

# The Model Does Matter II: Admissions and Training in APA–Accredited Counseling Psychology Programs

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## Abstract

This study collected information on the acceptance rates, admission standards, financial assistance, student characteristics, theoretical orientations, and select outcomes of American Psychological Association–accredited counseling psychology programs (99% response rate). Results are presented collectively for all 66 counseling programs as well as separately for practice-oriented PhD, equal-emphasis PhD, and research-oriented PhD programs. Practice-oriented programs accepted more applicants (29%) than equal-emphasis or research-oriented programs (19% and 17%); however, they offered less full funding (30%) than equal-emphasis (72%) or research-oriented programs (83%). Average Graduate Record Examination scores (594 quantitative, 552 verbal) and average grade point averages (3.57) were strong and similar across programs. Approximately 70% of incoming students were women, 29% ethnic and racial minorities, and 8% international students. On average, 89% of students secured an accredited internship as part of their 5.5-year-long program. The research-driven portrait of doctoral training in counseling psychology is of highly competitive, multiculturally diverse, and theoretically pluralistic programs in which the training model does matter in several respects.

## Keywords

training; professional issues; academia; graduate education

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Comparative research in the past two decades has consistently revealed crucial differences among American Psychological Association–accredited programs along the practice–research continuum (e.g., Cherry, Messenger, & Jacoby, 2000; Gaddy, Charlot-Swilley, Nelson, & Reich, 1995; Mayne, Norcross, & Sayette, 1994; Norcross, Castle, Sayette, & Mayne, 2004). Clinical PsyD programs, for instance, typically accept a much higher percentage of applicants (41%) compared with equal-emphasis PhD (17%) and research-oriented clinical programs (10%). However, PsyD programs award proportionally less full financial assistance (tuition waiver plus assistantship), to only 17% of their students compared with the 84% of students entering research-oriented clinical programs. PsyD and equal-emphasis PhD program directors report higher percentages of humanistic and psychodynamic faculty, whereas research-oriented programs report higher percentages of cognitive-behavioral faculty (Norcross et al., 2004).

Counseling psychology programs have historically endorsed scientist-practitioner training and, with a few exceptions, actively resisted the practice-oriented PsyD. Nonetheless, several systematic program differences have been found as a function of a counseling program's position on the practice–research continuum. Differences among training models reflect diverse values, which in turn translate into distinctive mission statements, training objectives, and probably, student outcomes (Neimeyer, Saferstein, & Rice, 2005). Stoltenberg and colleagues (2000) concluded, “In short, two major differences between the scientist-practitioner model and the practitioner-scholar model concern the relative emphasis given to practice and science and the extent to which the research is anchored in practice” (p. 627).

In 2005, Neimeyer and colleagues posed the question, Does the model matter? Does the training model embraced by counseling psychology programs matter in relation to program and student outcomes? They compared 36 practice-oriented, equal-emphasis, and research-oriented counseling psychology PhD programs (response rate = 50%) in terms of six faculty activities and four student activities related to research. In a second study, they compared three aspects of internship match among 9 practice-oriented, 37 equal-emphasis, and 19 research-oriented counseling psychology programs. Practice-oriented counseling psychology students were less likely than students in equal-emphasis or research-oriented counseling psychology programs to present papers at professional meetings. Students from the three types of counseling psychology programs fared equally well in matching to American Psychological Association–accredited internships, but students from the equal-emphasis and research-oriented programs were matched at

higher rates to university counseling centers and Veterans Administration Medical Centers (VAMCs) settings. Overall, the results of their two studies provided preliminary support for the conceptually consistent relationship between the training model and program outcomes previously reported for clinical psychology programs.

The ongoing debates among advocates of disparate training models in counseling psychology can be informed by admission, program, and student data. Our study was designed to extend this line of research on the three types of counseling psychology programs using a large and more recent sample. We were particularly interested in potential differences among training models at the start of doctoral students' careers in the following aspects: acceptance rates, admission standards, financial assistance, student characteristics, and faculty theoretical orientations. Neimeyer and colleagues (2005) addressed the research productivity, practice involvement, and internship matching of students later in their graduate careers; we address here program and student characteristics at the onset of their graduate careers. In fact, only one of the variables investigated in this study (internship match rate) overlaps with the 13 outcomes assessed by Neimeyer and colleagues.

In this study, then, we sought both to provide current information on all American Psychological Association–accredited counseling psychology programs and to highlight any vital differences among these programs as a function of their particular training model.

## Method

We contacted the training directors of all 67 active counseling psychology doctoral programs accredited by the American Psychological Association in 2007 and requested them to complete a survey on their program. The survey, which formed the basis for the individual program listing featured in *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology* (Norcross, Sayette, & Mayne, 2008), addressed application numbers, acceptance rates, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, grade point averages (GPA), financial assistance, sociodemographic characteristics of incoming students, theoretical orientations of program faculty, and three program outcomes (including internship match rates). Following our initial e-mail requests, we sent reminders to nonrespondents during the course of the summer. Final telephone and e-mail requests were made in late 2007. We received responses from 66 of the 67 programs (response rate = 99%).

Although the 99% response rate obviously guarantees representativeness, our results pertain solely to American Psychological Association–accredited

programs in the United States and Canada. The present results cannot be generalized to doctoral programs not accredited by the American Psychological Association, to master's programs, or to other countries. Moreover, all data were secured by self-report; no efforts were made to independently verify the veracity of the data.

We categorized each counseling psychology program into one of three mutually exclusive categories on the basis of the program's self-rating along the practice–research continuum (1 = practice oriented, 4 = equal emphasis, and 7 = research oriented). Following the precedent of Neimeyer et al. (2005) and Norcross et al. (2004; Norcross, Sayette, Mayne, Karg, & Turkson, 1998), the three categories were practice-oriented programs (ratings of 1 to 3;  $n = 7$ ), equal-emphasis programs (ratings of 4;  $n = 39$ ), and research-oriented programs (ratings of 5 to 7;  $n = 20$ ).

## **Results**

### *Acceptance and Enrollment Rates*

Table 1 summarizes the number of applications, acceptances, and incoming students for counseling psychology programs. For all programs, the average number of applicants was 84 and the average number accepted was 10. The typical program accepted 19% of its applicants. The mean number of incoming students was nine, with 66% of admission offers accepted.

Table 1 also presents these results separately for the three types of counseling psychology programs. Research-oriented programs received a significantly higher number of applications on average, 118, than their equal-emphasis and practice-oriented counterparts, 67 to 70. The number of accepted students was significantly lower in those same research-oriented programs, four fewer students, on average. This disparity manifested itself again in the number of incoming students: six in research-oriented programs, seven in equal-emphasis programs, and eight or nine in practice-oriented programs.

### *GPA and GREs*

We collected information on the mean GPA and GRE scores for each program's incoming student body. The mean GPA of incoming students for all counseling psychology programs was 3.57 ( $SD = .20$ ), with no significant differences among the three types of programs. For all programs, the average

**Table 1.** Acceptance and Yield Rates by Type of American Psychological Association–Accredited Counseling Psychology Program

Variable	Practice Oriented ( <i>n</i> = 7)		Equal Emphasis ( <i>n</i> = 39)		Research Oriented ( <i>n</i> = 20)		All Programs ( <i>N</i> = 66)		<i>F</i> Value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Number of applications	69.50	70.81	67.03	25.99	118.50 <sup>a</sup>	64.51	83.60	51.46	8.34**
Number of acceptances	13.17 <sup>b</sup>	4.54	10.68	3.86	9.05 <sup>b</sup>	2.46	10.42	3.69	3.28*
% of applicants accepted	29.18	18.33	18.85	11.24	17.25	18.16	19.36	14.51	1.63
Number of incoming	8.50 <sup>b</sup>	3.33	6.89	1.93	5.95 <sup>b</sup>	1.73	6.75	2.12	3.90*
% of accepted attending	65.01	15.08	66.10	21.68	66.15	13.42	66.01	18.69	0.01

a. This group differs significantly from both the other groups ( $p < .05$  using Student Newman-Keuls comparison).

b. Groups differ significantly from each other ( $p < .05$  using Student Newman-Keuls comparison).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

GRE subtest scores were 594 ( $SD = 52.72$ ) for Quantitative, 551 ( $SD = 39.76$ ) for Verbal, and 4.67 ( $SD = 0.46$ ) for Analytical Writing. The single statistical difference associated with program type was the significantly higher mean quantitative scores ( $M = 628$ ,  $SD = 58.53$ ) for research-oriented programs than for both equal-emphasis ( $M = 583$ ,  $SD = 34.52$ ) and practice-oriented programs ( $M = 570$ ,  $SD = 74.02$ ),  $F(2) = 4.88$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### Financial Assistance

Each program director reported the percentage of students receiving a full tuition waiver only, assistantship only, or both (full tuition waiver plus assistantship). These numbers are summarized in Table 2. For all programs, approximately 5% of incoming students received a full tuition waiver only, 17% received an assistantship only, and 71% of students received both a full tuition waiver and an assistantship. Nearly 90% of students received some financial assistance from their program. Full tuition waivers plus assistantships were awarded significantly more often in research-oriented (83%) and

**Table 2.** Student Financial Assistance by Type of American Psychological Association–Accredited Counseling Psychology Program

Variable	Practice Oriented ( <i>n</i> = 7)		Equal Emphasis ( <i>n</i> = 39)		Research Oriented ( <i>n</i> = 20)		All Programs ( <i>N</i> = 66)		<i>F</i> Value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
% of students awarded:									
Full tuition waiver only	5.00	9.57	4.23	16.8	5.00	22.36	4.55	17.88	0.01
Assistantship only	14.57	18.06	21.33	33.70	9.90	18.65	17.15	28.69	1.08
Waiver and assistantship	30.00 <sup>a</sup>	40.93	72.21	39.05	82.70	29.542	70.91	39.05	5.42**

a. This group differs significantly from both the other groups ( $p < .05$  using Student Newman-Keuls comparison).

\*\* $p < .01$ .

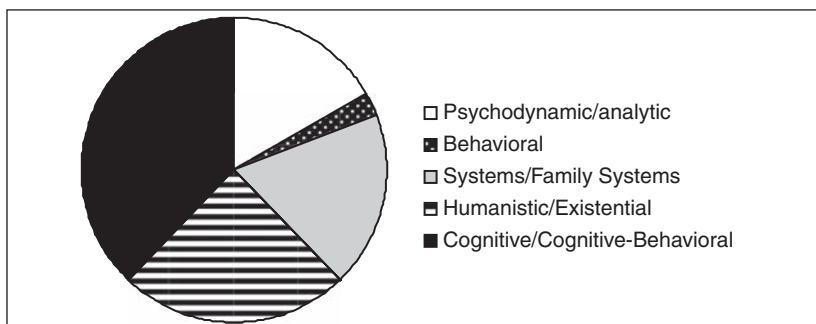
equal-emphasis (72%) programs compared with practice-oriented (30%) programs.

### Student Characteristics

Two thirds of counseling psychology doctoral students had already earned a master's degree ( $M = 64.95$ ,  $SD = 30.96$ ); one third ( $M = 33.67$ ,  $SD = 30.03$ ) entered with a baccalaureate. Fully 72% ( $SD = 11.81$ ) of students were women, 29% ( $SD = 14.13$ ) were ethnic or racial minorities, and 8% ( $SD = 6.62$ ) were international students. No differences in these characteristics attributable to the type of doctoral program were observed.

### Faculty Orientations

We collected information regarding the theoretical orientations of each program's core faculty. We listed five orientations (psychodynamic or psychoanalytic; applied behavioral analysis or radical behavioral; family systems or systems; existential, phenomenological, or humanistic; cognitive or cognitive behavioral) and asked program directors to list the percentage of faculty "ascribing to or practicing each." Respondents could add others and report more than 100% in the cases of eclectic or integrative.



**Figure 1.** Faculty Theoretical Orientations in American Psychological Association–Accredited Counseling Psychology Programs

Figure 1 displays the prevalence of theoretical orientations of core faculty in the counseling psychology programs. Fully 43% of the faculty endorsed cognitive or cognitive-behavioral orientation, 28% humanistic, 21% systemic, and 19% psychodynamic. Only 3% of faculty members ascribed to the behavioral orientation in contrast with the 43% in cognitive behavioral.

Two orientation differences among program types emerged. First, proportionally more faculty endorsed a systemic orientation in practice-oriented programs (34%) than in research-oriented programs (17%),  $F(1) = 2.83$ ,  $p < .05$ . Second, proportionally more faculty endorsed a psychodynamic orientation in equal-emphasis programs (22%) than in practice-oriented programs (9%),  $F(1) = 2.69$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### Selected Outcomes

We assessed in our study three program outcomes: internship acceptance rates, years to complete the program, and attrition rate. Each program reported the percentage of students applying for internship in the past year who were accepted into Association of Psychology Postdoctoral or Internship Centers (APPIC) or American Psychological Association–approved internships. Across programs, 89% of students were accepted, with no significant variation between types of programs. The typical doctoral program (including internship) took 5.56 years ( $SD = 0.77$ ) to complete. Research-oriented programs ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) took significantly longer to finish than practice-oriented programs ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ),  $F(1) = 2.47$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Consistent with American Psychological Association language, we defined attrition rates as “the number of matriculated students who have left

the program for any reason divided by the total number of students matriculated in the program.” Programs were asked to report their attrition rate for the past 7 years or since they secured American Psychological Association accreditation. Eight percent ( $SD = .35$ ) of counseling psychology students, on average, did not complete their doctoral training. There were no significant differences attributable to type of counseling psychology program.

### *Historical Trends*

These 2007 results of 66 American Psychological Association–accredited counseling psychology programs can be compared to the 1995 results of 61 American Psychological Association–accredited counseling psychology programs (Norcross et al., 1998) to identify trends in the intervening 12 years. The data were collected in the same manner with the use of a similar survey instrument with fewer items. In that span, we detect pronounced changes in application and acceptance numbers but mostly stability. In that span, the mean number of applications had slipped from an average of 129 ( $SD = 52$ ) to 84 ( $SD = 51$ ). Concomitantly, the average acceptance rate had risen from 8% ( $SD = 5$ ) to 19% ( $SD = 15$ ).

However, the student and faculty characteristics assessed in the survey have remained remarkably similar. For example, the average GPA of incoming students has remained stable (3.50 in 1995 and 3.57 in 2007). Sixty-eight percent of incoming students received full financial assistance in 1995 and 71% in 2007. The proportion of racial-ethnic minority students has slightly risen (25% then and 29% now). A nearly identical percentage of incoming students possess a master’s degree (67% vs. 65%). And theoretical orientations remained similar: 29% of core counseling psychology faculty subscribed to humanistic orientations then and 28% now and 45% to cognitive behavioral then and 43% now.

### **Discussion**

Our twin aims in this study were to disseminate updated, objective information on American Psychological Association–accredited counseling psychology programs and to highlight the occasional yet crucial differences among these programs along the practice–research continuum. Such knowledge can enhance evidence-based decisions among prospective graduate students, program faculty, and members of the entire discipline.

The research-generated picture of doctoral training in counseling psychology is of highly competitive, multiculturally diverse, and theoretically



pluralistic programs. American Psychological Association–accredited counseling psychology programs are competitive in nature, with an average of only 19% of applicants accepted. Incoming students have earned strong GRE scores (594 Quantitative, 552 Verbal, 4.67 Analytical Writing) and GPAs (3.57). American Psychological Association–accredited counseling psychology programs provide generous (by contemporary standards) financial assistance: 71% of enrolled students received both full tuition waivers and assistantships. Their diverse student populations consist of approximately 70% female, 29% ethnic-racial minority, and 8% international students. On average, 89% of students secure an accredited internship as part of the 5.5-year-long program. Students are regularly exposed to a healthy variety of theories.

In several respects, the training model does indeed matter in American Psychological Association–accredited counseling psychology doctoral programs. We found significant differences among the three types of programs in acceptance rates, class size, quantitative GRE scores, financial assistance, theoretical orientation, and length of training. Research-oriented programs were distinctive in lower acceptance rates, higher quantitative GREs, and longer training. Along with equal-emphasis programs, research-oriented programs awarded significantly more financial assistance than practice-oriented programs. This pattern of results essentially parallels those found in the field of clinical psychology (e.g., Cherry et al., 2000; Gaddy et al., 1995; Norcross et al., 2004).

The practice-oriented programs in counseling psychology differ in yet another way. They tend not to resemble practitioner, PsyD programs housed within professional schools in clinical psychology. Those programs tend to accept large numbers of students and high percentages of applicants—almost 50%—and provide virtually no direct financial assistance to students (Norcross, Ellis, & Sayette, 2009). Instead, practice-oriented counseling psychology programs more closely resemble equal-emphasis programs in accepting an average of 29% of their applicants, admitting eight or nine students per year, and providing full financial assistance to 30% of their students. Practice-oriented programs in counseling psychology remain firmly tethered to university-based training.

The training models of counseling psychology programs are embedded within institutional contexts that determine to a large extent those training models (Stoltenberg et al., 2000). In our sample, more than 95% of the research-oriented, United States counseling psychology programs were located in universities classified as “doctoral/research universities–extensive” by the Carnegie Foundation ([www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/)). By contrast, approximately 75% of the equal-emphasis programs and only 33%

of the practice-oriented programs were listed as such. Large research institutions will probably promulgate hiring, tenure, and promotion policies that differentially reward faculty research and publication, whereas smaller universities are more likely to employ hiring, tenure, and promotion policies that emphasize teaching, licensing, and other practitioner credentials (Stoltenberg et al., 2000). In short, a program's training model is profoundly influenced by its institutional context.

At the same time, the training model did not materially relate to enrollment rates, Verbal and Analytical Writing GREs, student composition, attrition rates, or probability of securing an American Psychological Association or APPIC internship. The latter finding replicates that of Neimeyer and colleagues (2005), who found that students fared equally well in being matched regardless of the program's training model. That is not to say that the internship settings were identical; students tended to serve their internships in settings most related to their program's training model (Neimeyer et al., 2005).

The 12-year historical trends among these American Psychological Association-accredited programs portend several developments of import. First, the average number of applicants to programs will probably continue to decline as additional programs in counseling, clinical, and combined programs are accredited by the American Psychological Association. Second, we predict that average acceptance rates for counseling psychology programs will rise gradually, as they have for virtually all graduate programs in psychology in the past 35 years (Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2005). Third, unless undergraduate grade inflation is curbed in the near future, the observed linear increase in GPAs of incoming graduate psychology students will continue unabated. Fourth, we suspect (and hope) that the small rise in the proportion of racial-ethnic minority students entering counseling psychology will persist. And fifth, given the ascendancy of the cognitive-behavioral orientation among current counseling psychology faculty, it seems likely that both university faculty and clinical practitioners of the future will increasingly embrace that orientation. Counseling psychology training will continue to evolve, although the trajectory of that evolution is not always so clear. The safest evidence-based prediction is a mix of stability and change (Goodyear et al., 2008).

In closing, we echo the words of Stoltenberg and colleagues (2000): "The history of counseling psychology has been one of examining and reexamining the utility of integrating science and practice" (p. 622). In that tradition, the present study offered further evidence that the training model does matter in several respects and that these robust differences occur against a backdrop of important similarities across the practice-research continuum.

## Authors' Note

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