Psychology, M.A.

Graduate study in psychology is designed for students seeking the Ph.D.; students enrolled in the doctoral program may elect to receive a Master of Arts when they have completed the M.A. requirements. Students from other University programs may seek an M.A. in psychology as a complement to other graduate or professional training.

Requirements

The Master of Arts program in psychology requires 30 s.h. of graduate credit with thesis, and 37 s.h. of graduate credit without thesis. The department ordinarily offers the M.A. only to students enrolled in the Ph.D. program.

Thesis students must earn 24 of the required 30 s.h. at the University of Iowa. Course work for the thesis program must include a statistics course and at least an additional 8 s.h. earned in Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences courses and seminars. Thesis students also must complete an acceptable scholarly thesis and perform successfully in an oral defense of their thesis.

Nonthesis students must earn 30 of the required 37 s.h. at the University of Iowa. Course work for the nonthesis program must include a statistics course and at least an additional 15 s.h. earned in Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences courses and seminars. Nonthesis students also must perform successfully on an examination covering their area of specialization.

Graduate Training Areas

Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience

The program in behavioral and cognitive neuroscience focuses on the analysis of learning, memory, attention, motivation, aging, sensory processing, and sleep, in both human and nonhuman subjects, through the application of behavioral and biological principles. Special faculty strengths are in classical and operant conditioning, motivation and emotion, developmental psychobiology, neurobiology of learning, comparative psychology, cognitive neuroscience, neuropharmacology, neuroendocrinology, and neuroanatomy. Students in this program have the opportunity to learn state-of-the-art techniques in computer-controlled experimentation and electronic instrumentation as well as advanced analytic and laboratory methods in neurophysiology, nonhuman neurosurgery, histology, neuroimaging, and assays of biochemical activity.

Faculty members in the behavioral and cognitive neuroscience area interact extensively with colleagues from other divisions in the psychology department and from several basic science and clinical departments in the Carver College of Medicine, including anatomy, anesthesia, pharmacology, internal medicine, pediatrics, and neurology. These collaborative activities provide excellent research and training opportunities for students interested in emerging interdisciplinary fields such as behavioral medicine.

Clinical Psychology

The clinical training program emphasizes a scientific approach to the understanding of psychological disorders and the influence of psychological factors on human relationships and health. The program is accredited by the Psychological Clinical Science Accreditation System (PCSAS), has been continuously accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of the American Psychological Association since 1948, and is a charter member of the Academy for Psychological Clinical Science.

The program is designed for students who are interested primarily in helping to advance scientific understanding of clinical phenomena and in acquiring the research skills necessary to do so. Faculty members and students have active research collaborations with colleagues from many departments in the University’s Carver College of Medicine and College of Public Health and at the Iowa City VA Health Care System. Many of the program’s faculty members conduct externally funded research programs that use cutting-edge behavioral science to develop improved understanding of mechanisms, processes, and interventions for mental disorders. Faculty members have strong training records, and the program’s graduates have gone on to top-tier research, teaching, and clinical service positions.

The clinical psychology program provides the first-hand clinical experience and opportunities to develop clinical competence that are integral to clinical research. It closely integrates practicum experience in the Seashore Clinic with course work and supervised research experience. Advanced students have opportunities to gain additional clinical experience through placement in the Benton Neuropsychology Clinic, Women’s Wellness and Counseling Service, adult and child psychiatry clinics, the Iowa City VA Health Care System, and other venues.

Cognition and Perception

The cognition and perception training area is guided by the philosophy that understanding a specific cognitive process requires an understanding of how it interacts with other cognitive processes. The area pursues empirical rigor and theoretical development, so its research is theory driven and data tested.

Research programs of the area’s laboratories overlap with each other, and most content areas are studied by multiple laboratories and with multiple methodologies. Areas of strength include categorization, computational modeling, cognitive control, language and language learning, learning and memory, visual cognition, attention, and working memory.

Students in perception and cognition take basic courses and seminars in specialty areas, but they devote most of their time to research activities. Students work closely with a faculty mentor at first and then become progressively independent as they gain knowledge and skills. The program encourages students to work with more than one faculty member, both in the program and across the department and the University. Students often combine basic work on cognition with work in areas such as neuroscience, neuropsychology, psychiatry, developmental psychology, and human factors engineering.

Developmental Science

The developmental science program focuses on understanding the processes that underlie change as each individual follows a unique developmental pathway. Students examine influences on development ranging from the level neurons to neighborhoods, and they work to understand the step-by-step accumulation of effects across these levels and over time. They are taught a broad range of developmental theory and acquire expertise in multiple research paradigms, such as observational research, experimentation, computational methods, and neuroimaging.
Students also have the opportunity to study and collaborate with faculty members whose research cuts across domains such as perception, cognition, action, social processes, and basic biological mechanisms. Faculty members collaborate with their colleagues across the University, including those in the Carver College of Medicine. These collaborations provide students with a unique breadth of training.

Students take courses in many areas of developmental science as well as in other areas of psychological and brain sciences. They also have research opportunities in early communication and social development, cognitive development in infancy and childhood, neuroimaging in toddlers and adults, and developmental psychobiology. The developmental research group meets regularly in conjunction with other members of the University of Iowa’s DeLTA Center, providing students and faculty members the opportunity to present and discuss their own research as well as to gain exposure to other developmental work being conducted in the department and at the University.

Health Psychology

The health psychology program is a research-based doctoral program concerned with application of psychological theory, methods, and treatment to understanding of physical health and illness as well as understanding biobehavioral factors that contribute to disease onset and progression. The program's perspective is based on the biopsychosocial model, which posits that biological, psychological, and social processes are integrally and interactively involved in physical health and illness.

Graduate training in health psychology emphasizes the integration of knowledge about biological, psychological, and social factors. Students are involved in research whose content and methods reflect the biopsychosocial perspective. Training in health psychology is facilitated by the faculty’s longstanding collaborations with medical practitioners and researchers at the University’s Carver College of Medicine and University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. Availability of medical populations and state-of-the-art medical technologies afford a unique opportunity for doctoral students in health psychology.

Research areas of the health psychology program include stress and illness, psychoneuroimmunology, patient adherence, animal models of hypertension and heart failure, postpartum depression, women’s health issues, and psychoneuro-oncology.

Students who are interested in clinical training with a focus on health psychology should apply directly to the clinical program and indicate an interest in clinical health psychology.

Social Psychology

The social psychology program offers a variety of perspectives on interpersonal and intrapersonal processes. Examples of research foci of faculty and students are social-cognitive processes, attitudes, stereotyping and prejudice, social comparison, judgment and decision making, compassion and altruism, moral judgment, emotion, social motivation, parent-child relationships, temperament and individual differences in childhood, and social and emotional development.

Graduate training in the social psychology program is designed primarily to prepare students for careers in psychology research and teaching. In addition to their experiences and course work in the program and in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, students can benefit from opportunities in related academic units at the University, such as the Departments of Sociology, Communication Studies, and Statistics and Actuarial Science, and the Tippie College of Business. Such experience can broaden a student’s training, research opportunities, and employment prospects.

Admission

Since the graduate program in psychology is designed primarily for students seeking the Ph.D., all applicants are considered on that basis. Occasionally, a qualified applicant who is in good standing in another UI graduate program and is interested in advanced work in psychology only through the M.A. level may be admitted to pursue a joint graduate program. Students interested in such a program should contact the department chair before filing an application.

The application deadline is December 1. For all materials to be on file by that date, applicants should take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) General Test in October, and no later than November. The subject test in psychology is not required. Applications may be submitted any time but are considered only once each year—between December 1 and February 1—for admission the following fall. Admission decisions are based on a composite consideration of prior academic and research performance; letters of reference; scores on the verbal, quantitative, and analytic writing sections of the GRE General Test; and the applicant’s statement about background and purpose. Admission materials are reviewed initially by faculty members in the applicant's primary training area.

An undergraduate major in psychology—including a laboratory course in experimental psychology, a course in statistics, and additional work in the natural sciences and in mathematics—is desirable but not required. Students who have not had such a background but are strongly qualified on other grounds may be admitted. They are expected to remedy deficiencies through special course work or independent study before embarking on the regular graduate program.

Applicants must meet the admission requirements of the Graduate College; see the Manual of Rules and Regulations of the Graduate College.

Career Advancement

Students who pursue a master’s degree in psychology have many opportunities to teach psychology in community colleges or high schools or to find employment in a business, school, or hospital.

Learn more about careers in psychology at the American Psychological Association website.