

Choosing a Graduate School in Human Services

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Exploring Human Services Careers

Human services work can include direct service to clients, administration of direct service agencies, and social research, planning, and policymaking. To determine if a human services career is right for you, begin by reflecting on your interests, values, skills, and lifestyle preferences. Consult the Lazarus Center for Career Development for information on written and online self-assessment tools and feel free to discuss your thoughts and plans with a career advisor.

To learn more about human services and decide if the field is right for you:

- A paid or unpaid internship or short-term job is the best way to find out what human services careers are really like. Working with the homeless, staffing a hotline, or interning in a hospital, drug abuse program, prison, or shelter will give you a taste of human services work that's an important part of your graduate school preparation. Internships are typically quite flexible and can take place during the summer, semester, January interterm, or other break.
- Contact Smith alumnae and other contacts in the field to talk to about their human services careers. If possible, observe their work environment and daily routines by scheduling informational interviews at their work sites. Talk to people with a variety of human services degrees and types of work experience.
- Speak with professors who have human services degrees. They can offer perspectives on the field, on the types of programs they chose, and on college teaching in the social sciences.
- Talk with current graduate students in programs of interest.
- Research the variety of human services career options in the Lazarus Center's library and online.
- Acquaint yourself with typical starting salaries in your field and geographic target areas. Reliable salary data can be found on sites including [Educate to Career Salary Calculator](#), [salary.com](#), and [O*NET Online](#).

Choosing a Graduate Degree

Although a Bachelor's degree can prepare you for an entry-level human services job, further training is usually required for career advancement. The chart at the end of this guide compares several advanced degree programs in human services. Other considerations:

- What roles, types of clients, work environments, and societal issues interest you most? Look for graduate programs with a similar emphasis. Be sure you're comfortable with the theoretical orientation of schools to which you apply.
- Many programs specialize in preparing students for a particular type of career. They may train administrators, professors, clinicians, therapists, community organizers, case workers, group leaders, or policy makers. Even within a specialty there are several choices. For example, a program may train only individual, family, or group therapists, or it might use only psychodynamic theory or family systems theory.
- Some graduate programs will admit students directly out of college; others prefer applicants who have a year or more of work experience in a related field.
- All programs combine fieldwork or practicum experience with classroom study, but programs vary in the proportion of time given to each type of learning.
- Some human services positions require licenses. License options and requirements vary by state. If you plan to set up a private practice, you must achieve a certain level of licensing in order to collect third-party (insurance) payments.

The Admission Process

Getting Started

- *Peterson's Guide to Graduate Study*, available at the Lazarus Center, in Neilson Library, and [online](#) is a good way to get an overview of human services programs. In addition, the Lazarus Center library has a variety of books about choosing graduate programs in psychology, clinical psychology, and counseling psychology as well as social work.
- Professional associations such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) are excellent sources of information as are professional journals such as *Social Work*, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, and *Journal of Educational Psychology*.
- Study the web sites of schools that interest you and request or download catalogues, applications, and financial aid forms. Email or call the school with any questions you have about the school, its program, faculty, facilities, research activities, and career planning services. The more specific information you have, the more focused and effective your application will be.
- Begin researching graduate schools before you leave Smith so you can take any necessary undergraduate courses. Many schools prefer that applicants have five or six courses in the social and behavioral sciences. Applicants who have been out of school for several years should check each school's requirements, and see if their work experience can substitute for particular course work.
- Find out if preparation is required by the schools which interest you. Ph.D. programs in psychology may prefer students who have conducted substantive research beyond the usual course requirements, while social work programs are often more interested in students' internships or work experiences with clients.
- Visit graduate schools, attend classes, and talk with current students and professors. Ask about graduate placement in the career area you've chosen.
- A strong undergraduate GPA is important, especially when applying to schools of psychology. If your undergraduate record is not strong enough to get into the graduate program you want, audit or take a few courses at the school to sample the course work and build a reputation with the professors. Demonstrating your commitment and performance this way may ease your entrance into the formal graduate program later.

Required Examinations

Graduate institutions may require applicants to take exams, usually the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). Graduate programs in psychology may also require the GRE Subject Test in psychology.

It is best to take exams during your junior year or in the fall of your senior year for entrance the following September. Alumnae should take the tests a year before they plan to enroll. The admission office of each school can tell you how important test scores are to their admission decisions.

To prepare for your admission tests, familiarize yourself with the exam's format and practice taking it online or by using a review book. "Prep" courses are costly but are another avenue for people who believe they need a structured method of review.

Application Essay / Personal Statement

Most schools want to know why you are interested in their program, what your academic and career goals are, and how these goals were shaped. Ideally, your application essay or personal statement will discuss your re-

search and your client-service experience, but the proportion of each varies with the kind of program. For example, applications to Ph.D. programs may need to stress your research, while applications to clinically-oriented programs (M.S.W. and Psy.D.) may emphasize your experience with clients. You can familiarize yourself with a school's orientation by reading the catalog, by looking carefully at the application questions for clues as to what the school wants, and by talking to some of their graduates or current students.

In writing your essay, use the active voice and "speak" in a style which is natural for you. Emphasize your strengths as well as your interest and experience in the field. Share your draft personal statements with a career advisor at the Lazarus Center, your professors, friends, family, and others. Begin writing early, as essays often pass through multiple iterations during the writing and revising process.

Recommendation Letters

Most applications ask for three confidential letters of recommendation. If you're a recent graduate, recommendations from professors are most important, though you may wish to include someone who can write about your ability to interact with clients. Professors might discuss your ability to think, analyze, write, and contribute to the scholarship of the field. Recommendations from work or internship supervisors who have seen you interacting with clients can emphasize your empathy, maturity, stability, and your interpersonal skills.

Some graduate schools have automated systems for contacting and collecting information from your recommenders. Others may ask your recommenders to send their letters directly to the school. If you will be applying to multiple programs, you may wish to use [Interfolio Dossier](#) to store and manage letters of recommendation. As an account holder you control where and when a letter is sent, while the contents of each letter is hidden and remains confidential.

Financial Considerations

Costs for graduate school are generally comparable to undergraduate fees, with public institutions in your home state being the least expensive.

There are four types of financial assistance:

1. Scholarships and fellowships are awards based on academic achievement.
2. Teaching and research assistantships are offered by many Ph.D. and Psy.D. programs. Students work with professors for a stipend or tuition remission.
3. You can borrow money to finance your education. The U.S. government has two major loan programs based on economic need: the Federal Stafford Loan and the Federal Perkins Loan; for these, applicants must submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Ask the schools' financial aid officers about qualifications and loan limits. Loans are also available from many schools themselves as well as from private lenders.
4. Work-study and other part-time jobs are offered by some schools, or you may find a part-time job nearby.

Application due dates for financial aid may precede the admission deadlines, so plan ahead.

Overview of Human Services Graduate Degrees

Degree	Average Length of Program	Program Structure and Emphasis	General Admission Criteria	Licenses Required ("Licensure")	Career Opportunities
M.S.W. (Master's in Social Work)	2-3 years	<p>Programs specialize in group and family counseling, social policy, psychotherapy, community organizing, administration, etc.</p> <p>Many programs run during the academic year only and combine 2 or 3 days' fieldwork each week with classroom study.</p> <p>The Smith School for Social Work offers summer classes with two full-time field placements during the academic year.</p>	<p>GRE or MAT may be required.</p> <p>A 3.0 GPA.</p> <p>Strong letters of recommendation.</p> <p>Documentation of clinical or social service experience showing commitment to the field.</p> <p>Excellent communication skills.</p>	<p>All social workers must be licensed, but the number and level of licenses required for specific jobs varies from state to state.</p>	<p>Psychotherapists in community mental health centers, general and private hospitals, court clinics, college counseling centers, and in private practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Case managers. -Counselors. -Group workers. -Administrators. -Supervisors. -Teachers. -Community organizers.
Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) in Clinical Psychology or Counseling Psychology	Approximately 4 years followed by a year's post-doctoral internship.	<p>Strong, highly structured academic program with an emphasis on research.</p> <p>Comprehensive examinations, a one-year clinical internship, and a doctoral thesis based on independent research are required.</p>	<p>GRE or MAT; some also require the GRE Subject Test in psychology.</p> <p>A 3.5 GPA.</p> <p>Research experience is highly recommended; human services experience is helpful but not always necessary.</p>	<p>Students take a licensing exam after completing the supervised post-doctoral clinical internship.</p> <p>Students who complete an APA approved program are more likely to be allowed to take the licensing exam.</p> <p>Some states have additional requirements.</p>	<p>About half hold positions listed above under M.S.W. career opportunities.</p> <p>About half teach or conduct research at a university and many are clinical psychologists in a variety of settings.</p>

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Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology)	Approximately 4 years.	<p>Emphasis is on training clinicians.</p> <p>Research is more quantitative (Ph.D. research is more qualitative).</p> <p>Internships are a major focus (combined with class work).</p> <p>A practically-oriented dissertation is usually required.</p>	<p>GRE or MAT and the GRE Subject Test in psychology.</p> <p>A clear demonstration of clinical and human services experience is required.</p>	<p>Students may apply to take the licensing exam after the post-doctoral internship.</p> <p>Students who complete an APA-approved program are more likely to be allowed to take the licensing exam.</p>	<p>Most positions are clinically-oriented; graduates have careers listed above under M.S.W. career opportunities.</p>
Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) in Clinical Counseling or Counseling Psychology	Approximately 4 years.	<p>Emphasis is on training counselors.</p> <p>Comprehensive exams and a practically-oriented dissertation are required.</p>	<p>GRE or MAT; some also require the GRE Subject Test in psychology.</p>	<p>Students may apply to take the licensing exam after the post-doctoral internship.</p> <p>Students who complete an APA-approved program are more likely to be allowed to take the licensing exam.</p>	<p>Most positions are clinically- or educationally-oriented; graduates have careers listed above under M.S.W. career opportunities.</p>
M.A. or M.S. (Master of Arts or Master of Science) in counseling psychology.	1-2 years.	<p>Programs often have a particular focus (such as counseling psychology, guidance counseling, or industrial psychology) and prepare students well within a limited range of career choices.</p>	<p>GRE or MAT may be required.</p> <p>Prior experience in the field is useful.</p>	<p>Make certain your program qualifies you to become licensed.</p>	<p>Positions fall within a narrower range, with each school specializing in training students for a particular profession such as guidance counseling, industrial psychology, or school psychology.</p>