

> Original Research

Reflective Training: A Tool to Help Diverse Learner Groups Scale-Up Therapy Skills | 407

David L. Roberts, Logan Bruntmyer, Casey L. Straud, Casey Thornton, Austin W. Lemke,
Jason E. Schillerstrom

> Student Forum

Advising Discerning College Students About Psychotherapist Career Options: Unpacking the Alphabet Soup of Graduate Training and Licensure | 420

Thomas G. Plante

> Original Research

Racial Microaggressions and Cultural Intelligence | 426

Monnica T. Williams, Muna Osman, Ahmad Alftieh

> ABCT MATTERS

- President's Message: Change Is Hard but Necessary: Evolving Our Convention to Meet ABCT's Growth in a New Era | **Steven A. Safren** | 439
- CEO's Message: Plodding Forward in Uncertain Times | **Courtney L. White** | 442
- Call for Abstracts—2025: New Orleans | 444
- Call for Continuing Education Ticketed Sessions—2025: New Orleans | 445
- Call for Applications: Fellows | 446
- Convention 2024: Scenes From the Awards Ceremony | 447
- Call for Award Nominations, 2025 | 449
- Call for Nominations—ABCT Governance | 454
- Webinars | 455
- Podcast: Sanity x ABCT | 456

> THIS MONTH'S ADVERTISERS

- Hogrefe Publishing | 409
- New Harbinger Publications | 411
- Anxiety & Depression Association of America | 413
- International Association of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy | 414
- Psychology Tools | 419

PLUS

- > Receive your CEs from ABCT 2024 | 443
- > Graduate Student Research Grant | 453
- > Call for Nominations: Spotlight Researcher | 457

ABCT President: Steven A. Safren

Chief Executive Officer: Courtney L. White

Managing Production Editor: Stephanie Schwartz

Web Manager: Rachel Greeman

the Behavior Therapist

Published by the Association for Behavioral and
Cognitive Therapies | 305 Seventh Avenue,
New York, NY 10001

www.abct.org

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies is a multidisciplinary organization committed to the enhancement of health and well-being by advancing the scientific understanding, assessment, prevention, and treatment of human problems through the global application of behavioral, cognitive, and biological evidence-based principles.

STUDENT FORUM | **Advising Discerning College Students About Psychotherapist Career Options: Unpacking the Alphabet Soup of Graduate Training and Licensure**

Thomas G. Plante, *Santa Clara University and Stanford University School of Medicine*

MANY OF OUR PSYCHOLOGY college students wish to become psychotherapists (Farber et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2013). Becoming a psychotherapist has been a popular career choice for psychology majors for decades (Huynh & Rhodes, 2011; Kottler, 2022). The popularity of psychotherapy as a career option is likely only to increase, given the recent attention to mental health troubles among youth in particular and the reduced stigma of seeking mental health professional help (Bommersbach et al., 2023; Cullen, et al., 2020; Weisz et al., 2019). Many celebrities with a great deal of media attention and social media followers have recently admitted to mental health struggles and have discussed the many benefits of psychotherapy. Furthermore, the U.S. Surgeon General has offered several unprecedented recent advisories highlighting the increased numbers of people with mental health concerns and the need for more professionals to serve those in need (Ferrari, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2017; Office of the Surgeon General, 2021).

However, given all of the attention mental health problems and treatment options have received in recent years, our students are easily confused and are often misinformed about the best path forward in pursuing graduate training and then licensing as a psychotherapist. In my over 30 years of teaching psychology undergraduates, it has often become a daily ritual for me to meet with confused students and try to help them discern their path forward following college to become licensed psychotherapists. While there are many resources available to help guide interested students, including books, websites, journal articles, and so forth (e.g., Sayette & Norcross, 2024), one can easily experience an overload of information as well as too many distracting details that can only add to confusion for students trying to make decisions about their post-college graduation plans that are suitable for them. The purpose of this brief article is to help both students and their faculty advisors better understand options for graduate training leading to licensure as a psychotherapist in a brief, simple, straightforward, and direct manner.

Before a fruitful and productive discussion about graduate training and career options can begin, it might be helpful to introduce students to a structured strategy for decision making and discernment using the four Ds (i.e., discovery, detachment, discernment, and direction; Plante, 2017, 2024). The four Ds originated from the work of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits, 500 years ago, but has been adapted to use with secular and modern audiences (Burton et al., 2023; Plante, 2017, 2024; Tan, 2023).

The Four Ds of Decision-Making

Discovery refers to an understanding of one's gifts, talents, and desires. Asking students about what they are interested in, compelled by, and talented in provides a richer understanding of their gifts and desires to thoughtfully consider when advising them about potential career possibilities. *Detachment* refers to avoiding the subtle and not-

Copyright © 2025 by
the Association for
Behavioral and
Cognitive Therapies.

The author declares no
conflicts of interest.

Thomas G. Plante
ORCID: 0000-0001-5314-
2991

Correspondence to

Thomas G. Plante, Ph.D.,
Department of Psychology,
Santa Clara University,
Santa Clara, CA 95053
tplante@scu.edu

so-subtle influences of society, peers, parents, and others who may have strong views or agendas for their career paths and decisions. This might include practical matters such as likely income, prestige, or following the footsteps of their family members in business, medicine, law, and so forth. Students are asked to at least temporarily detach from these influences to help determine their own desires and goals. *Discernment* focuses on reflecting on what provides consolation versus desolation when considering various graduate training and career options. For example, students might feel more engaged by and comfortable with certain career pathways than with others. Finally, *direction* speaks to next steps in decision-making where specific issues and questions can be addressed to develop clarity and a game plan about what to do next. The four-D process will help to prepare students for specific questions that can assist them in determining their best path forward to reach their educational, career, and professional goals.

Three Critical Questions for Psychotherapist Career Path Discernment

The path to becoming a psychotherapist is especially confusing for many as there are so many possibilities and tracks to consider (Karazsia & Smith, 2016; Landrum, 2018; Protivnak & Yensel, 2017; Schatz & Ansborg, 2020). Students, and often faculty advisors, can easily be perplexed by the “alphabet soup” of options and potential directions (e.g., MFT, LCSW, LPC, PhD, PsyD). This confusion can be simplified by asking students to answer a few basic questions in a particular order to help them narrow their options and select the one that is most likely to meet their needs, desires, and goals. Following the four-D process, I would suggest starting a conversation with these three important questions:

Question 1: *Do you want to be a psychotherapist only and thus have no interest in conducting research, teaching at the college or university level, or conducting psychological assessments such as neuropsychology testing, cognitive or intellectual assessment, and personality or psychopathology assessment?*

If students answer “yes” to this question, then they may be interested in a master’s-level degree and licensure as a social worker (i.e., LCSW), marriage and family therapist (i.e., MFT), or licensed professional counselor (i.e., LPC). Since licensure occurs at the state, and not federal, level, students should check to be sure that the pathway that they choose is licensable in the state (or states) that they likely will settle in when they complete their training. Most states offer licensing in all of these areas but some states will license MFTs but not LPCs while other states will license LPCs but not MFTs. Checking with the state licensing boards in the states of interest would be advised before applying to graduate programs, especially when applying to graduate programs in states other than the one the student is most interested in settling in when their graduate training program is completed.

Master-level training programs are generally not very selective or competitive and so students with various grade point averages and backgrounds, including with diverse academic majors not in psychology, may be able to enroll in many of these training programs. The training programs will likely cost money, with private schools being generally much more expensive than public ones. Additionally, few scholarships are typically available to offset costs. Since these training programs usually take only about 2 years of study to complete compared with the longer length of time that it takes to complete an undergraduate or a doctoral degree, the costs may be more manageable. In most states, a post-degree internship year of supervised training experience is needed before one is eligible

for licensure. This post-degree internship often includes a modest stipend.

Question 2: *Do you want to be a psychotherapist who also conducts psychological assessment such as neuropsychological testing, forensic evaluations, cognitive or intellectual assessments, and personality and psychopathology evaluations?*

If students answer “yes” to this question, then they should pursue a doctoral degree (PhD or PsyD) at either a university or at a free-standing professional school setting. If students are not interested in research or teaching at the college or university level and want to focus primarily on clinical applications such as psychotherapy and psychological or neuropsychological assessment, then they might focus their graduate school search attention on either PsyD programs or any of the doctoral degrees offered at free-standing professional schools.

Like master-level training programs, free-standing professional schools, unaffiliated with universities, tend to be generally nonselective in their admission processes and thus students with diverse college academic performance and with different academic majors can often be admitted to these doctoral training programs. Additionally, students who are older and perhaps have had other careers or family obligations are welcome to apply to most of these training programs too. Free-standing professional schools tend to depend on tuition dollars for their operations at a much higher percentage than universities and so class sizes tend to be larger and tuition costs can be high as well. Few scholarships are generally available for most students, with some exceptions for minority students. Since doctoral programs take 4 or more years to complete, the costs of training can be very high, especially at these nonuniversity-affiliated, free-standing professional school graduate programs.

Question 3: *Do you want to be a psychotherapist who not only conducts psychotherapy and psychological testing but also conducts research and potentially has interest in teaching at the college or university level?*

If student answer “yes” to this question, then they likely want to direct their graduate school search attention to PhD programs in university settings only. These programs are generally highly competitive and thus excellent grades, test scores, and previous research and clinical experience is strongly advised prior to submitting an application for admission. Additionally, applying broadly to many schools across the country is usually needed as well to increase the probability of receiving an invitation to enroll in at least one of these programs. Some graduate training programs require applying to a particular faculty member’s laboratory or research group while others require a more general admission application procedure without specifically indicating which faculty member the student hopes to work with. Some programs are very research focused, with little attention to clinical training, while others are more balanced with equal attention to both clinical and research training and experiences. A close review of each graduate program’s informational material as well as speaking to current or recent students and faculty might be helpful to determine if the program fits the applicant’s needs and desires.

Earning a PhD from a university in an accredited clinical or counseling psychology program provides students with the most career options and opportunities in that these graduates can later pursue careers in clinical work such as psychotherapy and psychological testing but also pursue careers in research, teaching, consultation, or a combination of all of these options. However, students who have little interest in research might be disappointed with these university-based PhD training programs if they are primarily interested in becoming clinicians. A significant advantage of PhD programs

offered in university settings is that typically research or teaching fellowships are available so that the financial costs to students tend to be much lower (and might even be completely free) compared to other graduate training options (i.e., terminal master's degrees, PsyD degrees, or degrees from free-standing professional schools).

Once these three questions are presented and answered, it might be helpful for students to consider several other common issues and questions about graduate training leading to professional licensure before making their decision about which programs to apply to.

Important Additional Considerations for Psychotherapy Career Path Discernment

Specialization Training

Students often wonder if they need to enter a graduate training program with a clear specialty in mind. Perhaps they are considering focusing their graduate training attention on children, adolescents, families, adults, or the elderly. Maybe they are interested in particular diagnoses such as eating disorders, depression, anxiety, trauma, autism spectrum disorders, or major psychopathology such as schizophrenia. They may wonder about particular professional training methods such as dialectical behavior therapy, trauma-informed therapy, or working with particular subgroups such as BIPOC (i.e., Black, Indigenous, People of Color) clients. Some training programs require students to select a specialty or subspecialty interest during the application process, while others do not. Since interests can change over time and also might change after students obtain advanced training and experiences in the field, it is recommended to secure a broad and diverse education in order to make a more informed decision about specialization later in one's training program and career.

Interstate Training

Students often wonder if they can complete their graduate training in any state. Since each state has its own requirements for licensing, they should be mindful of individual state requirements in whatever state (or states) they hope to settle in once they complete their graduate degree and seek state licensure. Typically, there are mechanisms in place to be licensed across state lines, but glitches can easily occur when different states have different requirements for licensure. One recent development for psychologists that offers some degree of helpful licensure reciprocity between states is PsyPact (Taube et al., 2023; Younggren et al., 2022). More than 40 of the 50 states are now members of PsyPact that offers a pathway to be a recognized licensed provider in multiple states once licensure is secured in one of the PsyPact states.

Overseas Training

Some students wonder if they might complete their graduate training in another country. This is not recommended, unless they are considering Canada since educational and licensing requirements overseas often do not closely match those of the United States. Thus, students may complete graduate training overseas only to realize that getting licensed in the U.S. after they graduate results in many insurmountable obstacles. If students wish to work in the U.S. when their graduate training is complete, they would be best served if they complete their graduate training in the U.S. as well. Canada is the one exception as their training program requirement mostly match those in the U.S.

Applying for a Terminal Master's Degree First Before Working Towards a Doctoral Degree

Often students wonder if they should apply for a terminal master's degree first and

then decide later if they want to continue their graduate training to earn a doctoral degree. The problem with this plan is that many doctoral degree programs will not recognize all of the classes taken as part of a terminal master's degree program and they may not accept some or all of the credits earned. Thus, for most students, it is likely best to decide if they wish to pursue a terminal master's degree program leading to a masters-based licensure or a doctoral degree program leading to a doctoral-based license.

Degree Programs and Licensure Titles Can Be Misleading

Students often are confused by what degree programs and licensure titles allow them to actually do in clinical practice. For example, someone who has a license as a marriage and family therapist (i.e., MFT) can do marriage and family therapy, but they also can conduct individual therapy, group therapy, and couples' therapy where the couples they are working with are not married. A licensed clinical social worker can do individual, couple, group, and family therapy as well as case management and advocacy work. The critical issue is that professionals must stay within their lane of professional training, supervision, and competence and not deviate or dabble in areas that they have no or little training or expertise (American Psychological Association, 2017). Both legally and ethically, professionals need to maintain competence and work in the areas of practice that they are adequately trained in, regardless of the title of their degree or license.

Required Training Does Not End With the Degree, and Post-Degree Training Is Necessary Before State Licensure

Students may assume that once they earn their graduate degree, they have fully completed their training and are ready for state licensure. Almost all states require at least 1 year of post-degree supervised training experience before eligibility for state licensure. Thus, students must complete an internship or post-degree fellowship under the supervision of licensed professionals before they are allowed to sit for most state licensing exams. A modest living stipend is usually provided for this post-degree year of supervised training and experience.

Conclusion

Many college students are interested in becoming psychotherapists but are easily confused about the best path to do so. Since there are many training and licensing options to consider, there are multiple opportunities for confusion, misinformation, and distraction to make the best choice given their interests, skills, and hopes for their future career path. Asking students to first participate in a decision-making process—the four Ds—that highlights discovery, detachment, discernment, and direction before considering three critical questions may help them find the right direction. Thoughtful reflection and discernment about their options may avoid errors in decision-making as well as later regrets.

REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association. (2017). *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*. Author.
- Bommersbach, T. J., McKean, A. J., Olfson, M., & Rhee, T. G. (2023). National trends in mentalhealth-related emergency department visits among youth, 2011-2020. *JAMA*, 329(17), 1469-1477. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2023.4809>

- Burton, N., Vu, M. C., & Hawkins, M. (2023). Secular discernment: A process of individual unlearning and collective relearning. *Management Learning*, 54(5), 680-704. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050762211009>
- Cullen, W., Gulati, G., & Kelly, B. D. (2020). Mental health in the COVID-19 pandemic. *QJM*, 113(5), 311-312. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcaa110>
- Farber, B. A., Manevich, I., Metzger, J., & Saypol, E. (2005). Choosing psychotherapy as a career: Why did we cross that road? *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(8), 1009-1031. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20174>
- Ferrari, A. (2016). Using celebrities in abnormal psychology as teaching tools to decrease stigma and increase help seeking. *Teaching of Psychology*, 43(4), 329-333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628316662765>
- Hill, C. E., Lystrup, A., Kline, K., Gebru, N. M., Birchler, J., Palmer, G., Robinson, J., Um, M., Griffin, S., Lipsky, E., Knox, S., & Pinto-Coelho, K. (2013). Aspiring to become a therapist: Personal strengths and challenges, influences, motivations, and expectations of future psychotherapists. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 26(3-4), 267-293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2013.825763>
- Hoffman, S. J., Mansoor, Y., Natt, N., Sritharan, L., Belluz, J., Caulfield, T., Freedhoff, Y., Lavis, J. N., & Sharma, A. M. (2017). Celebrities' impact on health-related knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and status outcomes: protocol for a systematic review, meta-analysis, and meta-regression analysis. *Systematic Reviews*, 6, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-016-0395-1>
- Huynh, L., & Rhodes, P. (2011). Why Do People Choose to Become Psychologists? A Narrative Inquiry. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 17(2), 64-70.
- Karazsia, B. T., & Smith, L. (2016). Preparing for graduate-level training in professional psychology: Comparisons across clinical PhD, counseling PhD, and clinical PsyD programs. *Teaching of Psychology*, 43(4), 305-313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628316662760>
- Kottler, J. A. (2022). *On being a therapist*. Oxford University Press.
- Landrum, R. E. (2018). Affordances and alignments: Continuing challenges in advising undergraduate psychology majors. *Teaching of Psychology*, 45(1), 84-90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628317745462>
- Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The US surgeon general's advisory*. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34982518/>
- Plante, T. G. (2017). The 4 Ds: Using Ignatian spirituality in secular psychotherapy and beyond. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 4(1), 74-79. <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000122>
- Plante, T. G. (2024). *Living Better with Spiritually Based Strategies that Work: Workbook for Spiritually Informed Therapy (SIT)*. Cognella.
- Protivnak, J. J., & Yensel, J. F. (2017). Recruiting undergraduate students: Creating a path to the counseling profession. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 9(1), 8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7729/91.1152>
- Sayette, M. A., & Norcross, J. C. (2024). *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology*. Guilford Publications.
- Schatz, R. T., & Ansborg, P. I. (2020). Advising psychology majors about graduate school in psychology: Current practices and challenges. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 6(1), 36. <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000165>
- Tan, J. B. C. (2023). *How Then Shall We Guide?: A Comparative Study of Ignatius of Loyola and John Calvin as Spiritual Guides*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Taube, D. O., Shapiro, D. L., Harster, K., Cruitt, P., & Maddux, J. (2023). Problems with the interjurisdictional regulation of psychological practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 54(6), 389. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000536>
- Weisz, J. R., Kuppens, S., Ng, M. Y., Vaughn-Coaxum, R. A., Ugueto, A. M., Eckshtain, D., & Corteselli, K. A. (2019). Are psychotherapies for young people growing stronger? Tracking trends over time for youth anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and conduct problems. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14(2), 216-237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618805436>
- Younggren, J. N., Gottlieb, M. C., & Baker, E. (2022). Navigating the labyrinth of professional regulations: Surviving in a flawed regulatory system. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 53(4), 333. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000468> ■