

Questions and Answers

About the NIU Specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy

Why should I choose to study marriage and family therapy in a program that's accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education?

The Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE), a branch of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), is the only accreditation body that accredits marriage and family therapy (MFT) education programs. The Commission sets the standards for education in the MFT profession, dictating the curriculum for its accredited master's degree and doctoral programs. The Commission, in turn, is given the authority to accredit MFT programs by the U.S. Department of Education.

Practically speaking, accreditation means several things. *First*, accreditation ensures that the MFT program is regularly monitored and evaluated by someone outside the University. When an accreditation body looks over the shoulders of a University, the University tends to comply. University administrators often like accredited programs, so they treat them well.

Second, accreditation means your degree will mean something wherever you choose to work. There are over 75 accredited MFT master's and doctoral programs in the U.S. and Canada today. That's a large enough group to help spread the word about the quality of all accredited MFT programs -- including your possible future alma mater.

Third, accreditation guarantees that your courses will satisfy the educational requirements for clinical membership in AAMFT. It's great to be able to open the AAMFT membership application and know that you don't have to list every graduate course you've ever taken or send copies of syllabi. You will already be sure that AAMFT will accept your completed courses.

Fourth, accreditation almost certainly assures that your degree will satisfy the educational requirements for state regulation if you move to a state that regulates the profession of marriage and family therapy. To date, 42 states have regulated MFT; all accept the courses of accredited programs.

Why should I choose NIU instead of one of the other programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education?

When you compare the accredited programs, many of them may look similar. NIU's program stands out, we think, in several ways. Here's another list.....

First, the entire program at NIU reflects the systemic view held by the faculty and by systemic family therapists everywhere. We practice in ways consistent with what we teach; we apply systemic ideas in and out of therapy. You will not be lectured at in our MFT courses; you will be encouraged to discover what you believe and what you can do.

Second, we teach the latest ideas occurring in the field as well as the classics. In fact, we are proud to say that our faculty have developed new ideas and techniques that recently have influenced the profession. Their presence is consistently felt at national MFT conferences, and in past years they have fulfilled invitations to give workshops and lectures in Iceland, Norway, Greece, and Canada. Several of their papers have also been published internationally. This growing recognition has many advantages. In past years we have been visited by prominent therapists from Australia, Finland, Norway, Austria, and Greece.

Third, our students are among the finest people we know. They are bright, warm, funny, serious, committed, creative, and generous. We think you'll like them too.

Not surprisingly, our students have often been recognized for their achievements. Several have won AAMFT minority fellowships, several have published papers in leading professional journals, and many of them have given presentations at state and national conferences, including the 2007 AAMFT conference in Long Beach, California. Students in the department have been accepted in the Ph.D. programs at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Iowa State University, Purdue University, Virginia Tech, University of Georgia, Michigan State University, Texas Tech University, Kansas State, Syracuse University, and Florida State University.

We encourage you to talk to our current students and our alumni, too, if you can. The former can often be reached at (815) 753-1684.

Fourth, the **Specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy (SMFT)** is a well-established program at Northern Illinois University, first accredited in 1983. The accreditation of the program, the quality of our students, the scholarship of our faculty, and the Specialization's national reputation combine to ensure that our students are well respected from the day they enter the University.

Fifth, our program is situated in an area rich in resources. Our students take advantage of numerous and excellent internship sites. Well-known therapists in the field serve as guest speakers and occasionally teach classes for the **SMFT** students. This past year, students in the program started a Student Association to address the needs and concerns of students in the program. The Marriage and Family Therapy Student Association is run by first and second year students in the SMFT program. Its main purposes are to give students the opportunity to act as one to implement change in the SMFT program and the Family Center, and to advance different causes of interest among students. Students plan activities, fundraising events for causes of interest, and implement additional training and career development opportunities.

Why should I choose marriage and family therapy rather than social work, clinical psychology, or counseling?

Most of the people who choose to study marriage and family therapy at NIU have considered other mental health disciplines. When they compare the curricula of several programs, though, they somehow know that *marriage and family therapy is what they want*. They want to be skilled in working with couples and families as well as individuals, and they sense that the systemic, ecological perspective of family therapy somehow fits what they value most in life. They value the intensive, closely supervised, clinical training they receive in our program. They also feel confident that there are many jobs out there for family therapists and believe that the future for the MFT profession is bright.

We encourage you to take a long and serious look at every program that interests you whether it's social work, clinical psychology, or counseling, and make the choice that seems right for you.

But what about licensing and jobs?

Just recently all 50 states have begun licensing the practice of marriage and family therapy. This Specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy is an Approved Comprehensive Training Program in Marriage and Family Therapy with the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation (DPR). This means that the DPR has recognized the quality of the SMFT ahead of time. Completing the SMFT simplifies the licensing process and eliminates the necessity of filing myriad supporting documents that are required of others.

For Illinois residents, a copy of the Illinois Marriage and Family Therapy Act and Rules is available upon request by contacting the Springfield Office of the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation at (217) 782-3414 or visiting their webpage at www.dpr.state.il.us.

What do you look for in a student?

We tend to select students who show commitment to family therapy, interest in NIU's program, and appear curious, bright, confident, self-aware, articulate, socially skilled and interesting. The ability to laugh and to take life lightly, while at the same time having the ability to be goal-directed and productive, really seems to appeal to us. Independent thinkers also fit in nicely at NIU.

Traditional academic criteria, such as grade point average and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores are considered, and Graduate School standards are observed. This means that applicants must have a minimum 2.75 overall grade point average based on a 4.0 system in their baccalaureate program. The Graduate School does not set minimum GRE scores, but most students in the **Specialization** have individual scores above 450 on the verbal, quantitative, and analytic scales. Impressions gained during application interviews also receive a great deal of attention.

Prior work experience in social services is not necessary, but it is taken as an indication of a commitment to helping people. Similarly, it is not essential to have had an undergraduate major in family and child studies, psychology, sociology, or the like. Some of our students had undergraduate majors in the humanities (e.g., art, history, english) or the sciences (e.g., engineering, mathematics). However, it's important to note that a psychology, family studies, or sociology background often helps to assure that you have met the Department's prerequisites.

People of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds are particularly encouraged to apply. AAMFT, NIU, and our faculty are committed to recruiting more future therapists who have minority status, as well as those who are bilingual. The diversity of our program is enhanced by the contributions of Dr. Lin Shi, an Asian American who brings an international perspective to the MFT program. Dr. Shi, along with Brent Atkinson and Barb Cuppett (both Caucasian), emphasize themes of social justice, diversity and equality in their teaching and supervision of MFT students. We value all forms of diversity in both our faculty and student body, and offer internship placements in which interns have the opportunity to work with diverse populations. AAMFT offers scholarships for ethnic minority students, and NIU offers significant financial support. We are actively seeking students who value diversity of race, social class, ethnicity, age, culture, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability and spirituality.

How many applicants do you have in a year? How many do you accept?

In recent years, we have received about 35 applications each January. Due to our commitment to provide an intense, high quality educational program we accept only twelve students per year.

How long does the program take to complete and is it full or part time?

The **Specialization** can be completed in 21 months (two academic years plus one summer term between) if it is pursued "full time". The majority of the students choose to study full time; they carry full time course loads (about 12 hours each semester of the first year) and many also have 10 hour per week assistantships and part time jobs.

A few students have tried to keep full time jobs in the first year of the program, but they generally have found it too intense. During the second year of the program it becomes extremely difficult to maintain a full time job due to the heavy clinical caseload carried (approximately 12 hours per week).

The faculty cannot guarantee that every student will complete 500 hours of client contact within 21 months. However, the majority of students in the past five years have completed the requirement.

What are the prerequisites for the program?

The *Graduate Catalog* states: "An applicant is required to have a minimum of 9 semester hours of undergraduate courses in family and child studies, or the equivalent including a course in family relations and one in child or lifespan human development. Three of the nine hours must be an upper-division family theories or child development theories course." This requirement is assessed by the faculty at the time of admission; admission is often granted under the condition that prerequisites be fulfilled by the end of the first year. Fulfilling at least two of the classes prior to starting the specialization is strongly encouraged.

Could I transfer courses that I have taken elsewhere into the program?

Technically, with the approval of the School of FCNS and the Dean of the Graduate School, students may transfer up to 12 hours into the School of FCNS. However, the specificity of courses in the **SMFT** make approval of transfer hours extremely uncommon.

How much does it cost? What types of financial assistance are available?

Out-of-state tuition, fees, and insurance for a full-time graduate student total \$8,327.36 per semester; in-state residents pay \$5,039.36 per semester. For more information on the break down of tuition and fees visit <http://www.niu.edu/bursar/tuition/graduate.shtml>. However, since SMFT students provide a service on behalf of the university (that is, they provide counseling) all **SMFT** students receive **tuition waivers both years** as the university's way of saying "thanks". This tuition waiver reduces costs of general university fees and insurance down to approximately \$1,500 per semester for both in-state and out-of-state residents.

Additionally, students in the Specialization are often employed as graduate assistants to various faculty. In past years, a minimum of 80% of the SMFT students have received an assistantship in the department their first year. Assistantships are also available outside of the department. Graduate assistants in our department receive a stipend ranging from approximately \$450 per month (for a half-time, 10 hours per week assistantship) to approximately \$850 (for a full-time, 20 hours per week assistantship).

Student loans and fellowships are brokered by the University. The Graduate School, for example, offers a full-ride fellowship to the highest performing students (i.e. high GRE scores and undergraduate GPAs) in each College which is awarded for the students' second year. Five family therapy students have won this award in seven years. The competitive Jeffrey T. Lunsford Minority Fellowship is available for the second year of study and was won recently by a **SMFT** student. Faculty are also pleased to nominate **SMFT** students for the AAMFT Minority Fellowship Award which comes with a stipend and free travel and registration to an AAMFT national conference.

The University offers graduate student housing, but the majority of graduate students live in apartments near campus. Monthly apartment rentals range between \$450 for a studio or a one bedroom to about \$700 for a large two bedroom, plus utilities. Many students in the **Specialization** arrange to share apartments to lower costs. Books add approximately \$400 - \$500 per year.

Please refer to the insert on financial assistance in this packet for further information.

Do you teach a particular clinical orientation?

During the first academic year, all of the major marriage and family therapy approaches are explored in the classroom setting. Students are encouraged to get a feel for how approaches "fit" with their assumptions, values, and personality.

The **SMFT** supervisors also bring their unique assumptions, experiences and knowledge to the supervision process. Each of them have written summaries about their assumptions, values and expectations as supervisors. We've enclosed their summaries in this application packet for your information. If you would like to receive a longer version of these summaries, they are available upon request.

The students begin their practicum year the summer semester after the first year. The three SMFT faculty supervise the students at the **Family Center of NIU**. Decisions regarding assignment of students to specific supervisors are made by the SMFT faculty.

During their practicum year, students divide their time between providing therapy at the **Family Center of NIU**, and at an internship setting, such as a youth or family service agency, hospital, or community counseling center. Supervisors at different agencies vary in their assumptions and approaches to therapy, and we encourage students to learn all they can about internship supervisors before deciding on an internship location.

Who are your SMFT faculty/supervisors?

Brent Atkinson is an Associate Professor. After receiving a master's degree in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary, Dr. Atkinson completed another master's degree in marriage and family therapy at the University of Wisconsin, then a doctorate in marriage and family therapy from Texas Tech University. A Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and AAMFT-Approved supervisor, Brent is co-founder of the Couples Clinic, in Geneva, Illinois.

Dr. Atkinson is the principle architect of Pragmatic/Experiential Therapy for Couples, an approach that translates new findings in neurobiology and the science of intimate relationships into practical methods for improving relationships. Dr. Atkinson is author of *Developing Habits for Relationship Success*, and *Emotional Intelligence in Couples Therapy: Advances from Neurobiology and the Science of Intimate Relationships*. His pioneering work has been the subject of dozens of professional journal articles, and has recently been featured in magazines and newspapers such as the Oprah Magazine, the Washington Post, Cosmopolitan Magazine, the Psychotherapy Networker, and others. A personable and engaging speaker, Dr. Atkinson is known for his ability to present complex scientific ideas in compelling and easy-to-understand ways. His seminars are packed with cutting-edge information, practical interventions, and handouts that can be given to clients.

Barb Cuppett is the **Director of the Family Center of NIU** and a clinical faculty in the Specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy. She received a master's degree in counseling psychology from St. Mary's College of Minnesota, and later went on to complete a year of post-graduate study in Marriage and Family Therapy. She earned a post-master's certificate in Marriage and Family Therapy from St. Mary's University of Minnesota. She is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Illinois and Minnesota, and is an AAMFT Approved Supervisor. She was appointed in August 2007 to serve on the Board of Directors for the Illinois Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

Ms. Cuppett has several years of experience in providing clinical services. She has worked in a variety of settings including crisis programs, in-home family therapy, out patient therapy, adolescent and adult day treatment programs, and case management. The modalities of treatment include family, couples, individual, and group therapy. Her competencies are sexual abuse and recovery, high-risk families, blended families, relational and family issues, and physical and developmental disabilities.

Prior to coming to Northern Illinois University, Ms. Cuppett worked for several years providing clinical services as a family therapist, supervising staff and interns, and program administration at two mental health agencies. In addition, she was an adjunct graduate faculty, teaching courses in two master's programs, and a certified trainer for the Minnesota Child Welfare Training System, teaching curriculums around the state in the areas of sexual abuse, children's sexuality, developmental disabilities, family preservation, and family assessment. She was also active in County and State Associations.

Barb divides her time between administration of the Family Center, teaching, supervision, and providing clinical services. She has research interests in supervision and also enjoys spending time with friends, cooking, drumming, music, reading, and writing.

Lin Shi is **Director of the Specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy program** and an Associate Professor. She received a master's degree in Family Studies from Oklahoma State University and a doctorate in Marriage and Family Therapy from Texas Tech University. Prior to joining the SMFT faculty, she was a college teacher and an active clinician. She also worked as a clinical consultant and an EAP consultant for a large behavioral health company. Dr. Shi is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, an AAMFT Approved Supervisor, and an accreditation site visitor for the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education.

Her unique clinical approaches are strongly influenced by attachment theory, psychodynamic therapy models, Experiential therapy models, and Structural Family Therapy. She has special interests in couple therapy, individual therapy, play therapy, and trauma recovery. Her research and clinical papers have appeared in *Family Process*, *American Journal of Family Therapy*, *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, and *Family Science Review*. She has also presented clinical and research workshops at national and international conferences. As a clinical supervisor, she works from a developmental model that aims at empowering supervisees at various developmental stages.

Lin enjoys many activities outside her work with her husband, Haibo, including traveling (to new places and going back to old favorite places), camping, hiking, visiting museums, and reading interesting books. They also enjoy good music and movies.

What is the Family Center like?

The Family Center is located on the NIU campus in the North end of Wirtz Hall. The Center includes a waiting room, seven therapy rooms, and an office area. Every therapy room can be observed from adjoining observation rooms through one-way mirrors. All of the rooms have video equipment and telephones which allow therapists to talk with observing supervisors and team members. One of the rooms is equipped with two remote-controlled cameras for producing split-screen videotapes of therapy sessions. Recently, the Family Center acquired digital technology that allows us to electronically store client sessions, case notes, and account information. Now, any session can be retrieved and easily reviewed by student therapists and supervisors from the secure online database.

Graduate students share the office space. This area contains five computers and a printer, which are used by the **SMFT** students for completion of the client chart paperwork and for access to the internet. The area also includes telephones, the appointment board, a library of resources, fax machine, copier, and a

small kitchen and filing section.

The Family Center schedules appointments 4 days per week, 50 weeks per year. We have afternoon and evening hours available and are open until 8:00 p.m. three days per week.

What is clinical supervision like?

Supervision takes place in both individual (one or two students and one supervisor) and group (up to six students and one supervisor) formats. Through use of one-way mirrors and/or closed circuit TV at the NIU Family Center, supervisors observe students while they are conducting sessions. Supervisors can call in with suggestions during sessions by telephone. Some therapists like to take breaks part way through sessions to consult with supervisors, and some prefer to wait to consult after the close of sessions. Supervisors and student therapists also review videotapes or digital recordings of sessions. This is an excellent way to give attention to the details of therapy sessions and to skill development. Finally, supervisors and students also use individual supervision time to just discuss cases or the therapist's experience in the therapy room.

Supervisees often begin supervision with some anxiety, knowing that they will be closely observed and critiqued. Anxiety soon gives way to relief, however, as supervisees experience the affirming guidance and support of our supervisors. One supervisee in her final semester recently said, "Supervision feels like a luxury. Where else can you get such quality attention in a supportive context?"

What kinds of clients could I expect to see at the Family Center?

The **Family Center** attracts a wide variety of clients. In a few hours one evening, you might see a woman with problems controlling her eating, a couple deciding whether to stay married, a family with a screaming two year old, two depressed college students -- one of whom is suicidal, a three generation family, a single parent and her teenage son, a gay couple who is having trouble communicating, and a man sent to therapy by his wife.

The **Family Center** has become very busy in the last several years. In 2006, we conducted over 2,500 sessions with individuals, families, and couples. We serve a diverse client base, including students, staff, or faculty of the University and community residents in DeKalb and the surrounding areas. We are also striving to increase the diversity of the clientele we see here at the Family Center, and in 2006, 30% of our clients identified as a minority ethnic or racial background. Currently, our students complete approximately half of the 500 client contact hours required to graduate at the **Family Center**. The remaining hours are completed at community internship settings.

How soon could I expect to be assigned clients?

The clinical component of the **Specialization** is divided between the on-campus training site (The **Family Center of NIU**) and an off-campus internship. The first year at the Family Center goes like this: For most of the first fall semester, students observe therapy through a one-way mirror at the **Family Center** and participate in therapy as a member of the "team." This experience, combined with classroom exposure to the theories and methods of family therapy, gives students increasing confidence about seeing their own clients. Students are assigned cases to team on based on their practicum day and class schedules, and may expect to be at the Family Center approximately two evenings a week.

Early in the Spring semester (when faculty consider them ready and they have completed at least 75 hours of teaming), students slowly begin co-therapy at the **Family Center** with a second year student. Students assume responsibility for all new **Family Center** intakes on March 15th.

The **Specialization** has cultivated relationships with numerous community counseling agencies where students can become interns. Students, for purposes of their internships, are paired with these agencies based on their individual therapeutic interests. Some of the internship sites are nearby and some are closer to the Chicago suburbs and Rockford. *Students begin work at community internship settings some time between May and August, and generally work at the internships through the following April or May.* During their second academic year, they see approximately 12-15 clients/families per week, generally reaching the 500 hour total by the end of the Spring semester of their second year.

Do we get time off for holidays?

The **Family Center** is open 50 weeks per year, closing the week between Christmas and New Year, and also the second week of May (the week after final exams). Students (and faculty) in the **Specialization** can apply for three additional weeks off. Requests are generally granted, provided that not all students want to take the same weeks off.

Do you require your students to get therapy for themselves?

No. We do not believe anyone should be coerced into therapy. However, should the faculty ever determine that a student had lost the ability to provide services to **Family Center** clients, we would require a return to professional functioning and recommend therapy as one of several means to the end.

Of course, therapy can be very useful as a way of understanding the experiences of therapy and as a way to make significant changes in one's life. We recommend it to everyone! But again, students may choose to participate in personal therapy or not, as they see fit.

We would like to add here that often, former students say that just going through the graduate program was therapeutic for them. Perhaps this is because we look for applicants who appear ready and willing to grow as persons when they enter the program. As clinical training progresses, new opportunities for ongoing personal growth often emerge. Supervisors observe students interacting with clients, and help them identify interpersonal habits that both enhance and inhibit their effectiveness. Supervisors encourage students to build on their positive habits, and develop a plan for working on their negative ones. Since it is often the same habits that inhibit one's personal as well as clinical potential, those who identify and outgrow such habits leave the program feeling personally as well as professionally enriched.

Do you require a thesis?

No. The thesis is optional. It is often chosen by students who plan to pursue doctoral studies. You should count on one additional summer semester which is often necessary to finish a thesis. Small, competitive thesis grants are available.

What is DeKalb like?

DeKalb, Illinois is a rapidly developing industrial and commercial Midwestern community that not only claims its famous corn but also its medium-sized university (about 26,000 students). The university is home to outstanding theater, music and sport performances throughout the year. People are generally friendly, and the weather in each of the four seasons is generally moderate.

DeKalb is 65 miles west of downtown Chicago, home of Chicago style hot dogs, excellent blues bars, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Field Museum, the Brookfield and Lincoln Park Zoos, Navy Pier, and

mouth-watering deep-dish pizza. There are sports year-round in Chicago, including the Chicago Bulls, Bears, Cubs, White Sox, Fire, and Blackhawks, not necessarily in that order. Students can experience the cultural diversity of Chicago by visiting numerous ethnic neighborhood shops and restaurants, as well as museums such as the China Museum at Northwestern University, and the DuSable Museum of African-American History. The closest Metra train station is 15 miles east of DeKalb in Elburn.

When are classes offered and what would my schedule be like?

In the first year of the program you would probably have one or two evening classes (6 pm to 8:40 p.m.) and two daytime classes. In addition, as the year progresses, you would spend up to two evenings per week at the **Family Center**. At this point most of the family therapy courses meet in the mornings and most of the other academic courses meet in the evening. Most courses meet once per week for about three hours. All required courses are offered on campus; occasionally additional sections of the classes are held in the suburbs of Chicago and/or on weekends.

When can I apply?

We review applications only once a year beginning January 15. You would officially begin the program in the fall of the academic year. To be considered in the first round of applicants, individuals must submit complete applications, including GRE scores, by January 15. We continue to take applications after January 15, until all spaces for the Fall incoming class are filled. Your chances of acceptance are best if you submit an application before January 15. However, if you are unable to meet this deadline, we encourage you to still apply.

Some students who are not accepted into the SMFT apply to the department's Applied Family and Child Studies major with the hope that they can get a head start on courses and be admitted to the SMFT the following year. Because of the two year sequence of practica in the **Specialization of Marriage and Family Therapy**, though, their programs take more than two years.

What if I have other questions?

Give us a call. You can reach the **SMFT** program director, Dr. Lin Shi, at (815) 753-6349 or lshi@niu.edu. Application packets can be requested from Pam Roesner in the FCNS office at proesner@niu.edu. We look forward to hearing from you.