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Abstract

This study used a national sample of PhD students in clinical psychology ($N = 1,034$) to explore when students decided to pursue their graduate degree, reasons for their decisions, and associated satisfaction. Results indicated that immediately after completing their undergraduate degree, 57% of current graduate students reported postponing graduate studies, 10% went directly to a terminal master's program, and 33% went directly to a clinical psychology PhD program. A variety of reasons for these decisions were documented. Individuals who postponed graduate school were significantly more satisfied with their decision than individuals who went directly to a terminal master's program and reported less frequent thoughts of withdrawal from their program than individuals who went directly to a clinical psychology PhD program. Implications for undergraduate advisors are discussed.

Keywords

graduate school, clinical psychology, decision process, application process

Undergraduates often struggle with the decision of whether to apply to graduate school during their senior year or postpone applying and work for several years, gain additional research experience, or engage in other types of activities (Zimak & Edwards, 2008). In fact, advisors from colleges and universities around the nation report that one of the most commonly asked questions among upperclassmen is whether they should apply to master's or PhD programs during their senior year (e.g., Ball, personal communication, June 30, 2009; Cox, personal communication, June 30, 2009). It is surprising, however, that there are few published resources to assist students and their advisors with this decision (Briihl, 2001; Neimeyer, Lee, Saferstein, & Pickett, 2004; Todd & Farinato, 1992). Empirical data specific to deciding when to apply to graduate programs could have important implications for undergraduate students and the advisors who assist them in making this important life decision.

Some research exists on what motivates individuals to pursue a graduate degree, in general. Common reasons include personal and professional development, monetary gain, acquisition of knowledge and research skills, and intellectual interest (Fardanesh, 1985; Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005). Reasons for pursuing a graduate education appear to vary across topic of study (Fardanesh, 1985), which underscores the need for discipline-specific research.

Clinical psychology PhD programs, in particular, note increasing competitiveness (American Psychological Association, 2005), continual increases in program

enrollment (Oliver, 2007), rising debt levels among graduate students (De Vaney Olvey, Hogg, & Counts, 2002), and considerable academic rigor. Despite these considerable barriers to starting and completing a clinical psychology PhD, there is no research on the motivations of students to pursue this degree, the timing of this decision, and associated satisfaction.

Using a national sample of students in clinical psychology PhD programs, the purpose of the current study was to explore four aims: (a) the rates of students who, following completion of their undergraduate education, go directly to a terminal master's program, go directly to a PhD program, or postpone graduate school; (b) students' reasons for their decisions; (c) students' satisfaction with their decisions; and (d) students' consideration of withdrawal from their program given their decisions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 1,034 graduate students in APA accredited clinical psychology PhD programs. The sample was largely

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young ($M = 27.41$, $SD = 5.07$), female (81%), and Caucasian (80%). The demographic makeup of our sample is similar to that of first-year graduate students in psychology from the years of 1999 to 2000 (Pate, 2001).

Procedure

Online surveys were collected over a 2-month period in fall 2007. Solicitation e-mails were sent to department chairs of all 169 accredited institutions located through the American Psychological Association's *Graduate Study in Psychology* (APA, 2007), with follow-up e-mails sent to those who did not respond to the initial e-mail. Approximately 35% of department representatives confirmed sending the message to their students, 5% declined to participate, and another 60% neither confirmed nor denied sending the e-mail.

Measures

Decisions to attend graduate school questionnaire. Participants completed the following statement: "Immediately after completing my undergraduate degree, the next academic year I..." (a) enrolled in a terminal master's degree program, (b) enrolled in a clinical psychology PhD program, or (c) did something else (e.g., got a job, took time off). Depending on responses, participants then checked any number of a list of options that corresponded to reasons for this decision and their reasons for ultimately enrolling in a clinical psychology PhD program (see Tables 1–3 for a list of all options included in the questionnaire). This questionnaire was developed through consultation with relevant literature (e.g., Leonard et al., 2005), clinical psychologists, faculty advisors, and graduate students.

Satisfaction with decision. Satisfaction levels were assessed with regard to the participants' decision to enroll in a master's program, enroll in a PhD program, or do something else, after completing an undergraduate degree. Response options ranged from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*).

Thoughts about withdrawing. A single item asked how often participants considered withdrawing from their current clinical psychology PhD program. Response options ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*almost always*).

Results

Immediately following completion of an undergraduate degree, 10% ($n = 106$) reported enrolling in a terminal master's program, 33% ($n = 343$) reported enrolling in a clinical psychology PhD program, and 57% ($n = 585$) reported postponing graduate school.

The majority of participants reported that they attended a terminal master's program following completion of their undergraduate degree because they believed that a master's degree would be useful for a future career (69%) and they wanted more research experience (58%) (see Table 1 for all reasons). The most commonly reported reasons for eventually

Table 1. Reasons for Going Straight to a Terminal Master's Program Following Completion of an Undergraduate Degree

Reason	Percentage Who Endorsed
Useful for a future career	69
Wanted more research experience	58
Wanted to further professional development	58
Believed it was the next logical step in career	44
Sharpen general intellect	42
Desire to become a clinician	39
External pressure to obtain a degree	35
Desire to obtain more clinical experience	33
Did not feel prepared for the rigor of a PhD program	33
Believed that he or she was a competitive applicant	30
Rejected from clinical psychology PhD programs	29
Clear about future goals, including a master's degree	25
Wanted more life experience	22
Desire to become an academician	18
Unsure why went to master's program	18
Wanted to improve Graduate Record Exam scores	17
Wanted to improve grade point average	16
Wanted to relocate	9
Did not like any of the programs that accepted him or her	9
Wanted to study in English	9
Did not want to get a job	7
Not interested in PhD program at time	6
Other	18

pursuing a clinical psychology PhD were a personal desire to obtain a PhD (89%), next logical step in career (76%), desire to become a clinician (76%), certainty about future goals (62%), and felt prepared for the rigor of a PhD program (62%) (see Table 2 for all reasons).

The most common reasons to enroll immediately in a clinical psychology PhD program were a personal desire to obtain a PhD (90%), next logical step in career (85%), desire to become a clinician (73%), desire to finish studies at a young age (71%), and felt prepared for the rigor of a PhD program (70%) (see Table 2 for all reasons).

The most common reasons to postpone graduate studies before attending a clinical psychology PhD program were to gain more research experience (65%) and to further personal development (55%) (see Table 3 for all reasons). On average, students waited 3 years ($SD = 3.58$) before pursuing a clinical psychology PhD. Reasons for eventually pursuing a PhD program in clinical psychology were a personal desire to obtain a PhD (86%), desire to become a clinician (78%), felt prepared for the rigor of a PhD program (67%), next logical step in career (66%), and desire to become a researcher (64%) (see Table 2 for all reasons).

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) assessing differences in satisfaction as a function of when participants matriculated

Table 2. Reasons for Attending a PhD Program in Clinical Psychology

Reason	Percentage Who Went Straight to Master's	Percentage Who Went Straight to PhD	Percentage Who Postponed Graduate School
Personal desire to obtain PhD	89	90	86
Desire to become clinician	76	73	78
Next logical step in career	76	85	66
Felt prepared for the rigor of a PhD program	62	70	67
Certain about future goals	62	57	53
Desire to become researcher	61	53	64
Desire to become academician	57	48	48
Believed oneself to be a competitive applicant	55	69	60
Further personal development	51	62	61
Sharpen general intellect	41	47	43
Wanted to finish at young age	30	71	22
Wanted to relocate	10	14	8
Did not want to get job	5	12	—
External pressure for degree	4	13	8
Not sure what else to do	4	17	—
Wanted to study in English	2	1	0
Desire for career change	—	—	23
Other	4	9	5

Note: The dashes represent items that were not asked of certain groups, as some items were not applicable.

Table 3. Reasons for Postponement of Graduate School Following Completion of an Undergraduate Degree

Reason	Percentage Who Endorsed
Wanted to gain more research experience	65
Wanted to further personal development	55
Wanted to gain more life experience	47
Wanted to take a break from school	46
Desire to get a job	42
Interested in getting PhD, but not prepared	30
Desire to travel	20
Not sure what to do	20
Not interested in PhD at time	14
Wanted to improve Graduate Record Exam scores	12
Rejected from all graduate schools	11
Not enough motivation	6
Uncertain about succeeding	6
Wanted to improve grade point average	5
Restricted by financial constraints	3
Waited until it was too late to apply	3
Did not like schools for which he or she was accepted	3
Restricted by geographical constraints	3
Desire to start a family	3
Too much financial debt	2
Other	17

to a clinical psychology PhD program was significant, $F(2, 1032) = 3.17, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$. Bonferroni-adjusted follow-up tests suggested that individuals who postponed graduate school ($M = 4.21, SD = 1.32$) were significantly more satisfied with their decision than individuals who went straight to a terminal master's program ($M = 3.87, SD = 1.36$, Cohen's

$d = .25$), whereas no differences were found relative to individuals who immediately enrolled in a clinical psychology PhD program ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.27$).

An ANOVA testing differences in frequency of thoughts of withdrawing from their program was significant, $F(2, 1026) = 6.71, p < .01, \eta^2 = .01$. Bonferroni-adjusted follow-up tests suggested that individuals who enrolled in a PhD program immediately after completing their undergraduate education ($M = 1.97, SD = .97$) endorsed higher rates of withdrawal consideration than individuals who postponed graduate school ($M = 1.74, SD = .92$, Cohen's $d = .24$). No differences were found relative to individuals who went straight to a terminal master's program ($M = 1.73, SD = .87$).

Discussion

Based on the results of this study, advisors could inform undergraduates that many students wait before applying to graduate school. In addition, advisors should assess students' reasons for pursuing graduate studies. In the current study, descriptive statistics suggest that students immediately matriculating into a clinical psychology PhD program relative to the other two groups report a relatively stronger desire to finish their studies at a young age but sometimes report matriculating because they are not sure what else to do. Furthermore, advisors should encourage undergraduates to gain research experience, to enhance students' readiness to apply for clinical psychology PhD programs. In fact, a majority of students who attended a terminal master's program or postponed graduate studies reported a desire to gain more research experience before applying to a PhD program.

The current study also suggested that students who postponed graduate school were more satisfied with their decision than those who immediately enrolled in a master's program and

less likely to think of withdrawing from their program than students who attended a PhD program immediately after completing their undergraduate education. Despite the small effect sizes for these differences, these data suggest that advisors can assist undergraduates to evaluate their preparation, personal and professional goals, and motivations for furthering their education when determining whether and when to apply to graduate school in clinical psychology. Undergraduates may also benefit from courses and seminars focused on whether graduate school is the right option for them, what other options exist as alternatives to graduate school, and the potential benefits of postponing graduate studies.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be noted. The study was cross-sectional, relied solely on self-report data, and used measures lacking established psychometric properties. The study sampled only clinical psychology PhD students, and students who had already left their PhD program (e.g., by withdrawal or expulsion) were not sampled, limiting the study's representativeness. Further discipline-specific research is needed to determine other factors that might influence graduate student satisfaction and to determine whether satisfaction and withdrawal consideration has an effect on professional development and productivity. Research on other specialty areas (e.g., clinical vs. experimental) and degree types (PhD vs. PsyD) is needed to generalize these findings to other psychology graduate programs.

In sum, this study provides useful information concerning the rates of when students begin clinical psychology PhD programs, their reasons for doing so, and associated satisfaction. As the data suggest, there is no "right" or "wrong" time to attend graduate school in psychology. Rather, it depends on the unique life circumstances, qualifications, and career aspirations of each individual.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Bios

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Katie M. Edwards is a graduate student in the clinical psychology doctoral program at Ohio University. Her professional interests include the causes, consequences, and prevention of interpersonal violence. She is also engaged in violence-related advocacy work.

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