

If the program doesn't fit, tailor it!

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Graduate students in clinical psychology pursue a myriad of careers upon completion of their degrees. We can choose to work primarily as researchers or practitioners, in private practice or the public system. We can focus our practice on assessment or intervention. We can work with adults, adolescents, or children and choose further specialization in areas like health or forensic psychology. We can work within whichever evidence-based clinical orientation we choose. The possibilities are endless – and dizzying for students considering a career in clinical psychology.

Such diverse career options require diversity in training. Yet, regardless of the career that we eventually choose, we all require the same basic training in ethics, research methods, statistics, psychopathology, assessment, and intervention. The need for a standard level of training across all clinical psychology professions necessitates the accreditation of programs through our national body, the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). Between the research, clinical practice, and course requirements demanded of accreditation, there is little time and resources left for programs to offer specialized training to fit the interests and career aspirations of each of their students.

The good news is that there are plenty of opportunities to tailor your graduate training to your own preferences, interests, and professional goals. Most programs in clinical psychology offer a variety of practicum experiences that allow you to work in different settings, with different

client populations, and within different clinical orientations. Moreover, electives are offered in upper years after the completion of required core clinical courses. In addition to the choices built into your program, there are other ways to personalize your graduate training if you venture outside of the training requirements of your program.

Take Courses Outside of Your Discipline. Although certain courses of interest may not be offered by your clinical psychology program, they may be offered by other departments at your university. Interested in advanced statistics? Check out the math department. Interested in health research? Check out the health sciences department. Interested in language development in autism? Check out the linguistics department. You may be able to take a graduate level course in another department that will provide you with the knowledge background to help you pursue your specialized research and clinical interests.

Supervise an Undergraduate Student. Whether you choose to work in research or practice, supervision of students and/or junior colleagues is likely to become part of your job. Supervising the research project of an undergraduate student is a great way to get a head start and develop supervision skills and your own supervision philosophy. As students, we know that conscientious supervision in research and practice is an instrumental part of graduate student success. While supervising an undergraduate student, you will learn how to provide support and guidance, encourage

independence and autonomy, and evaluate and provide constructive feedback to a student. A skilled undergraduate supervisee may also be interested in taking on additional research projects and could contribute to your own research productivity.

Get Involved in Outside Research.

Working on a research project outside of your thesis or dissertation (although not at the expense of your thesis or dissertation!) has a number of advantages. You will gain experience with new research areas and methodologies. You will build your CV which will improve your internship application and eventual job applications. You will meet and build connections with other researchers which may lead to future opportunities. You might even be exposed to a different client population and discover a new clinical interest. Talk to your research supervisor and fellow students about potential research collaborations.

Teach a Course. Many graduate students work as teaching assistants for psychology courses, and some even have the opportunity to be a course instructor. Teaching a course, or teaching a laboratory or seminar component of a course as a teaching assistant, provides hands-on teaching experience and training for students who

envision teaching as a part of their future career in psychology. You can refine your teaching skills by asking for feedback from your students and seeking guidance from the current or previous instructor for the course. Teaching also requires an in-depth knowledge about the course content, which makes it a great opportunity to increase your expertise in an area of interest.

It is impossible to provide the ideal training program for every student in clinical psychology. Within my cohort of students alone, we have career aspirations that vary from academic to child clinician to clinical neuropsychologist. There will absolutely be gaps in each of our training that may leave some of us feeling slightly unprepared as we venture out to our respective careers. We can, however, fill in those gaps by taking some personal responsibility for our education and seeking out the training opportunities that we require. While it is important to avoid taking on too much and burning out, you may find that obtaining additional training will actually facilitate your ability to complete required program components via your newfound knowledge and experience. In any case, it is prudent to consider how you might be able to personalize your training to best prepare yourself for your career of choice. Happy tailoring!