

## **COURSE-BASED AND THESIS-BASED MASTER'S PROGRAMS IN COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY**

### **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)**

#### **\*PLEASE NOTE:**

**All potential applicants to the Master's Programs in Counselling Psychology are expected to thoroughly review all FAQs in preparation for applying to either or both programs. The FAQs have been developed based on the most common application inquiries the department has received over the past 10 years.**

**In the interest of fairness to all applicants, and due to the extremely high volume of interested potential applicants for these programs (over 150 applicants per year and more than double the number of queries) and the fact that we only accept approximately 5% of applications in each admission cycle, the Counselling Psychology faculty members are not available to meet with or interact with prospective applicants or offer any program-related advising before applicants are actually admitted into these programs. Program faculty may only meet with students after they have been accepted into these programs.**

#### **1. What is the difference between the course-based and thesis-based Counselling Psychology Master's programs?**

Both programs are highly competitive and include courses in counselling theories, counselling skills, ethics and professional standards, research, and assessment. However, the thesis-based program involves conducting a supervised research study in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, whereas the course-based program involves conducting a capping project in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year. A capping project is a practical professional project, like for example, a best practice guideline or protocol for working with a particular client population, and students develop their capping projects as part of a scheduled course in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the course-based program. Unlike master's thesis research projects, these capping projects do not involve any direct data collection or analysis that requires approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

Applicants interested in pursuing future doctoral studies should apply to the thesis-based program, as this program includes the research experience within it that would prepare them to move towards doctoral studies. However, students from the course-based program route who have research experience from volunteer or work roles outside of the program can still apply to the doctoral program, and their applications are considered on a case-by-case basis through a determination of whether they have adequate research preparation to undertake a doctoral dissertation.

## 2. Can I apply to both programs? What if I am accepted to both?

Yes. If you make our short-list for both programs, you will be informed of that fact, and will be given a choice about which program offer you wish to accept.

## 3. How are Master's applications evaluated and what makes for a competitive or strong application?

For each program, multiple Counselling Psychology faculty members independently rate applications based on: (1) academic ability (e.g., GPA); (2) depth and breadth of psychology coursework; (3) amount and quality of related work or volunteer experience; (4) amount and quality of research experience; (5) quality of letters of recommendation, which should be from former professors or employers/supervisors; (6) quality of the cover letter of application (also called your letter of intent for applying to the program); and (7) overall "fit" with the program/match with faculty interests.

Faculty members do not see each other's ratings; their ratings are completely independent. In the end, ratings are pooled by our graduate program application assistant, and each applicant gets a total composite score. Applicants are then rank-ordered, from highest to lowest. The "short list" of the 15-20 highest-ranked applicants are carefully considered and further evaluated for admission. For example, for Thesis-Based program applicants, Counselling Psychology faculty members further assess the credentials and match in research interests with applicants on the short list who have identified them as potential supervisors, and then choose the most-qualified, best matched students to work with.

In light of this rigorous admission process, you can strengthen your application and enhance your competitiveness by doing everything you can to improve your overall portfolio:

- Work hard to get really good grades in courses you take prior to application
- Gain as much related work or volunteer experience and research experience as possible before applying
- Make sure you have a good number of psychology courses (the minimum is ***21 credits of undergraduate educational psychology and/or psychology coursework***)
- Spend a lot of time drafting and revising your statement of intent, as that is the only direct sample of your writing that the Counselling Psychology Faculty members have available to them in the adjudication process

Although the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) at the University of Alberta allows students to apply to graduate programs with a GPA of 3.0 or above, due to the competitiveness of our Master's program, applicants with **GPA's below 3.6 are rarely admitted**. Furthermore, even if you have a perfect GPA, that does not

guarantee admission, as other applicants may have a stronger overall portfolio in terms of the admission and adjudication criteria described above.

#### **4. What type of work or volunteer experience is required to be eligible to apply for these programs? And how much experience is enough?**

Applying to either of these programs requires that you have some work or volunteer experience where you have utilized and strengthened your interpersonal or helping skills. Examples of this type of experience include: volunteering on a distress line or being involved in another type of mental health service delivery role, such as a camp counsellor, tutoring, teaching or mentoring, facilitating youth or adult group programming, being a team leader, etc.

Because the application process for both programs is competitive, there is no benchmark for having enough experience. As a minimum, you should have at least two or three different volunteer or work roles (in total) that helped you build your interpersonal and helping skills.

In some years, students applying to the programs have years and years of relevant experience. These students are often seeking a career change, and they can ride out less experienced applicants, when grades, reference letters, and other factors are equal.

#### **5. Do I need research experience for the course-based program and how do I get it?**

Research experience is required for application and admission to both programs, in part, because our training programs are based on the scientist-practitioner model, which emphasizes the integration of both research and practice.

Research experience can be gained by pursuing an undergraduate honours degree program where you do an honours thesis, volunteering or engaging in paid work as an assistant on any professor's research project, or conducting an independent study under a professor's supervision.

Please note that research experience doesn't have to be in the field of counselling psychology – it can be in any field. Also note that Counselling Psychology faculty members cannot supervise students in undergraduate independent studies due to their high supervision loads of Master's and Ph.D. students.

#### **6. What do I write about in my letter of intent or cover letter of application to the program? And, what is the page limit?**

Your letter of intent should:

- Clearly explain *Why* you want to pursue a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology
- Specify what makes you a qualified and strong applicant for the program you are applying to by tying together your background and all your related applied and research experience described in your CV or resume
- Outline your Master's thesis research general topic area and a potential research study direction and identify potential supervisors you may want to work with – only if you are applying to the Thesis-based program
- State your short and long-term career objectives in the field of counselling psychology (both programs)

The maximum length your letter of intent can be is 2 single-spaced pages in 12 point font.

### **7. Can I apply to a Counselling Psychology Master's program with a Bachelor's Degree in another field?**

Yes, you can apply as long as you have the minimum 21 credits of undergraduate psychology or educational psychology coursework (e.g., at least 7 courses). If you have more, all the better, as depth and breadth of psychology coursework is an important evaluation criterion.

Please be aware that a course only counts as one of these 7 or more courses if it is actually labeled as a Psychology or Educational Psychology course. For an Educational Psychology course to count, the focus of the course has to be more psychological than educational in content, and it has to be taught by a psychologist (i.e. someone with at least a Master's degree in Educational Psychology or Psychology). If you are not sure if the instructor of educational psychology courses you have taken meets this requirement, check with the instructors who taught you those courses.

### **8. If I don't have enough undergraduate psychology coursework to apply, what courses should I take to build-up my psychology background?**

In order to eventually become a Registered Psychologist, the College of Alberta Psychologists (CAP) assesses your background in psychology at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. They expect you to have coursework in the following content areas, so your best bet is to try to take one or two courses in each of these topic areas prior to applying to our programs:

Individual Differences (e.g., courses in Human Development, Abnormal Psychology, Personality Psychology, Clinical Psychology)

Biological Bases of Behaviour (e.g., courses in Biological Psychology, Behavioural Pharmacology, Sensation & Perception, Neuropsychology)

Social Bases of Behaviour (e.g., courses in Social Psychology, Group Psychology, Cross-Cultural Psychology)

Cognitive and Affective Psychology (e.g., courses in Cognitive Psychology, Psychology of Motivation, Psychology of Emotion, Psychology of Learning).

**9. From whom should I seek letters of reference to bolster my chances of acceptance?**

You are required to have 2 letters of reference from former professors who know you well (those whom you have taken classes from, where you were actively engaged and had multiple interactions with the professor, or who supervised you in doing an honours thesis or independent study). These references can speak to your academic potential for pursuing graduate studies.

You also need 1 letter of reference from someone who can speak to your interpersonal, relationship-building, or helping skills, such as a volunteer coordinator who oversaw your work, supervisor, or boss in a work role, etc.

**10. The application forms for both programs ask me to list which professors I have contacted before applying to the program. What do I write down if the program professors don't meet with me or interact with students until after they get into the program?**

The Counselling Psychology Graduate Student Handbook on the Program website includes a list of all Counselling Psychology Professors, along with their areas of expertise and research interests. Regardless of which program you are applying to, consult the list and write down the name of any faculty member(s) whose areas of work interest you.

If you are applying to the thesis-based program, make sure the professors whose names you write down are those who you are interested in being supervised by on your thesis work. During the application evaluation process for the thesis-based program, if you make the short-list of the top-ranked applicants, the professors you listed will then consider you as a potential candidate for supervision. For course-based applications, there are no faculty supervisors, as students proceed through the program as a group and receive group-based mentorship in completion of their master's capping projects through an actual scheduled course in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of their program.

**11. Can I apply to the Counselling Psychology Master's program if I am an International Student?**

Yes. You just have to meet all the program requirements other applicants have to meet, as specified on the program website. You also have to meet the Department of

Educational Psychology's TOEFL or IELTS test requirements, which are also listed on the department's website.

**12. What is the application deadline, and how do I apply? Also, how do I check if my application is complete?**

Applications are due December 1<sup>st</sup> of each academic year, to start the Master's program the following September. The application process is fully on-line, and the application portal is open for you to submit your application any time between September 1<sup>st</sup> and December 1<sup>st</sup>. We do not accept program applications at other times of the year.

Please note that your application has to be fully complete, including receipt of official transcripts, reference letters, and all other program forms and documentation by the December 1<sup>st</sup> deadline in order to be considered for admission. If you miss the deadline, your application will not be evaluated and you will have to re-apply the following year.

If you have questions about using the on-line application system and are having trouble checking your application on the system to see if it is complete, please contact our graduate program assistant at [edpygrad@ualberta.ca](mailto:edpygrad@ualberta.ca)

**13. Can I re-apply to the programs if I am not accepted the first time?**

Yes, but keep in mind that the competitive pool of applicants differs year-to-year, which means that a strong application one year might not be as competitive the next year, or vice-versa. This means that while re-application is possible, there is no guarantee of success.

**14. What courses are involved in the Master's programs and how long does it take to complete the programs?**

The Counselling Psychology Graduate Student Handbook on the program website includes a list of the courses in each year of each master's program. The typical length of time to complete the Master's programs is 2 years, full-time.

**15. Can I attend the Master's Program in Counselling Psychology part-time?**

Both of our Counselling Psychology Master's Programs are full-time programs, with no part-time study options, as the courses are offered in a standard sequence in specific academic terms during the two-year cycle of the program and are taken together.

**16. I am comparing the U of A's Counselling Psychology Master's Programs with other face-to-face and online programs, and want to know whether**

**Master's students get to actually do some counselling in the program, and in which year(s) of study?**

The first year of both of our master's programs includes direct counselling experience with a wide range of clients and presenting problems, supervised by registered psychologists, as part of formal practicum courses. Typically, client contact starts as early as October in year one of the program and continues until the end of April.

In the second year of the program, students also obtain supervised assessment experience in additional practicum courses.

**17. How much does it cost to do a Master's in Counselling Psychology overall, and how much does it cost per course or per semester?**

Course fees and program fees are set by the University of Alberta Registrar's Office, rather than by the program or department that houses a Master's degree route. Therefore, you have to contact the registrar's office to ask about this information and can obtain this contact information by searching the U of A website.

**18. What scholarships or financial support is available for taking the Counselling Psychology Master's program(s) and how do I apply?**

If you are admitted, you will be informed of scholarship opportunities or paid teaching or research assistantship opportunities that may be available to you and how to apply for them at that time.

If you are applying to the thesis-based program, you can apply for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Master's scholarship directly through SSHRC. Look up the SSHRC website to find out more about this scholarship and application deadlines.

**19. Does the Counselling Psychology Master's program qualify you to be a Registered Psychologist in Alberta or any other Canadian Province?**

The programs are designed to cover most of the requirements for registration, but students often take additional courses to fully qualify (based on deficits in their undergraduate psychology background or other key areas). Also, after completing the master's degree in either program, students have to arrange for a year of supervised counselling experience to move towards registration, as well as take the North American Board Exam called the *Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP)*, as well as an oral exam with the College of Psychologists in the province they want to practice in.

To learn more about registering as a psychologist, please check the websites of the College of Psychologists in the province(s) you eventually see yourself living and

working in, and then consider requirements of that College in setting up your program and coursework if admitted.

## **20. Are the Counselling Psychology Master's Programs Accredited?**

In Canada, the professional association responsible for evaluating programs for accreditation is the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). CPA only confers accreditation status on programs at the doctoral level, not at the Master's level, although Master's level courses in a university's program are considered and assessed to make sure they provide adequate counselling preparation leading up to the doctoral degree in order for Accreditation to be granted. Our University of Alberta Doctoral Program in Counselling Psychology has been accredited by the CPA for 16 years (since 2001).

\*\*\*For more information on applying to graduate school in Canadian Universities, please see this "Facts Sheet:"

[http://www.cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/PsychologyWorksFactSheet\\_ApplyingToCanadianGraduateSchools.pdf](http://www.cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/PsychologyWorksFactSheet_ApplyingToCanadianGraduateSchools.pdf)