

## BRIDGING EDUCATION AND CAREER

# Psychology training prepares PhD graduates for careers in a variety of settings

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*Based on a collaborative project by the Council of Graduate Schools and the American Psychological Association, this info-brief is one of a series that examines psychology doctoral graduates' program experiences and career outcomes.*

### KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Most psychology PhD graduates reported that their PhD program prepared them for their jobs very well, regardless of the sector in which they work.
- Psychology education prepares those working in educational settings better than those working in the government or private (for-profit and non-profit) settings.
- By cohort group, those who graduated 9 or more years ago indicated the highest levels of career preparation.
- The majority of psychology graduates reported that they “definitely would” or “probably would” pursue a PhD in psychology again.

According to the National Science Foundation’s National Survey of College Graduates, in 2017, there were approximately 187,000 psychology doctoral or professional degree holders in the workforce.<sup>1</sup> About 35% worked in educational settings, 55% worked in private settings, and 10% worked in government settings.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that they work in a variety of settings, 97% believed their jobs are related to psychology. How well did their psychology training prepare them for the job? How did they apply skills learned to the workforce? What career paths did they take?

### Findings

In the PhD Career Pathways survey distributed by the Council of Graduate Schools and its partner institutions, psychology PhD graduates were asked how well their programs prepare them for their jobs.<sup>3</sup> Psychology graduates reported high levels of career preparation across all work sectors. Most psychology graduates reported that their PhD program prepared them for their jobs “extremely well” or “very well”, regardless of the sector in which they work.

<sup>1</sup> American Psychological Association. (2018). Careers in Psychology. [Interactive Data Tool].

<https://www.apa.org/workforce/data-tools/careers-psychology>

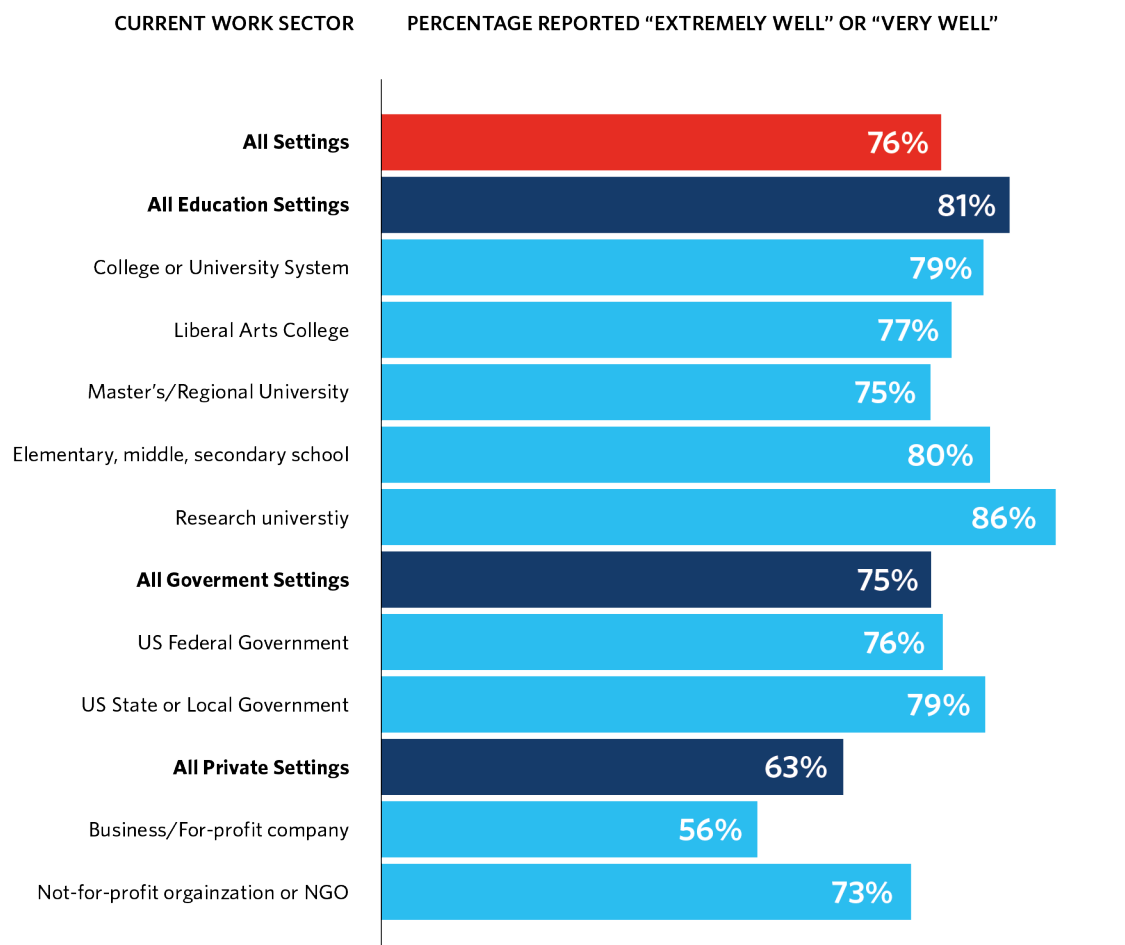
<sup>2</sup> Educational settings include research university, master’s/regional university, liberal arts college, community or two-year college, college or university system, and preschool, elementary, middle, secondary school or school system. Private settings include non-profit and for-profit organizations. Government settings include US federal (including military), state, or local government, as well as non-US government. These work sectors are mutually exclusive categories.

<sup>3</sup> PsyD degree holders were not included in the survey. Respondents were asked “How well did your PhD program in [subfield] from [institution] prepare you for your job as [job title]?”: “Poorly”, “Fairly well”, “Well”, “Very well”, and “Extremely well”. Results were based on those reported “Very well” or “Extremely well”.

Not surprisingly, those working in educational settings felt better prepared for their career than those working in other settings. The reported level of program preparation was highest among psychology graduates working in educational institutions—81% reported that their psychology program prepared them for their jobs “extremely well” or “very well”. Those working in the government (75%), for-profit (56%), and non-profit (73%) sectors reported lower levels of program preparation. This pattern is not unique to psychology and is similar to other STEM fields.<sup>4</sup>

FIGURE 1

#### HOW WELL DID YOUR PSYCHOLOGY PHD PROGRAM PREPARE YOU FOR YOUR JOB?



Note: Categories with fewer than 20 observations were not shown in this figure due to small sample sizes.

When the results are broken down by cohort group (0-3, 4-8, and 9 or more years post-graduation), those who graduated 9 or more years ago reported the highest levels of career preparation. Of those working in the private sector 9 or more years post-graduation, about 77% reported that their psychology degree prepared them for their jobs “extremely well” or “very well”, compared to 58% and 55% for those in the private sector 0-3 and 4-8 years post-graduation. Similar patterns were found between the cohort groups within educational settings and the government as well.

The majority of psychology graduates reported that they “definitely would” or “probably would” still pursue a PhD in general, a PhD in psychology, and choose the same institution if they had to start again.<sup>5</sup> For those working in educational settings, 86% reported that they would pursue a PhD in general if they had to start again; 83% would pursue a PhD in psychology and 79% would choose the same institution. Those working in the government or the private sector (for-profit and non-profit) reported similar percentages.

<sup>4</sup> Okahana, H., Zhou, E., & Kinoshita, T. (2019). *CGS Research in Brief: Closing Gaps in our Knowledge of PhD Career Pathways: How Well Did a STEM PhD Train Degree Recipients for Their Careers?* <https://cgsnet.org/cgs-research-brief-closing-gaps-our-knowledge-phd-career-pathways-how-well-did-stem-phd-train-degree?nl=>

<sup>5</sup> Respondents were asked “Given the perspective that you have gained since completing your program, if you had to start again, how likely would you do the following?”: “Pursue a PhD in general”, “Pursue a PhD in the same field”, and “Choose the same institution for doctoral education” – “Definitely would not”, “Probably would not”, “Indifferent”, “Probably would”, and “Definitely would”. Results were based on those reported “Probably would” or “Definitely would”.

These findings suggest that the versatility of psychology training not only allows psychology graduates to work in a variety of work settings, but also gives them the ability to explore different career pathways, as demonstrated through the career mobility of psychology graduates, especially for those in earlier career stages.

FIGURE 2

### HOW WELL DID YOUR PSYCHOLOGY PHD PROGRAM PREPARE YOU FOR YOUR JOB?

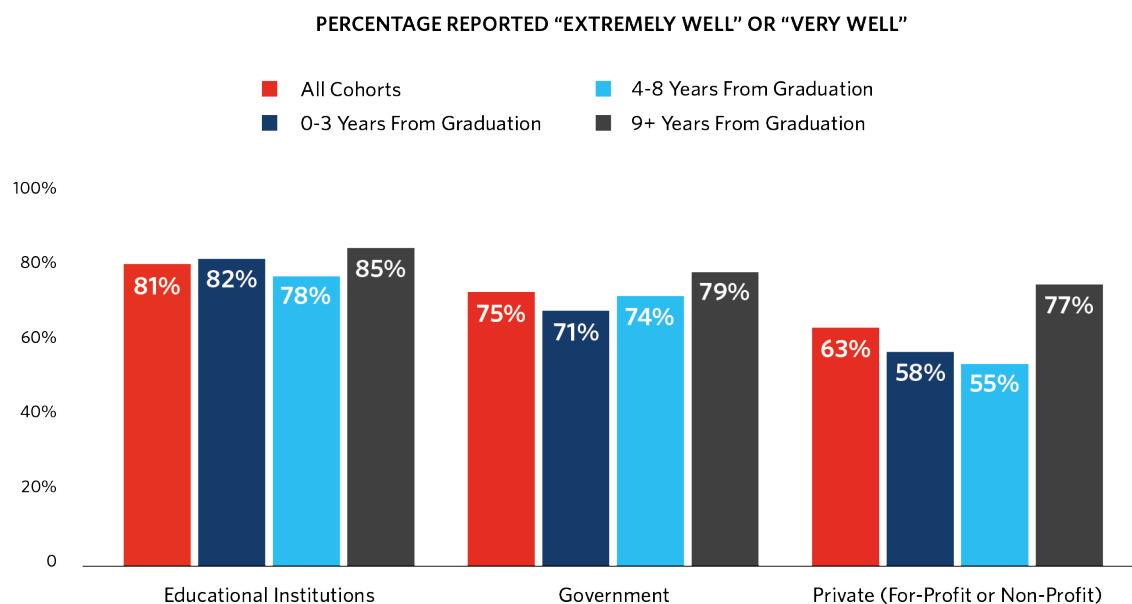
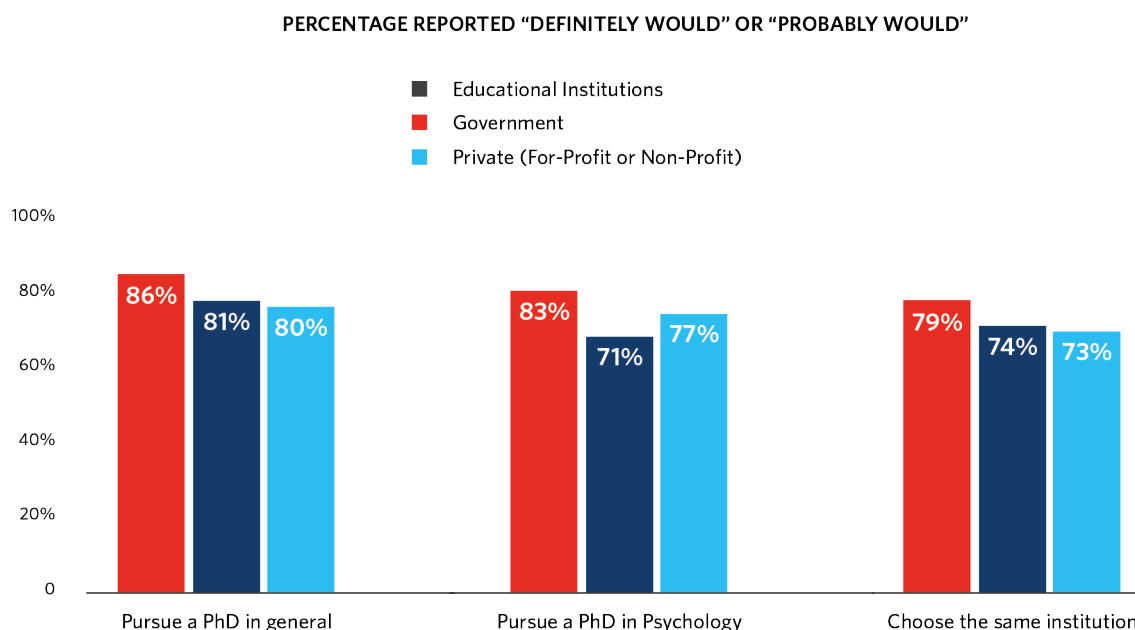


FIGURE 3

### GIVEN THE PERSPECTIVE THAT YOU HAVE GAINED SINCE COMPLETING YOUR PROGRAM, IF YOU HAD TO START AGAIN, HOW LIKELY WOULD YOU DO THE FOLLOWING?



## Conclusion and Discussion: How to help psychology graduates achieve their career goals?

Results from this analysis show graduate psychology training is applicable to careers in a variety of settings. However, it also suggests psychology graduate training does not prepare graduates working beyond academic settings as well as those within academic settings. These findings indicate potential areas of improvement for psychology programs to incorporate relevant training and professional development opportunities for those working beyond academia.

- Encourage career diversity. Although academic and practitioner occupations are common, psychology graduates work in a wide range of occupations and settings. Programs could better prepare students to understand the versatility of a psychology degree and utilize resources such as APA's [Careers in Psychology](#) data tool to help them with career decisions.
- Increase professional development opportunities outside academia and health services positions. Invite mid- or late-career alumni working in different work environments to share their experience and provide more resources and guidance to students to support the transition from degree to career. Engage with and foster partnerships with current and prospective employers to provide more professional development opportunities such as internships.
- Utilize resources to identify skills that are valued in job markets. [APA's Job Advertisements in Psychology](#) data tool is a useful resource that describes the characteristics of job advertisements in psychology, including trends, geographic distribution, and qualifications. APA offers resources to help programs and trainees learn more about career pathways and jobs on its [Individual Development Plan \(IDP\)](#) resource portal and its [How Did you Get that Job?](#) webinar series.

## About the Data

All data in the analysis were collected through the Council of Graduate Schools' (CGS) PhD Career Pathways Project (2017 and 2018 survey cycles), supported by grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (grant number 31600612) and the National Science Foundation (grant number 1661272). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders, nor do they constitute official policy of the APA.

The survey was distributed to PhD degree recipients and asked questions pertaining to their program experience and career outcomes. Each participating university administered the survey and shared the survey data with CGS. CGS produced aggregated data for APA to analyze the program experience and career outcomes of psychology graduates.

The analysis was based on a combined sample of psychology graduates, which consisted of 426 individuals from 33 institutions from the 2017 survey cycle, and 585 individuals from 40 institutions from the 2018 survey cycle. As the survey was distributed to PhD degree recipients only, PsyD degree holders were not included in this analysis.

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For more information on the psychology education pipeline and workforce, visit [www.apa.org/workforce](http://www.apa.org/workforce)

For more information on the PhD Career Pathways Project, visit [cgsnet.org/understanding-career-pathways](http://cgsnet.org/understanding-career-pathways)

## Recommended Citations

American Psychological Association. (2021). Bridging education and career: Psychology training prepares PhD graduates for careers in a variety of settings. <https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/psycpathways/training-preparation.pdf>

American Psychological Association. (2021). Bridging education and career: Essential skills for psychology PhDs. <https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/psycpathways/essential-skills.pdf>

American Psychological Association. (2021). Bridging education and career: Non-linear career pathways in psychology. <https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/psycpathways/non-linear-career.pdf>



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