

11 Things

You Really Need To Know About Going To Graduate School in Counseling or Art Therapy



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**SOUTHWESTERN
COLLEGE**

CONSCIOUSNESS-CENTERED GRADUATE SCHOOL
FOR COUNSELING AND ART THERAPY

11 Things You Really Need To Know About Going To Graduate School in Counseling or Art Therapy

--from a graduate school president

Dr. James Michael Nolan

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Introduction

We all know that graduate school is a very expensive decision, not only in terms of money (which it is), but in terms of time, energy, and opportunity costs (the stuff you will NOT get to do if you go to graduate school, like work and make money, or backpack in India.) But for many of us, going into the “Helping Professions” or the “Healing Arts” is a calling, and we know all the costs, and we are happy to go to grad school and get the journey going.

When done right, graduate school can absolutely transform your life, and set you on a meaningful and sustainable career path for many decades to come.

But you have to get it right. And to get it really right, you have to be an informed consumer. Here’s the problem: Graduate schools have a really bad track record of informing you about anything that might make them less attractive to you. It’s just the way it is. The schools do not want to lose a prospective student that represents additional income. (Usually a lot of additional income,) It’s about business.

But as the president of a graduate school (Southwestern College in Santa Fe), I am writing this book because I feel it is the right thing to do—because it is the conscious and ethical thing to do—and because being conscious and ethical and forthcoming is ultimately, almost paradoxically, the best thing for business. But many schools forget that, or never knew it.

So I want you to know what you are doing, to have some facts and information that grad schools tend not to disclose. In medicine and in therapy, there has to be informed consent before they can treat you, so that you know exactly what you are getting into. The options are presented, and discussed. But in sales, it doesn’t always work that way. Even in higher education.

Let’s start from the beginning. You want to go to grad school to become a therapist. Maybe eventually you would like to teach, or consult, or coach, but pursuing a clinical degree program usually means you have some interest in being a therapist.

The good news is that a number of graduate degrees can get you to that kind of career. If you want to be a therapist, and see clients, you can take a number of different paths.

What are the differences? Are they all more or less the same? What else do I need to know?

Great questions. That is what this book is all about.

Let's get started.

#1: Are Counseling Psychology and Counseling the same thing?

Absolutely Not! This sounds crazy (and it is), but I assure you it's true, and it is one of the LEAST understood distinctions in the mental health fields, even by people who are one or the other.

Pursuing Counseling or Counseling Psychology are two RADICALLY different propositions, and if you are thinking of getting a graduate degree, or find yourself thinking you want to be a "Counselor", you really have to know the difference. Getting this one wrong could cost you tens of thousands of dollars and your dreams, and those are high stakes.

The Field of Counseling

OK—What is Counseling? Counseling is "Counseling"—it comes under the regulatory umbrella of The American Counseling Association (ACA) <http://www.counseling.org/>. You can get a two (or so) year master's degree in Counseling and be eligible to sit for licensure as a Counselor in all 50 states. You have to complete a 600 hour (usually) internship, and then, after graduating, accumulate 2,000 hours of supervised work experience (one full time year.) Where I come from, in New Mexico, you can then take and pass the exam, and become an LPCC, or Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor. You can see private clients, get third party payments, and eventually supervise other counselors in training. You can teach in some college or community college settings (though not in a doctoral program--or very rarely, say, if you are famous, or have published books, or are the Dalai Lama.)

Counseling Psychology

Counseling Psychology, on the other hand, falls under the regulatory umbrella of the American Psychological Association (APA) <http://www.apa.org/>, which has absolutely nothing to do with ACA. In fact, in some states the Counseling and Psychology fields are virtually antagonistic toward each other.

In the United States, to become a “Counseling Psychologist”, you have to get a PhD in a Counseling Psychology, do a 2,000 hour internship (compare to Counseling’s 600 hour internship), accumulate another 2,000 hours (one full time year) of supervised work experience after graduation, pass the national licensing exam for Psychology, then probably a smaller state exam as well, and then you are a Psychologist. It takes about 5-8 years, depending on your progress. You end up a PhD, a “Doctor”, a “Psychologist”.

By the way, although there are three (3) licensure tracks in Psychology (Clinical, Counseling and School), Clinical and Counseling end up getting the same license. So your license will not say “Clinical Psychologist” or “Counseling Psychologist”—just Psychologist. However, some Psychologists refer to themselves as a “Clinical Psychologist”, just so you know what specialty they pursued, even though it does not say that on their license.

Clarification & Summary

“OK, but tell me again, what the heck is a “Counselor” then, as opposed to a “Counseling Psychologist”? “

Well, when you study Counseling, you end up a Counselor, or Professional Counselor. When you study Counseling Psychology, you end up a Psychologist. To become a Counselor takes about 2-3 years, Psychologist 5-8 years. Obviously a huge time differential there (and cost differential), so you have to be REALLY clear what your goals are, and whether you want to spend the extra time for the PhD, and whether it will “pay off” for you.

(By the way, I just Googled the above topics to see what level of clarity the online resources offered on the issue of Counseling and Counseling Psychology, and everything I read was either moderately or wildly incorrect. It’s scary.)

#2: What if I want to be a Psychotherapist? And, uh —what IS a Psychotherapist, anyway?

The world of “Counseling (ACA) “owns” the title “Counselor.” You cannot go out and call yourself a Counselor, and neither can a Psychologist, or a Social Worker. You must have a Counseling License to be a Counselor. On the other hand, a Counselor or a Social Worker also cannot go out and call themselves a “Psychologist.” Those terms are “proprietary”, and owned by their respective professional organizations, for all intents and purposes. You need a license.

The term or title “Psychotherapist” is not owned by anybody. Counselors, Psychologists, Social Workers, Art Therapists, and others can all say they do “Psychotherapy”. Same with the word “Therapist.” A lot of different people can claim to be a Therapist, because it is not, formally speaking, a proprietary term. If somebody with no credentials goes out and says “I am a therapist”, a lot of people would be miffed, and might even try to go after them somehow, but again, nobody owns that term, the way nobody owns “Coaching.” Anybody can call themselves a Coach. Or an Energy Healer. Or a Spiritual Guide.

I know, it is all very weird, but that is how it is. In parallel fashion, some Art Therapists get all up in arms when Counselors and Psychologists use “Art” in therapy. The Art Therapists say “You are not qualified to do Art Therapy!”, and the Counselor says “I am NOT doing Art Therapy, I am USING art-making IN therapy”, and the circle goes around and around.

Territory is power and money. Everybody tries to protect their own against the other guy while quietly encroaching on the other guy’s territory. Seems like it should not be that way in the “Healing Arts”, but the healing arts are populated with human beings, not terriers. I wish it were a mix, personally.

#3: What About Art Therapy?

As you might have expected, this one is complicated too. Art Therapists earn a Master's Degree in Art Therapy, do a 600 hour internship, and, if they live in a state that licenses Art Therapists, they can take the exam and become a licensed Art Therapist (LPAT, in New Mexico—Licensed Professional Art Therapist.)

Here's the problem. Only four (4) states actually license Art Therapists as Art Therapists: New Mexico, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Maryland. (I know, not the four you were expecting.) A number of other states will allow Art Therapy people to sit for licensure as a "Counselor", because they consider Art Therapy to be a related profession. But other states will not allow that. New York has a "Creative Arts Therapist" license, but you have to look at every state individually to see whether your MA in Art Therapy will allow you to practice there.

There is a solution to this one, and it is a good one. Southwestern College in Santa Fe (and perhaps others I do not know about) offers a Master's Degree in "Art Therapy/Counseling", which allows a graduate to sit for licensure in both Art Therapy AND Counseling in most states.

To be honest (and I am biased, because of all the disappointment I have seen among Art Therapy graduates who found out they could not be licensed in the state they moved to), I think it is really a bad decision to go to a master's program that offers ONLY the MA in Art Therapy. (There may be occasional exceptions to this statement, but...) I mean, why would anybody do that and restrict themselves so much in terms of what they are able to do professionally? After spending two to three years and a lot of money, you want an MA in a discipline that is licensed in four states? I just can't understand that decision, personally.

The good news is this: The number of job announcements specifically for Art Therapists is decent, but small. (I posts lists of jobs for Art Therapists, Counselors and Substance Abuse Counselors every month—more about that below.) If you add a Counseling license, the number grows by probably a multiple of 5. Add an Alcohol and Substance license to that (more about that below too), and it doubles again. And if you are a trained Art Therapist, you can bring Art Therapy into any

job, including a job you might get as a Counselor or Substance Abuse Counselor. You can use Art Therapy in any therapeutic modality, but if the only job you are eligible for, or are willing to take, is one that is very specifically advertised as an Art Therapy job, that's fine, that is your choice. Just know you have cut down your employment possibilities by a lot.

The take-away on this one is, "if you are drawn to Art Therapy, Get a dual master's in Art Therapy and Counseling."

#4: Will I need to take the GREs (Graduate Record Exams)?

Many will tell you that yes, you will have to take the GRE, but that is not true. More traditional schools will likely require it. More holistic, integrative, forward-thinking and progressive graduate schools are finding that the "skills" or knowledge bases covered in the GRE are not ones they value enough to require such a daunting and energy-consuming exam. My school (Southwestern College in Santa Fe) does not require the GRE, because we feel the quality of the interaction with the prospective students is far more valuable in determining both if the person would be a good fit at our school, and a good fit for the profession. Nailing the GRE means that you nailed the GRE, probably test well, and you have a strong knowledge base, all of which are nice, but not sufficient for making our admissions decisions. I have to tell you, there are a lot of prospective students who are delighted to hear that we will not require the GREs.

#5: What about distance learning degrees?

I have taught for most of the for-profit, distance learning schools. They can be OK. When they are really good, it is probably because you are really good, and create your own experience. The connection with faculty is distant, in several meanings of that word, and one of their historically huge problems is getting people through the gate-keeping events, like General Exams, the Master's Thesis, and so on, all too often with unskilled or unavailable committee members and chairs. Of course there are exceptions, and I can think of two friends off the bat who are

exceptional in that area, and are in distance learning. But in general, for profit, distance learning programs have been taking a pounding in recent years, because so many of their students have run up enormous student loan debt and still do not finish their program. Do a lot of research on this topic if it interests you. I am not anti-online degrees, and still teach in one, but the quality of the students' experiences and educations vary dramatically, and many people are just poorly suited for the kind of discipline and willingness/capacity to work in isolation that such programs require. Caveat emptor! Know Thyself! Also, Art Therapy is different than Counseling or Psychology. I can't really see why somebody would want to study Art Therapy in a distance learning setting. I really can't.

#6: Is there reciprocity among states? In other words, if I get a license in one state, will I be able to transfer it to another state?

Probably not. At least not without some extra coursework, another exam, and so on. Professional disciplines are always talking about this, discussing the possibility that you could just pass one national exam and be licensed everywhere, but they are not having much luck figuring out how to do it.

This should not discourage you too much, since you can usually work it out, take the extra coursework, and get on with it. But you really should look at all the states you think you could possibly end up (I know, that is not always easy to know), and bookmark them, and track them, and look at their requirements every so often, as they can change like Facebook without even telling you.

#7: Are the classes in the various programs pretty much the same?

No. Many programs are still very old school, with seasoned professors downloading their "knowledge" to you, and you repeating it back in some fashion to show that you learned it. Unfortunately, that is still a very common model.

Some more progressive schools feature experiential education, transformational education. You learn more by doing, by getting your hands dirty, by deep exploration and challenging of yourself, rather than analyzing others as if they were faulty car parts needing a diagnosis and “fixing.” This is huge. You have to ask about their educational model, about experiential learning opportunities, and when they say “Oh, yeah, we’re experiential”, ask them what that looks like, and see if they really are. Sometimes they even think they are when they are not. So it goes...

#8: Can you say more about the differences among programs?

To simplify matters a bit, let’s put it this way: There are programs that focus on Experiential and Transformational Learning (not many), and there are Old School programs (many). Some people prefer Experiential, some prefer Old School. You have to decide what you are looking for in your graduate school experience.

And as I mentioned—many Old School programs claim to be experiential if you ask them (even though it’s probably not in their literature or on their web site), but they’re not. So you have to know how to shop this one...

Old School involves more lecturing, more of them, less of you, writing traditional papers, most likely all in APA style, third person, because they really do not want to hear what you have to say, since you are only a graduate student—“write about other people’s thoughts, not your own.” The philosophy is more along the lines of “We know a lot of stuff, you don’t, and if we tell you what we know, then you can demonstrate that you know it on a test or in a third person paper, and when you do that for two (or six) years, you will get a degree. Possibly then we will be interested in hearing about your thinking on the subject.”

Of course I am exaggerating a bit, and all schools have some good people. But that is how grad school was when I went through it, more or less. They talked, we took notes. All schools will have practicum and internship experiences, but the classes themselves are very traditional in Old School programs.

At Southwestern College, for example, you might, in any given day, get a brief lecturette, work in dyads, take a medicine walk, role play, do a meditation, draw a mandala, experience a shamanic ceremony, listen to student presentations, or make art. In such a school, the educational philosophy is more in the spirit of “Educare”, or “drawing out that which is within.” The idea is not that the professor knows stuff and you don’t. That may or may not be true, but it is not the point. The skilled professor in an experiential and transformational program will create a safe space and facilitate activities that will allow your own “Inner Knower” to be awakened and drawn forth. Psychology is (or should be) about helping clients access their own Inner Truth, and Inner Knower. That process is learned by going through it yourself. I can share what is true for me, but that is not what’s important. What we really want to find out, at a deep level, is what is true for YOU.

Psychology, and being a therapist, is not primarily about facts, evidence and science, though some in the field will try to sell that point of view. It is about intuition, connecting, emotional intelligence, self-knowledge, skill in being able to reflect deeply on one’s experience in life so that one can facilitate that process in others. That being said, some people still prefer Old School, and are not that interested in their own self-exploration. Those who are interested in their own personal growth are more likely to look for holistic, integrative, experiential programs, where you learn by doing, by getting your hands and psyche dirty, by trusting processes that are not always easy, or comfortable.

So think about that one, and do your homework. This piece of your decision may be the most life-changing of all.

If you are interested in alternative, holistic kinds of programs, here are some names. Of course there is Southwestern College in beautiful Santa Fe, New Mexico. I might be slightly biased in my view that it is the best place in the world to get a master’s degree in Counseling or Art Therapy/Counseling, because I happen to be the president. OK, I am being a little funny here, but this whole book is about being authentic, transparent and honest, so I will give you the names, too, of our sister schools (some would call them competitors): Naropa. CIIS,

Pacifica, Saybrook, JFK (in the Bay area). We are all different in significant ways, but all similar in that we are not Old School, by any means.

#9: Are There Jobs?

Great question. I thought you'd never ask.

Yes, there are jobs. I have blogged a lot about this, and here is what you need to know.

The more mobile you are, the better your chances of finding a good job. That one is kind of obvious. I have always moved to where the job was, and other people would never consider that in a million years.

In 2014, you really have to be on Linked In, and it is really helpful to be involved in social media. Not absolutely necessary, but it does help. I have written a great deal about social media and job hunting, and you can read it here

<http://swc.edu/category/blogs/new-thoughts-from-president-nolan/conscious-entrepreneurship/>

Where do a grad school's graduates work? Any program at a grad school should be sharing that with you on their website. Like here:

<http://swc.edu/category/blogs/alumni-updates/swc-grads-get-jobs/>

And, as suggested earlier, if you go the Art Therapy route, be sure you get a dual license in Counseling, or you are asking for decades of trouble with licensure and fewer job opportunities.

It is important to note, too, that when one first graduates, it is not uncommon for your first jobs to be entry level—as a friend says, you don't start off at \$50K with a leather chair in a beautiful office. It can take some dues paying. I say this because I know of people here in Santa Fe who have complained for years “There are no jobs here!” Fortunately (and comically), I was in the room when two of them launched that speech, and two significant employers in Northern New Mexico, who happened to be in the room, chimed in, in succession “I have 13 openings at my agency”, and other guy said “I have about nine.” That stopped the whine from flowing. What was true for them was “there are no jobs I want available, and I am

NOT driving to Albuquerque (an hour away) or Espanola” (about 30 minutes.) In other words, they were being inordinately picky and entitled about the whole thing, and, as you might have guessed, had the resources to, in effect, not work. THAT is way different from “there are no jobs.”

There are jobs. I post a listing of jobs in Art Therapy, Counseling, and Substance Abuse Counseling every month. You are welcomed to use that service yourself, when you are ready to look for professional work...

#10: What About Alcohol and Substance/Drug Abuse Counseling?

Each state has its own license for this specialty, and, surprisingly, if you are getting a master’s or doctoral degree in a mental health field, it won’t take you a whole heck of a lot more work to get the Alcohol Counselor license. In New Mexico, it is called the LADAC (Licensed Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselor), and at Southwestern College we offer that track, which involves only a few extra courses. Imagine graduating with license eligibility in Art Therapy, Counseling and Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counseling. Now THAT is value, my friend. Seriously.

#11: Are Scholarships available?

You have to check with each college on that one. At Southwestern College (swc.edu) we have a lot of scholarship opportunities and graduate assistantships as well, so yes, some graduate institutions do have scholarships available, and we are one of them.

In Closing

I am hoping this was helpful to you. The knowledge and observations I share here took me decades to collect, and understand, and struggle with at times. I just hate to see prospective students trying to make decisions without the information they need, and not even knowing what they do not know. And it happens all the time.

Hopefully, after reading this, it will not happen to you. I remain available by email (see below) for your questions and requests for clarifications. If I know the answer or have an informed opinion, I will share it with you. If not, I will say so, and I will refer you if I know somebody who does.

Thanks for spending this time with me. Feel free to connect with me on Facebook, Linked In, or Pinterest, and I have a lot of relevant blog posts at the following URL:

<http://swc.edu/category/blogs/new-thoughts-from-president-nolan/>

Best of luck making your way to graduate school, and you should remember, despite all of the sometimes confusing stuff we have just discussed, that being a therapist is a great and noble profession, and you will be making a real contribution to the world, while at the same time experiencing personal growth beyond what you could ever have imagined.

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About The Author

Dr. Nolan has been the president of Southwestern College since June of 2006. He earned his Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from The Ohio State University in 1989 after pursuing graduate studies in English and Irish Literature. Indeed, in addition to humanistic psychology luminaries such as Carl Rogers and Carl Jung, Dr. Nolan's early views on psychology were influenced heavily by the likes of Shakespeare, James Joyce, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Hesse, Jack Kerouac, and Taoist literature. Unfettered by the narrow constraints of so-called "scientific evidence", these visionaries could ask the great questions of the Spirit, and could receive Truth in whatever form it appeared, scientific or mystical. During Dr. Nolan's tenure at Southwestern College, the school built an Art Therapy Complex, added several professional certificate programs, was granted a ten year re-accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission, and has enrolled its largest class ever. In addition, he has been working toward compiling a "History of Quimby/Southwestern College." In addition to his many years in administration, Dr. Nolan has a long professional history in teaching, clinical work and supervision. One of his passions is to work within a Consciousness-based paradigm, while also staying in close touch with current developments in the professions of Counseling and Art Therapy, so that the career and employment needs of students are paramount in all decisions made at Southwestern College. Visit [New Thoughts From President Nolan Blog](#).

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