



## Degree Overview:

# Community Psychology

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### About this document

This degree overview is part of a series developed for Idealist.org's Public Service Graduate Education Resource Center, available as free PDFs at [www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/overviews.html](http://www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/overviews.html). It is designed to give you a better understanding of an academic discipline and what you can expect if you decide to study this field.

This overview was written by Sharon Hakim and reviewed and edited by Idealist.org's graduate education program staff and interns; for a complete list of contributors, please visit [www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/about.html](http://www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/about.html).

If you read the PDF on screen, note that the blue text in the document is hyperlinked. Links are also spelled out in the text if you prefer to print the document. All links were active as of the document's creation in March 2010.

Most but not all programs named in the text have attended Idealist Graduate Degree Fairs for the Public Good ([idealist.org/gradfairs](http://idealist.org/gradfairs)), and are intended to show a sampling of the diversity of study options in this field.

## Introduction

Although community psychology shares its historical roots with clinical psychology, it is very different from the traditional, one-on-one counseling model that comes to mind when one thinks of the field of clinical psychology. Community psychology aims to go beyond the individual, focusing instead on the community, environment, and larger influencing factors that affect people's daily lives (culture, politics, economics, health-care, etc.).

The field of community psychology is devoted to advancing theory, research, and collaborative social action (at neighborhood, organizational, state, national, and international levels) to promote positive well-being, increase empowerment, advance social justice, encourage understanding of each other and of issues that society faces, and to prevent the development of problems.

Community psychology links direct action and service with research and evaluation, partnering with community members to promote change, recognizing both the expertise they have about their own situation, and the need for community member involvement and participation to implement culturally and situationally appropriate and sustainable progress.

Community psychologists work in nonprofits, community organizations, government positions, mental health agencies, public health, healthcare, consulting and evaluation agencies, at foundations, and in academic or research settings. Although the field spans many positions and interests, most community psychologists identify themselves as either a community practitioner (someone who is working directly with communities, organizations, schools and groups to bring about change) or an academic/researcher (someone who teaches and does the research and evaluation on which effective community practice is built).

Many programs related to community psychology are housed in psychology departments, while others are interdisciplinary. Students earning a community psychology degree complete courses that focus on: history and concepts of the field, human diversity and cultural competence, public health, community research methods and statistics, collaborative work in communities, organizational and community development and consultation, prevention and intervention, program evaluation, and grantwriting. Research is a large component of both the Ph.D. and masters degrees, as community psychologists base interventions on theory and research and use action-oriented research to promote positive change. Further, students will generally find niches under faculty mentors at their institutions related to local programs, organizations, grants, special populations, or social issues of interest—granting students the chance to have practice doing the work of a community psychologist, under the supervision of a faculty member.

## Why a graduate degree in community psychology?

A graduate degree in community psychology allows social justice-oriented professionals to:

- engage in direct service with community-based organizations
- consult and advise nonprofits and local community coalitions or groups
- advocate for and empower underrepresented groups
- conduct action-research to better understand problems and promote change
- teach and conduct community research in university settings
- advance public policy to better meet all peoples' needs.

### People who look at this degree also consider

- » Community development
  - » Clinical psychology
  - » Community psychiatry
  - » Applied social psychology
  - » Community mental health
  - » Nonprofit management
  - » Social work
  - » Counseling
  - » Public health
- » Get overviews of some of these fields at [www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/overviews.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/overviews.html)

A program of graduate education for this degree offers theory, research, and skills development, as well as supervised “real world” application of those skills through field work in community, organizational, and/or government settings. (Field work placements are called practica, community placements or internships, depending on the particular graduate program.)

This graduate degree prepares you to take a leadership role in nonprofits, community groups, governmental agencies, or grant efforts. It should offer you the research and evaluation skills to help organizations as they become more accountable for the resources they require to serve the community.

The community psychology degree offers practical experience working with people outside of the classroom and an integrated, theoretical framework from which to interpret and act in the world. This degree prepares you to competently work with various populations and subgroups, to conduct research around social problems and community health concerns, and to teach at the university level.

Other degrees in psychology and related fields such as clinical psychology focus on improving well-being, but generally do so by treating the individual (rather than by altering the situation or environment through empowerment, prevention, and intervention). In contrast, community psychology works towards sustainable progress by focusing on the relationships of individuals *with* their communities and societies. An advantage of this education is that you get training to make sustainable changes through improving systems, and become able to train others to more efficiently work in their own communities. This degree successfully combines theory and action—it backs up its “good works” with empirical evidence.

Gloria Levin, Community Psychology Practitioner based in Glen Echo, MD, explains how she became interested in the field:

Throughout my life, even as a child, I have volunteered on initiatives of social justice, civil rights, poverty, feminism, etc. I started graduate school in clinical psychology because it was ‘expected,’ but, when I realized that my impact would always be limited, by working one at a time, I quit. I entered the ‘real world,’ working as a community organizer for seven years in urban neighborhoods, through Peace Corps service in a Peruvian squatter settlement, in public health, and as a consultant to recipients of community development grants. Fortunately, when I arrived at the point that I was craving intellectual stimulation, a few (very few) community psychology graduate programs were opening. I obtained a Ph.D. in community psychology and my career since then has been devoted to the practice. Community psychology is my natural home, since I am a born community organizer.



Students in Ph.D. programs often have the opportunity to learn about social issues and effective change strategies, teach undergraduate classes, and conduct applied action-oriented research. Furthermore, Ph.D. students will come from a variety of professions and share your passion for public service and social justice. Almost every program will offer you a supervised internship or practicum in a community organization. Having this degree demonstrates a professional commitment to lasting social change, an understanding of the origins of socially constructed problems, and the training to help others face those issues completely and successfully.

### Other names for a degree in this area

The majority of programs in this field remain categorized under the “Community Psychology” title for both masters and doctoral degrees. Individual schools, however, may have a specific focus or cross-discipline component, and in those cases the name of the program may differ from the traditional title of community psychology.

Some examples of these are:

- Community and Cultural Psychology
- Community and Ecological Psychology
- Community Psychology and Prevention Research
- Community Research and Action
- Community Health Psychology
- Human and Organizational Development

Some community psychology programs are interdisciplinary in nature across departments of a university—programs that may not call themselves community psychology but are essentially training graduates for a career in community psychology.

As Allen W. Ratcliffe, Ph.D., Community Psychologist, of Tacoma, WA, says,

Community psychology training should be done on an interdisciplinary and interdepartmental basis, sending our students to some classes in departments such as geography, community development, political science, social work, health planning, criminal justice (or whatever fits the individual student’s career interests); and bringing their students into some of our classes. I see Community Psychology as a collaborative profession that can benefit from exposure and collaboration with other disciplines throughout our training.

- » For links to community psychology and interdisciplinary programs, please refer to the Education Connection section at [www.scra27.org](http://www.scra27.org)

- » Idealist’s collection of community psychology graduate program links:  
[www.delicious.com/gradresources/communitypsych+gradschool](http://www.delicious.com/gradresources/communitypsych+gradschool)

Realize, however, that community psychology by its nature is an interdisciplinary field. Whatever the name of the degree, research the programs that interest you and examine the types of work both students and professors are doing. Contact the program director to discuss their particular program. Determine which programs are the best fit for your personal and professional goals and needs, and apply to those programs.

Finally, some clinical psychology programs incorporate a community psychology subspecialty. These programs train students in both clinical and community psychology, and graduates have the option to apply community psychology to their clinical work or apply their clinical knowledge to community psychology work.

### Skills you can gain

In addition to a strong foundation in theory, design, and research for community work, as well as experience in applying these skills, this degree will provide you with tools to work collaboratively with community and organization members, to direct research and grant applications, and to consult for community coalitions. Some skills you will learn include:

- Advocacy
- Capacity-building
- Communication
- Community-based research methods
- Community development
- Consultation
- Cross-cultural competency
- Dissemination of information and techniques
- Empowerment
- Ethics in community interventions
- Evaluation and assessment
- Facilitation
- Grantwriting
- Group processes and collaboration techniques
- Implementation of community projects and grants
- Leadership and leadership training
- Organizational development
- Prevention and intervention techniques and strategies
- Public policy
- Relationship building
- Report writing
- Research and policy recommendation
- Resource development
- Strategic planning
- Teaching and training of others



## What can you expect to find in a program?

Students who want to study in community psychology at an advanced level may choose from a great variety of program designs and offerings.

### General structure of programs

Several universities across the United States, and internationally, offer graduate degrees in community psychology. Most graduate programs offer both masters and doctoral level courses; however, a large majority of these universities offer non-terminal masters degrees, which means that you need to apply to and be accepted into the doctoral program, completing your masters program along the way to your doctorate.

Many universities offer concentrations within their program such as youth issues, family life, community action, advocacy, public health, and prevention research. While no certificate programs exist, many community psychology programs allow you to enroll in certificate programs of related fields in order to satisfy elective credit and determine a sub-specialty.

In addition to a variety of program concentrations, universities vary in the formats and timelines for education. Most Ph.D. programs run from four to six years to complete coursework, field work, and dissertation—including the time it takes to earn a masters degree along the way. (Some students may enter the community psychology Ph.D. program with a masters from a related field.) The length of time needed to earn a degree depends on how long a student stays with a field placement, where that placement is (and whether they have access to take classes during the placement), and the nature of a student's dissertation.

Some Ph.D. programs have summers off, while others require students to research, teach, or take classes over the summer months. Unlike most undergraduate experiences, in graduate school—especially at the Ph.D. level and particularly with community-focused programs such as community psychology—classes are just one part of your education.

As Susan M. Wolfe, Ph.D. and CEO/Owner, Susan Wolfe and Associates, LLC in Duncanville, TX, says,

When I was a student at Michigan State University, we were required to set up an internship in a community setting during our first semester and continue it through the second semester. Both the Master's Thesis and [Doctoral] Dissertations required original field research be conducted in a community setting, which

required us to continue our community-based activities throughout graduate school.

Masters programs are generally two years and include a shorter community placement, as well as a capstone project or master level thesis. Part-time programs are available in a few schools (more commonly in masters programs, but check with the Ph.D. program you are interested in to see if part-time is an option), designed especially for mid-career professionals to advance their skill sets while maintaining their current jobs. Classes in these programs are offered at night or on the weekend—and often students praise these part-time programs, claiming that the simultaneous community work grounds their education.

- » Read “Going to grad school part-time” to learn more about some pros and cons of part-time study  
[www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/goingparttime.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/goingparttime.html)

### Usual coursework and concentrations

Graduate degree programs in community psychology place a strong emphasis on connecting the theoretical with the practical. Experiential learning is usually accomplished through work with local agencies and organizations for courses or through internships. Community psychology students also benefit from adjunct professors who spend the majority of their time working or researching in the field, and then bring their “real life” experiences to the classroom, teaching classes in their area of expertise.

Allegra Moore Williams, a recent graduate of the Masters in Community Social Psychology program at University of Massachusetts Lowell, says,

I was fortunate to learn early on that professors can do a great deal more than recite the same line to a class of students year after year. To my father, being a scientist meant crossing rivers fully clothed to just measure their depth and asking cab drivers their take on the political climates of the countries where they came from. To him, everything was an experiment that he could be a part of if he so chose. With my father as a model, I grew to become a person who, similarly, could not separate my life from my work, and who now sees great benefit in choosing not to. Being perpetually engaged in my surrounding environment—whether it is an art classroom, a playground, or a homeless shelter—gives me purpose and energy. Community psychology, then, was a logical choice for me. I am grateful to my peers and mentors in the field for their continued support and compassion in choosing this as not only a career path but a way of life. Should I become a professor one day, I hope to pass these values and practices on to future leaders and practitioners, as others have done for me.



Typical courses give you a foundation in:

- Social psychology
- Advanced research methods
- Community development
- Organizational structure and development
- Intervention and social change
- Prevention theories and practices
- Empowerment theories and practices
- Personal development
- Social justice
- Health psychology
- Diversity
- Psychology of women
- Multivariate statistics
- Factor analysis/Structural equation modeling

Students may develop individual concentrations for their study through elective coursework or a certificate. If the program is part of a larger graduate school, students can often fulfill electives in other departments or schools for an interdisciplinary curriculum, or again, may take courses towards a certificate.

Most graduate education programs post their course offerings online for prospective students to view. Taking a look at the curriculum for the programs you are interested in will give you a clearer sense of how your graduate education will be structured and what you will be learning. Comparing the curricula will also help you determine which graduate programs may be a better fit for your interests. Here are some curricula from a few schools to give you an idea of what community psychology graduate programs may be like:

- » Depaul University, Community Psychology Ph.D. Curriculum <http://las.depaul.edu/psy/Programs/GraduatePrograms/CommunityPsychology/Timeline.asp>
- » University of Massachusetts Lowell, Community Social Psychology M.A. Curriculum [www.uml.edu/catalog/graduate/colleges/arts\\_sciences/psychology/course\\_listings.html](http://www.uml.edu/catalog/graduate/colleges/arts_sciences/psychology/course_listings.html)
- » Wichita State University, Community Psychology Ph.D. Curriculum <http://webs.wichita.edu/?u=psychology&p=/graduate/community/communitycurriculum/>

### Concentrations

Common concentrations for community psychology students:

- Advanced research methods
- Qualitative and community-based research methods
- Public health
- Community development

- Nonprofit management
- Public policy
- Social work
- Prevention

### Graduation requirements

In order to complete your degree, you will be required to complete a capstone project or masters thesis for masters programs and a dissertation for doctoral programs. Doctoral programs also typically have comprehensive examinations or projects.

- A capstone project is an opportunity for you to apply the education you've received throughout the program by addressing a real issue and need in the community. It usually culminates in a written report and presentation.
- A masters thesis is a written paper on research that you have conducted on a topic relevant to community psychology and your area of interest.
- A dissertation is also a written paper on a research project that you have conducted, but it is generally longer and the research is more complex than a masters thesis.

In each of these projects, you will have the guidance of an advisor and will learn a lot through the process. A comprehensive examination, paper, or project may test your knowledge of the field or yield a product that demonstrates this knowledge. Each of these different products may require an oral defense or examination.

### Who gets this degree and what do they go on to do?

#### Prior experience

Prior work in the field helps enrich and expand the academic experience. Most graduate schools in community psychology strongly recommend, and some require, between three to five years of experience working with communities or specific populations directly and/or demonstrated interest in research within the domain of community psychology.

- » Read "Setting yourself up for success: Things you can do while you're an undergrad" [www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/settingyourselfup.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/settingyourselfup.html)

Sharon Hakim, Community Psychology Graduate Student at Wichita State University, says

I discovered community psychology not through a textbook or



graduate program catalogue, but by using tools and resources that members of the field have developed, while working with an organization for community-based youth development. This real world experience in the work of a community psychologist, helping facilitate youth trainings and organizational development, has helped ground what I am currently studying in reality, giving me insight and perspective on the application of many of the issues and theories we discuss in the classroom.

Prior work experience in any sector will help define your professional interest and goals before entering into a graduate program, affecting how you approach your studies from the classes you take to the types of learning opportunities you look for both in and out of class, and ultimately help you get the most return on investment in your education.

If you have not worked professionally in nonprofits, community agencies, or government social services, there are many ways to gain significant experience and insight into issues unique to public service work:

- Participating in a national or international service program. Programs such as AmeriCorps ([www.americorps.gov](http://www.americorps.gov)) offer you a chance to work directly with communities in the United States on issues of social inequity and poverty. Peace Corps ([www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)) or Volunteer Service Overseas International ([www.vsointernational.org](http://www.vsointernational.org)) offer opportunities to fight global poverty through service in other countries. Full-time service is a good way to develop professional skills while gaining experience in nonprofits and/or working with local government.
- Sitting on a local nonprofit board or government agency citizen committee. These opportunities allow professionals from any sector to share their expertise, develop fundraising and project management skills, and gain insight into local issues. Be aware that many nonprofit boards may expect their members to contribute money to the organization. Make sure you know what the minimum expected contribution is, as well as the legal obligations of nonprofit board service.
- Volunteering. Volunteering your skills and time on activist issues and special projects or ongoing programs at local nonprofits or government is another way to explore community work. For example, you could help to organize rallies for migrant workers' rights or assist the city with a needs assessment for homeless youth.
- Getting involved in research. Research experience, ideally in a topic area of interest, will be helpful for developing basic research skills and allowing your supervisors to get to know you. You will need letters of recommendation to get into

graduate school, and research experience and strong letters are key components to your application. If you are still an undergraduate, seek opportunities to assist professors and graduate students with their research projects.

- » Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers. Choose your preferred version and read Chapter Five ("Become a stronger candidate") [www.idealists.org/careerguide](http://www.idealists.org/careerguide)
- » Learn more about service programs and their benefits [www.idealists.org/service](http://www.idealists.org/service)
- » Learn more about volunteering [www.idealists.org/volunteer](http://www.idealists.org/volunteer)
- » Find volunteer opportunities [www.idealists.org/if/as/vol](http://www.idealists.org/if/as/vol)
- » Learn more about volunteering as a board member [www.idealists.org/if/i/en/faqcat/3-1](http://www.idealists.org/if/i/en/faqcat/3-1)
- » Read our series of articles offering tips on how to prepare for grad school [www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/preparing.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/preparing.html)

### Career paths

Community psychology students use their degree to prepare for and transition into work as educators, professors, program directors, consultants, policy developers, evaluators, and researchers in community organizations, universities, or government agencies to promote health and well-being. Some typical job titles that graduates may qualify for include:

- Director of a community service agency
- Evaluator of community programs, policies, and grants
- Self-employed consultant to community development organizations, or program evaluator
- Public policy analyst
- Charitable foundation director
- Community or neighborhood council advisor
- Health prevention researcher/Community health program implementer
- Executive director
- Program manager for healthcare systems or hospitals
- Grantwriter
- Community mental health worker
- Member of department of public health
- Grassroots organizer
- Professor at a college or university
- Researcher at a university-based research center
- Director of research at a mental health center or community based organization
- Consultant on quality of life issues/relationship to larger community



Regarding career options in the field, Greg Meissen, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at Wichita State University, notes,

The possibilities for rewarding and meaningful work as a community psychologist are unrivaled. Community psychologists make a difference on topics ranging from prevention of child and domestic abuse to developing settings in schools and organizations that enhance those settings and the individuals in them, to helping a community to be more environmentally responsible. The array of methods and approaches of a community psychologist are most versatile and we work across different levels using what has the most impact, be it policy development, evaluation research, facilitating community groups toward collaborative solutions, or helping launch new initiatives.

Rarely will you see a job announcement requesting a community psychologist by name; instead you'll find job descriptions that community psychologists can fill across sectors such as mental health, public health, community development, government consulting, nonprofit management, research institutions, and foundations. Here are a few sample job postings we found online (*italics added for emphasis*). A community psychology graduate degree would help prepare you for the following responsibilities and duties:

#### **Managing Associate in Research & Capacity Building**

FOR A NONPROFIT AGENCY

- Do you want your work to have a bigger impact?
- Are you looking for the opportunity and flexibility to pursue your research and social change strategies?
- Do you want to work as part of team that values quality work and making a difference?
- Do you want to be the best you can be as a scientist-practitioner?
- Do you want to be part of the development of a new model organization for social change professionals where scientific rigor, practical solutions, professional development, entrepreneurship, and progressive social values come together?

If this is you, then consider applying to our full-time Managing Associate to lead research and technical assistance tasks for national and local initiative across the United States. You will be working with public agency and nonprofit representatives, community leaders, evaluators, and others on federal, state, and foundation initiatives. We are looking for an individual to join us in taking the professional practice of social change through science and capacity building to a higher level. We promote teamwork, excellence in our work, and the professional development of all of our community members.

We are looking for someone with the knowledge, skills, and experience in: 1) systems and community change to promote healthy communities and families in order to address social problems such as poverty, health inequities, substance abuse, violence, HIV, and crime as well a healthy human development; and 2) community organization and development, community capacity building, or community building. The successful candidate must be committed to scientific rigor and progressive social change through community capacity building.

The successful candidate must have:

- Two years prior experience (minimum) in the implementation of research or evaluation of community-based or systems changes projects
- *Masters or doctoral degree (preferred) in a social science, public health, or related fields*
- Prior task management and staff supervisory experience and skills
- Successful past experience conducting research or evaluation cross culturally
- Demonstrated proficiency in qualitative and quantitative research skills, including data collection and management
- Analysis skills, including the use of computer analysis tools (e.g. SPSS, Atlas, or GIS)
- Ability to travel
- Strong communication (written and verbal) skills including publications in scientific or practitioner outlets
- Ability to multi-task, attend to details, and meet strict deadlines

#### **Tenure-track Opening in the Psychology Faculty**

FOR A STATE UNIVERSITY

This position would be a good fit for a community psychologist whose work/research is applied to community or organizational contexts and who would enjoy mentoring graduate students interested in (non-clinical) applied research. Probationary, Nine Month Appointment.

State University is seeking applicants for a psychology tenure-track faculty position to begin in the fall. The ideal candidate would have demonstrated ability to teach graduate courses in community and/or social psychology, and related areas (e.g., health promotion, prevention, statistics, applied research methods, adolescence, I/O, etc.). Also, an ideal candidate would have an applied research program and experience supervising student research.

The psychology department offers two bachelors programs within the department: psychology and early childhood studies. The masters program has an emphasis on prevention and



program evaluation in community contexts, and encourages non-clinical applications to problems within groups, organizations, and communities. The person hired would be expected to be an active participant in the masters program as well as be involved in research, community service, advising, and teaching undergraduate psychology courses in the individual's area of expertise.

The department is committed to increasing the diversity of its faculty. Individuals identifying with traditionally underrepresented groups are encouraged to apply.

#### Required Qualifications:

- *Doctorate in Psychology, or closely related field*, by time of appointment
- College-level teaching experience in one or more of the following areas: community psychology; applied research methods (statistics, program evaluation, qualitative methods, etc.); organizational or social change; prevention; health promotion; and/or social, developmental, I/O, or learning psychology
- Demonstrated commitment to linking theoretical and practical learning (application) to student-centered education
- Knowledge of and commitment to serving a culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse student body

#### Preferred Qualifications:

- Research experience in community psychology, broadly defined as non-clinical research related to problems within groups, organizations, and/or communities
- Demonstrated applied work in community settings
- Demonstrated experience supervising student research and thesis projects Demonstrated experience in culturally diverse communities

### Health and Welfare Benefits Manager

#### FOR A MEDICAL CLINIC HUMAN RESOURCES FIRM

This position defines, develops, and implements health and welfare benefits programs that are aligned with Clinic's vision, mission, and strategic plans as well as competitive practices. This position provides benefit expertise to HR staff and assisting with employee communication, administration including plan renewals and changes, compliance and long term planning of health and welfare benefits for employees including medical, dental, life, and disability. Support provided includes communicating changes to benefits HR and assisting with the communication to employees. Ensures compliance with all legal requirements of various employee benefit programs, must have strong working knowledge of current and proposed rules and regulations governing health and welfare benefit plans. The Health and Welfare Benefits Man-

ager will be responsible for the supervision of health and welfare benefits staff while acting as part of the Benefits leadership team to foster team work to promote a productive work environment.

Basic Qualifications: Bachelors degree and at least five (5) years experience including working with benefits plan administration and compliance.

Other Qualifications: *Prefer Masters degree with strong leadership, team building, and problem-solving skills as well as demonstrated ability to work collaboratively with multiple disciplines, i.e., physician, administrative, supervisory, and allied health staff. CEBS designation is desirable.* Experience with plan conversions, employee communications, and working with various vendor/broker relationships. Experience with personnel management, resource allocation, coaching, and mentoring desirable. Strong technical and analytical skills. Excellent presentation, oral and written communication skills. Excellent computer skills including Microsoft applications; Self-motivated, have strong attention to detail, and must be able to manage multiple priorities and deadlines. A certain amount of creativity and latitude. Outstanding research, problem solving, and analytical skills.

- » Explore nonprofit careers in our Nonprofit Career Center [www.idealists.org/career](http://www.idealists.org/career)

## What should you know about admissions?

### Applying

Your application will be judged on a variety of characteristics, including the following: GPA (college), GRE (Graduate Record Examinations) scores, personal statement, research experiences, volunteer and work experiences, and letters of recommendation.

Each program has its own admissions requirements. Traditional programs for full-time students require GRE and/or TOEFL if you are a non-native speaker of English. Most programs also require several letters of recommendation—from professors, research supervisors, and/or community partners you have worked with. Be sure to check with the programs you are interested in for specific instructions.

Some programs accept students more generally, and other programs have a mentorship model where students are linked with a particular faculty member (or two) through the application and admission process. Thus, it is a good idea to explore the



types of programs you plan to apply to and understand their model of mentoring students. Then, tailor your application to describe your interests, fit with the program, and fit with faculty research interests.

Besides the quality of your application, you will be judged also on the level of applicant-program fit: do your research interests match those of the professors you would work with? Do your career goals align with the work of the department? Because of this added element to the application process, many schools will either require or suggest an in-person interview. This is a chance for the department to get to know you, and a chance for you to explore the environment that could be your potential home for the next four to six years. Because of the level of student/professor collaboration that goes on in these programs, a good fit benefits everyone.

Also, most community psychology departments operate independently from the office of admissions at the university. A student may have to apply to the graduate school and then separately to the department. For community psychology programs, it is often the faculty in the department who are making the admissions decisions.

Use your graduate admissions essay to clearly explain your distinct career goals, as well as why the program is a good fit for you.

- » Read our series of articles offering practical advice on applying to grad school  
[www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/applying.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/applying.html)
- » Read our series of articles offering tips on how to prepare for grad school  
[www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/preparing.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/preparing.html)

## Financial aid

As with any degree, you should pursue many avenues of financial aid early in your grad school research. Most graduate students have to take on some loans while pursuing this degree; however, grant, scholarship, and assistantship money is available from national organizations and individual schools.

Most terminal masters programs require students to pay tuition. Check the funding packages and scholarship opportunities of the programs you are interested in, so you can plan ahead for your graduate school career.

Most Ph.D. programs provide funding (e.g., tuition waiver and/or stipend) to support student work in exchange for teaching and/or research. Because Community Psychology Ph.D. pro-

grams tend to be small, most departments/universities try their hardest to provide students with a modest stipend and/or tuition waiver in exchange for graduate assistantships in research or teaching within the department. This means that you work for a certain number of hours per week doing research and/or teaching, are not required to pay for your coursework or a portion of your coursework, and receive a small salary that helps cover your living expenses (for example, one student at a large urban university reported a stipend of \$15,500 per year). In addition, these experiences are an important part of your training, are supervised by faculty, and enhance your skills and professional development.

Rachel Smolowitz, a graduate student at the University of South Carolina, emphasizes the range of financial aid options in her program:

My department has had teaching, research, and practice assistantships available to all students. These opportunities include work in teaching, working for a community organization, or research, and receive a modest stipend, full tuition remission, and some health coverage in return. While most students still take out some student loans, they are less than most programs and the assistantship work provides valuable experience and helps to build a strong CV.

Idealist's Public Service Graduate Education Resource Center ([idealists.org/psgerc](http://idealists.org/psgerc)) offers articles on graduate assistantships, other on-campus jobs, and the skinny on different types of student loans. A couple articles look at working full-time or part-time while going to school—both of which offer financial and other benefits (and challenges).

- » Learn more about funding your graduate education  
[www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/financing.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/financing.html)
- » Read our series of articles offering tips on how to prepare for grad school, including discussions of working while studying  
[www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/preparing.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/preparing.html)
- » Read our series of articles about the variety of graduate study options, including part-time study  
[www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/studyoptions.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/studyoptions.html)

## Conclusion and further resources

A degree in community psychology aims to help prepare you for a variety of leadership, research, teaching, and consulting positions in various organizations working towards social justice and the improvement of living conditions for people in the United States and internationally. The value of a degree in community psychology is that, when you graduate, you are a



generalist—knowledgeable in the concepts of systems and factors that contribute to problems we currently face, and trained both in ways to deal with those problems successfully and how to create and evaluate sustainable interventions to attempt to address these problems.

As Allen W. Ratcliffe, Ph.D., Community Psychologist, of Tacoma, WA, puts it

In my opinion, Community Psychologists add value in workplace settings because we look at issues and situations with a systems orientation, are able to point out unanticipated consequences of policies and practices, and because we are good collaborators with persons of other disciplines and viewpoints.

Susan M. Wolfe, Ph.D., CEO/Owner, Susan Wolfe and Associates, LLC, Duncanville, TX, agrees:

My community psychology background has always given me a little bit different perspective than my co-workers, and that translates into the work I do. For example, in my job as an evaluator for a school district, my co-workers all have education backgrounds. My supervisor often finds my background useful for evaluating programs that are more community-based rather than strictly focused on education, such as a community-based art project and homeless student services.

Kelly Kinnison Social Science Research Analyst at the Office of Research and Analysis for the Food and Nutrition Service at the USDA in Alexandria, VA, says,

My community psychology degree has shaped my work in a variety of ways. My unique combination of methodological skills, approach to understanding social problems, and capacity to work within organizations and the community were all developed in the context of community psychology. In my work, that means that understanding is gleaned through the application of an ecological framework, which both fits with and advances the current use of the ecological theory in Public Health. My broad training in research methods and, more importantly, the tailored training in research methods consistent with the values of community psychology, have been particularly advantageous in my current position designing program evaluations for Federal nutrition assistance programs. Furthermore, my work with vulnerable populations and the complex intersections of social problems like hunger, poverty, food access, and obesity has certainly been possible because of the training and education I received in my graduate program.

In short, community psychologists work with others—individuals, community groups, schools, governments, and nonprofits—to try to help them do what they are already doing, better.

## Community psychology quick links

These links provide useful further reading on this degree area.

- » Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) – Division 27 of the American Psychological Association (APA)  
[www.scra27.org](http://www.scra27.org)

## People who look at this degree also consider

- » Community development
  - » Clinical psychology
  - » Community psychiatry
  - » Applied social psychology
  - » Community mental health
  - » Nonprofit management
  - » Social work
  - » Counseling
  - » Public health
- » Get overviews of some of these fields at [www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/overviews.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/overviews.html)

