

# Early Career Professionals and Students SIG Survey 2023

### Why the Survey?

The demand for mental health professionals is ever-growing in the midst of a global mental health crisis. The good news is that there are various degrees and paths you can take to becoming a mental health professional! *However*, the plethora of path options are commonly daunting for students and individuals looking to change careers.

"I really had no guidance. My mother and I checked out books in the library to find programs that matched my interests. I so wish I had more guidance. Thankfully, things turned out fine, but much of the difficulty of that journey for me would have been preventable with even one person's guidance." **-ECP/S SIG member** 

As members of the ADAA Early Career Professional and Student Special Interest Group (ECP/S SIG), our goal is to develop a medium to educate individuals, who are interested in a mental health career, about the various graduate school options that are available to them.

We hope that by providing information, we can promote diversity and inclusion in the ADAA and the greater field. We believe it is important to highlight that our survey respondents mostly included professionals with MSW or doctoral clinical psychology degrees. Thus, these responses may not fully reflect the broad field of mental health. For additional resources, we have included a non-exhaustive list of external website links at the bottom of this page.

#### Preface and Overview

In 2023, we distributed a survey to our ECP/S SIG members and requested their personal takes on (1) why they chose their specific mental health degree path, (2) how they viewed the differences between the degree/license they obtained versus the alternatives, and (3) advice they would give to persons interested in pursuing a mental health career.

Overall, we found that there are some unique aspects across mental health licenses and degrees, as well as some unique aspects across programs that award the same degree. (Even our early/mid career respondents gave varying ideas about the *differences* between graduate programs, indicating that many alleged differences are not crystal clear, even to the established professionals). We also found that there is a great deal of overlap. This overlap in degree *outcomes* becomes especially clear when we consider post-licensure training opportunities (e.g., certifications; workshops) available to all licensed mental health providers.

What was consistent across respondents is that their decisions were largely impacted by: (a) the minimum reasonable duration of training required for gainful, ideal work, (b) tuition cost and availability of student funding, (c) proportion of applied practice, teaching, or research in desired future job descriptions, and/or (d) unique training opportunities afforded in specific degrees (e.g., neuropsychological assessment; grant-writing).

The process of becoming a licensed clinician in the U.S. (with health service provider capabilities) includes supervised clinical hours and licensing examinations (specific requirements vary across states). Licensed clinicians—tend to specialize in working with certain populations/concerns, as well as in certain treatment and assessment modalities, although they may also lend their expertise to careers outside of the health sector. To learn more about the

differences among mental/behavioral/community health programs, we encourage you to start by exploring external links at the bottom of this page.

### **Master of Social Work**

## What is a Master of Social Work (MSW)?

An MSW is a broad degree that involves learning about individuals and how to help them on both a micro, macro, and mezzo level. Individuals with an MSW can have a variety of jobs including, but not limited to, individual clinical providers in a variety of treatment settings (e.g., assessment, treatment planning, and interventionist), clinical supervisors, trainers and professors, programmatic director, care coordinators, researcher, consultant, speaker, social justice advocates, and policymakers.

As a MSW, to provide therapy, an individual takes licensing tests. They then need to practice under a supervisor until they are eligible to sit for a second level licensing exam. Details vary by state.

Why did you decide to pursue your degree? Why did you choose this degree over the other available pathways (e.g., Social Work, Counseling, Psychiatry, Psychology)?

Individuals choose an MSW program for a variety of reasons, including length of program, accessibility (e.g.,, financial and geographical), and flexible program structure.

"I was in a psychology graduate program but was not interested in testing or research, so I left to pursue an MSW where I could learn to advocate for marginalized people and develop clinical skills to help people live their best lives." - **Kimberly Morrow, LCSW** 

#### What, from your perspective, differentiates your degree from other mental health degrees?

A social work program includes a wide breadth of topics, including clinical skills, case management, advocacy, and policy development. An individual in a social work program will learn about these topics through the micro, macro, and mezzo level. Social workers also complete internships during their time in graduate school. These internships can range from inpatient mental health programs to working in geriatric care management. Those seeking to work as a clinical social worker are encouraged to seek supervision and postgraduate training to supplement what is learned in the social work program.

What advice do you wish you had when choosing which degree to pursue? and/or What advice would you like to give to individuals who are trying to choose a career path in mental health? "Love what you do! And if you don't, try something different! It's ok to change your mind. Seek support, know yourself, always be open to new learning, self care is vital. Build your support network." - Heather Greenawalt, LCSW

"I had a mentor early on who had an MSW, and she gave me great advice that this is a degree that can grow and change with you over your career. I agree completely and am grateful to her for that advice." - **Elizabeth DuPont Spencer, LCSW** 

# What is a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or Doctor of Psychology (PsyD)?

First, there are numerous PhD (academic) programs that focus on mental and behavioral health. Some programs emphasize understanding, assessing, and treating mental health through scientist-practitioner or clinical scientist training models (e.g. Clinical, Counseling, or Educational Psychology), and some emphasize understanding biological or societal aspects of mental health that can inform assessment and intervention (e.g., Neuroscience or Public Health). PhD programs will inherently emphasize skills in conducting research, student mentorship, and teaching.

PsyD (professional) programs were developed to train students under a scholar-practitioner model, as an alternative to scientist-practitioner PhD programs. PsyD programs are an excellent option for students who aspire to primarily practice as licensed clinical psychologists. r.

# Why did you decide to pursue your degree? Why did you choose this degree over the other available pathways?

Individuals choose a doctoral program for a variety of reasons, including a passion for highly specialized research, teaching, and/or practice.

"I felt that a doctorate in clinical psychology provided me with an advanced training in assessment, treatment, and research of mental health disorders." -Jesse Spiegel, PsyD, Private Practice

"[I chose a PhD program] because I wanted to pursue a career that allows me to mainly conduct my research and mentor students, as well as provide therapy to patients." -Cope Feurer, PhD, Researcher at a College or University

"I quickly realized I wasn't interested in how bones nor other body parts work, so I became disenchanted with the idea of spending 4 years in medical school to become a psychiatrist. At the same time, [...] I loved learning and uncovering new understandings about how the brain works and operates, and could see myself pursuing a career that blended both clinical and research expertise." **-Katie Bessette, PhD, Researcher at a College or University** 

"I enjoy working with children and families, really enjoy brain science, like the real-life application of clinical work, and wanted to have the option to do it all (practice, research, teach, train)" -Elle Brennan, PhD, Clinical Psychologist a Children's Hospital

"I wanted to lead scientific studies that help answer the most pressing questions in the field of neuroscience and mental health. Therefore, I chose a degree that completely immersed me in the research process and allowed me to focus all of my time on science." -Lana Ruvolo Grasser, PhD, Researcher at a Federal Agency

What, from your perspective, differentiates your degree from other mental health degrees?

A mental health-oriented doctoral program encourages specialization in certain mental health concerns. PhD programs, specifically, are unique in that they emphasize skills in conducting clinical research. APA-accredited, licensure-eligible doctoral programs emphasize specialized coursework and training in neuropsychiatric assessment, therapy fundamentals as well as specific treatment protocols for certain disorders or concerns, and biopsychosocial approaches to understanding and treating mental health disorders. Years of working with an expert mentor further enables topic specialization. Clinical/Counseling/School psychology PhD/PsyD students complete part-time clinical practica throughout graduate training and a full-time internship in a clinical setting (i.e., a year-long predoctoral residency placement). Postgraduate training may also be required for licensure (varies by state).

"The emphasis on research is the main difference [...] Other [mental health] degrees can provide training in clinical practice without such a large emphasis on the research piece." - Cope Feurer, PhD

"[A PsyD] provides more nuanced [and specialized clinical] training than [some Master's degrees that are shorter in duration] ." **-Jesse Spiegel, PsyD** 

"My degree is different from many other mental health degrees because it does not have a clinical component [...]this means that my time, training, and expertise is entirely focused on research.

-Lana Ruvolo Grasser, PhD (Neuroscientist)

What are the various mental health roles you can perform with your degree (e.g., professor, individual provider etc.)?

In summary, with a doctoral degree in mental health, individuals can pursue many roles in their career. This may include, but are not limited to: professor/instructor, provider at a hospital, community center, or group practice, , psychological testing, business owner, clinical supervisor,, private practice, consultant, program developer, researcher, social justice advocate, institutional administrator, industry employee, AI consultant.

What advice do you wish you had when choosing which degree to pursue? and/or What advice would you like to give to individuals who are trying to choose a career path in mental health?

"First determine the type of job or career you'd like to have [...] and from there, determine how others in that position got the training needed and which degrees they pursued. A PhD takes a lot of time, money, and energy, and is not needed for most mental health careers". **-Katie Bessette, PhD** 

"Advice for a degree: Be sure you are ready for the significant amount of training and studying that is needed. The educational background can be costly. [However,] if you are looking to help people with mental health difficulties then [you are on the right] path!" - Jesse Spiegel, PsyD

"I do wish that I had known about other degrees that merged both research and clinical work, like clinical psychology. Talk to a lot of different people who have different degrees and expertise to find out what really interests you and what the best fit is. {...} Be very specific in your goals and align your time towards those goals through the degree that you choose. There is something for everyone and every career!" -Lana Ruvolo Grasser, PhD

"PhDs in clinical psychology prepare one to enter the field through many paths (e.g., clinical, clinical supervision, teaching, research, administrative, industry, etc.) but take a long time and much dedicated work. I would not encourage someone just interested in clinical work to pursue this degree, but rather to start with a master's level degree." **-Elle Brennan, PhD** 

NAMI: Types of Mental Health Professionals

Department of Labor: Five Careers Making a Difference in Mental Health

Mental Health America: Types of Mental Health Professionals

A [Brief Synopsis] of Differences between a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and Psy.D.

American Psychological Association: Doctoral degrees in psychology: How are they different, or not so different?

University of Buffalo: What is Social Work and What do Social Workers Do? NA

Other (non-exhaustive) considerations for careers in mental health research and/or intervention:

- Behavioral Neuroscience
- Exercise Science
- Nursing
- Public Health
- Licensed Mental Health Counselors