

WHICH COURSE? WHICH COURSE?

THE UNDERGRADUATE COURSES EXPECTED BY GRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAMS



John C. Norcross, PhD, is professor of psychology at the University of Scranton, where he has served as Psi Chi faculty advisor for the past 10 years. The following feature article (the second in a series of three) is based on his recent *American Psychologist* article, "Graduate Study in Psychology: 1992-1993." Dr. Norcross also is the senior author of *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology* (1996).

John C. Norcross, PhD ■ University of Scranton

ACADEMIC ADVISORS frequently struggle with the question of which undergraduate psychology courses their students should take when preparing for graduate school. In a world of finite credits and time, the chorus of "Which course, which course?" from both inquiring students and curriculum committees demands crisp answers. Although graduate programs will differ slightly in the courses they prefer students to have taken prior to admission, aren't there some "core" courses that nearly all require?

This article responds to this pressing question by summarizing the answers provided by 559 departments and 2,023 graduate psychology programs in the United States and Canada. Our study analyzed all the numerical data in the 1994 edition of the *Graduate Study in Psychology* (American Psychological Association, 1994), which reports information from the 1992-93 academic year. Details and limitations of the study are presented in our lengthy *American Psychologist* article (Norcross, Hanych, & Terranova, 1996). The aim of this brief article, and the other two in this series, is to highlight information from our study that will enhance informed and data-based decisions on the part of graduate applicants and their academic advisors.

Empirical Results

Directors of graduate programs reported their psychology admission prerequisites by specifying a minimum number of psychology credits, specific psychology courses, an under-

graduate psychology major, or some combination thereof. Ninety-one percent of the programs (1,854 of 2,023) contributed such information; we were unable to determine whether the remaining nine percent of graduate programs had no prerequisites or simply failed to provide the requested information.

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of the 1,854 graduate programs that specified each type of psychology prerequisite. Overall, master's programs and doctoral programs required very similar types of undergraduate preparation. The sole exception was that doctoral programs were more likely to require an undergraduate psychology major than were master's programs (16% versus 11%). Approximately one-half of the graduate programs required specific psychology courses, and approximately one-third required specific psychology courses plus a minimum number of credits in psychology. The minimum number of psychology credits averaged 16 for both master's and doctoral programs (median and mode = 15).

Table 2 presents the psychology courses most frequently required (first column of numbers), preferred (second column), and required or preferred (third column) for graduate admission into those programs listing all such courses. (Introduction to Psychology was presumed to be a prerequisite for these advanced psychology courses and was therefore omitted from the analyses.) As seen in this table, statistics and research methods/experimental design courses were the most common. In descending order of frequency, other commonly required courses were abnormal, personality, developmental, testing, learning, lab course, physiological, history and systems, social, cognitive, and sensation and perception. Bear in mind that these figures underestimate the true percentage of programs requiring these courses since they do not include those graduate programs requiring a psychology major as a prerequisite and thus probably requiring most of the courses listed in Table 2. No other psychology course was required or preferred for graduate admission by even 1% of the programs.

In sum: Graduate admission will typically require, at a minimum, the equivalent of a rigorous minor in psychology, one that certainly includes courses in statistics and experimental/research methods and one that probably includes a smattering of courses from abnormal, developmental, personality, learning, physiological, and social psychology.

TABLE 1

Course and Credit Admission Prerequisites for Master's-Only and Doctoral Programs in Psychology

Type of Prerequisite	Master's-only programs		Doctoral programs		All programs	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Minimum number of psychology credits only	35	4%	17	2%	52	3%
Specific psychology courses only	456	53%	501	50%	957	52%
Psychology major only	30	3%	35	4%	65	4%
Specific psychology courses and minimum number of credits	280	32%	317	32%	597	32%
Psychology major and specific psychology courses	47	6%	89	9%	136	7%
Psychology major and specific courses and minimum credits	13	2%	34	3%	47	2%
Totals	861	100%	993	100%	1854	100%

Source: Norcross, Hanych, & Terranova (1996). Copyrighted by the American Psychological Association.

Other Tips

Completing these courses to satisfy graduate admission requirements is only the first step. If at all possible, you should complete more than the minimum required courses both to meet admissions criteria and to improve your GRE Psychology Test score. Doctoral programs typically require more courses on average than do master's programs (Smith, 1985). The safest plan, of course, is to

complete a rigorous undergraduate major in psychology to satisfy all these courses, but a well-planned minor in psychology may suffice.

Beyond these psychology classes, what other undergraduate courses might an academic advisor recommend for graduate school preparation? Our literature review (Norcross, Sayette, & Mayne, 1996) identified the following consensual tips:

TABLE 2

Course Prerequisites for Graduate Programs (N = 1554) Requiring Specific Psychology Courses

Course	Required	Preferred	Required or preferred
Abnormal/Psychopathology	15.6%	16.9%	32.5%
Childhood/Developmental	11.2%	24.2%	35.9%
Cognitive	3.6%	9.0%	12.6%
History & Systems	4.9%	12.3%	17.2%
Lab course	7.8%	3.8%	11.6%
Learning	8.7%	19.6%	28.3%
Physiological/Biopsychology	5.5%	18.9%	24.4%
Personality	12.0%	15.7%	27.7%
Research Methods/Experimental Design	40.0%	26.0%	66.0%
Sensation & Perception	3.1%	7.8%	10.9%
Statistics	56.5%	28.7%	85.2%
Testing/Measurement	9.5%	8.0%	17.5%
Social	4.7%	18.7%	23.4%

Source: Norcross, Hanych, & Terranova (1996). Copyrighted by the American Psychological Association.