be more limited than those of doctoral programs. If you decide to pursue a doctoral degree later, 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).

Doctoral Degree

Completion time: A doctoral degree typically requires 5–7 years of postbaccalaureate study, including a year of internship and a dissertation. Programs incorporate research training into program objectives.

Advantages: A doctoral degree prepares students for careers as academicians or practitioners in a variety of settings (mental health centers and clinics, hospitals, research firms, and testing companies). Doctoral designation may be regarded as increased credibility in some career opportunities. Doctoral-level graduates are recognized as full-member psychologists by the American Psychological Association (APA). Most doctoral students obtain assistantships and other forms of financial assistance. At a state level, graduates are eligible for licensure as independent psychologists provided they complete a program approved by NASP and accredited by APA.

Disadvantages: Most programs require full-time educational plans beginning in the fall semester. Admittance to doctoral programs is very competitive. PsyD programs typically offer less financial assistance in comparison to PhD programs.

PHD, EDD, PSYD: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES?

In school psychology, there are three different doctoral degrees: the PhD, EdD, and PsyD. A few distinctions among the three different doctoral degrees in school psychology are mentioned below.

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

In the schools: The type of doctoral degree earned may not differentiate pay scale or job opportunity. If a doctoral stipend is offered to a practicing school psychologist, it is usually offered to anyone holding a doctorate. Positions such as an administrator are typically held by individuals holding an appropriate administrative credential and any of the above doctorates.

In clinical and private practice: The minimum requirements are not specific to the type of doctoral degree. 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.

RESOURCES


**This fact sheet was initiated by Janeann M. Lineman, PhD, NCSP, and Bethany Mildren while they were graduate students in school psychology at Barry University and the University of Kansas, respectively, and it was prepared by Anna M. Peña, NCSP, during her tenure as a graduate assistant in the NASP office. The content was updated in 2020 by Eric R. Field, a first year PhD student at the University of Kansas.**