

Massage School Evaluation and Decision Guide

**Don't even think about choosing
a massage school until you know the pointed
questions to ask its Director of Admissions.**

Introduction

Massage Therapy can offer you an excellent full-time or part-time career in the healthcare field. Choosing a massage school is one of the most important decisions you will make regarding that career.

Massage education is a relatively new field and the quality of the schools can vary widely. Because it's a new field, prospective students are generally not aware of what questions to ask to find out about how massage schools actually differ.

This booklet is designed to help you evaluate massage schools, notice how the schools differ, and guide your final decision regarding which school to attend. There are seven crucial areas of inquiry, and a series of questions to ask each prospective school. The seven areas of inquiry are:

- 1. Massage Technique**
- 2. Preparation for a Successful Career**
- 3. Focus and Atmosphere**
- 4. Faculty and Instruction**
- 5. Science Curriculum**
- 6. Facilities and Materials**
- 7. Starting the Program**

(You will note that financing is not one of the seven areas of inquiry. Not because it isn't important. It definitely is. And it's usually one of the first questions you ask. However, it's a much better idea to compare schools based on the seven areas first, and then check out their financing).

1. Massage Technique

Q: What is your technique curriculum?

A: Check out the hours devoted to each technique, the total number of technique hours, and the number of certifications as well as the quality of certifications.

Simple techniques, like Swedish Massage, can be learned adequately in 60 hours or more. Complex techniques, like Neuromuscular Therapy, require 120 hours or more for a thorough training worthy of a certification.

Some programs give you 10-50 hours of each technique, which is an introduction without real depth of study for each area. Other programs give you a greater depth in the techniques they do teach. In this field, it's generally better to learn a lot about a few key technique systems than to learn a little about a lot of techniques.

Q: What do you think the key technique systems are and why?

A: What makes a key technique system? The technique must be based on its ability to serve massage clients well and prepare massage students for a successful career with the greatest number of career options available. In other words, it must provide therapeutic value to clients and marketability to therapists.

Everyone needs Swedish as a foundation. It is useful for relaxation, stress management, spa settings, health clubs, and light clinical settings. Massage therapists need a more

complex, scientific technique, like neuromuscular therapy to complement chiropractors, physical therapists, and medical doctors. NMT is more specific, technical, and more therapeutic than Swedish. It would be considered a key technique also because of its value to the clients and its marketability.

Having the ability not only to relieve pain and change posture by changing muscle tone, but also to help reorganize the connective tissue structure of the body with advanced techniques like muscle energy techniques and myofascial release techniques would also be highly-therapeutic for clients and highly-marketable for massage therapists. A program like that would also be a key technique.

Q: Do I have to pick a technique specialty?

A: Some schools offer more than one program, and you have to pick a specialty before you start school. That could be good if you already know what you want to do. It also could be like picking a major field of study at the start of college, rather than after two years of college.

It is usually better to choose a school that gives you preferably two key techniques besides Swedish. This kind of specific education will prepare you to do the most good for your clients, and will prepare you for any possible massage career option available.

Q: Is your school known for its technique program?

A: You may not want to go to a school that does not claim to have a strong technique program, and can back its claim with

its reputation. You might want to talk to current students and recent graduates to verify the school's claims in this area.

2. Preparation for a Successful Career

Q: Will your school prepare me to be successful after I graduate?

A: Successful massage therapists need three sets of skills – people skills (rapport-building, communication skills, compassion, desire to help, etc), technical skills (knowledge of the body, knowledge of technique, good hands-on technique, etc), and business skills (how to market yourself, a good business plan, how to run a business, etc).

Q: Does your school have a business class?

A: A good massage school should have a business class.

Q: Does your program prepare me for multiple massage career options, or only a couple of options?

A: The more specialized the training, the fewer the options. The fewer the number of comprehensive trainings (120 hours or more) in complex techniques, the fewer the options. In-depth training in Swedish and two complex techniques could prepare you for all the possibilities in a massage career.

Set it up so that you don't need additional training to open doors for yourself. If you are a massage therapist these days, you need to set yourself apart from your peers by being able to do more for your clients than simply relaxing them. You need to be able to relieve specific pain, help them rehabilitate from

injuries, help them improve their posture, improve their athletic performance, improve their general health, and enhance their mind-body coordination.

If you cannot do this, someone else will. Word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied clients are the best marketing tools possible.

Q: How does your program enhance my people skills?

A: Look for an emphasis on personal growth, speaking opportunities, understanding mind-body interaction, facilitating emotional release, and improving your personal health. Look for an emphasis on rapport-building with clients and improving communication skills.

Q: What is your school's view of massage and healthcare?

A: A school with a more holistic approach and/or philosophy is concerned about developing the whole person. They will understand the importance of healing yourself first.

They will understand the importance of becoming more aware of personal growth, and of reaching your full potential. They will talk about the fact that massage training transforms you personally.

Q: Will your school help me find a job?

A: Check to see if they have a job placement program. Massage schools cannot promise to get you a job, but they can help you find one.

3. Focus and Atmosphere

Q: What is the focus of your school?

A: Look for a school that is focused primarily on training massage therapists. If the school started with a different focus, find out when and why they added a massage program to their school. Some school owners are primarily business people looking for new income opportunities, looking to move their school into the next “hot” field.

Some are healthcare professionals who are passionate about massage and health. It makes a difference to know who runs your school.

Q: What is the atmosphere of the school like?

A: Check out the “feel” of the people and the place. Is it warm and friendly? Does it seem corporate or bureaucratic? Is it new age, crunchy-granola?

4. Faculty and Instruction

Q: How many teachers will you have as you go through the school?

A: Some schools have a different teacher for each subject. Some schools have as few as one teacher for the whole program.

Q: How many years of private practice experience must your faculty have to become lead instructors?

A: Good schools require their faculty to have at least two years experience before they are allowed to be lead instructors. Some schools hire folks right out of school to teach in their programs.

Q: Do you use assistants in your technique classes?

A: Some schools do not have assistants, and others do. Assistants mean more personal attention.

Q: What is the largest faculty-student ratio you allow?

A: This can differ for non-technique classes as compared with technique classes. Some schools try to combine classes that are primarily lecture and allow a larger class. Others put a cap on class size. The more people in lecture classes, the less time for personal questions. In technique classes, it is better if the faculty-student ratio is not more than 10:1. Some schools have ratios as low as 4:1 in technique classes.

Q: Does your faculty teach with multiple learning styles in mind?

A: Most massage students are more artistic than scientific. Good teachers will adapt their instruction to both art-minded and science-minded students.

Q: How often are tapes played instead of live lectures given?

A: Some schools rarely play tapes in lieu of lectures. Other schools rely heavily on video tapes.

Q: How are the technique classes taught?

A: Ask if there is sufficient time to practice the techniques on fellow students. Ask if there is a lecture, a live demonstration, followed by supervised practice.

Q: How are the anatomy classes taught?

A: Ask if it is mostly lecture. In massage education, it is preferable to do lots of hands-on learning to complement lecture and visual aids.

Q: Is your faculty known for being knowledgeable in the subject area, caring toward the students, and passionate about what they teach?

A: Check what the school claims with current students and recent graduates. Ask for student and graduate phone numbers.

Q: How are the teachers trained to teach their subject?

A: Some schools offer little or no instruction for their teachers. Other schools require that their teachers assist before they lead teach a subject and that they go through teacher training.

Q: Does your school have a Director of Faculty and what are his or her qualifications?

A: Some schools may not have one or may have an inexperienced person in this position.

Q: Does your school have department heads in each area of the curriculum?

A: Older, more established schools that are serious about the training they provide tend to have qualified department heads in each academic area.

Q: Does the school provide a curriculum or does the instructor come up with that?

A: In less well-established schools, if a faculty member quits, a new teacher makes up a new curriculum. Other schools tend to have well-established and school-approved curricula.

5. Science Curriculum

Q: What is your school's science curriculum?

A: Check how many hours of anatomy, physiology, and pathology you get. Check to see if they cover hygiene.

Q: Does your curriculum include nutrition?

A: Most schools do not have a nutrition course, but it is a complement to massage, and can be helpful in terms of improving your own health.

Q: How are the Anatomy and Physiology classes taught?

A: Check out the teaching methods. Lecture, visual aids, and hands-on work in class can be supplemented with study guides, drawing pictures, or working with clay models.

Q: How well do your graduates know the body compared to other school's graduates?

A: Some schools do better at science than others. Check with recent graduates to gauge the effectiveness of the school's science education.

6. Facilities and Materials

Q: How many students are generally in each class?

Q: How many classrooms do you have?

Q: What size are they?

Q: What does the building look like?

Q: Does your student clinic have private rooms?

A: Some schools have private rooms. Some have partitioned spaces with less privacy.

Q: Do I have to buy a massage table?

A: Most massage schools require this. It is necessary to have a table to do technique homework.

Q: Do I have to bring my massage table to school?

A: Most schools provide tables for technique classes and you do not have to bring your own table to class.

Q: Do the instructors use visual aids, wall charts, skeletons, overheads, etc.

A: Most schools have these, of course.

Q: Do I have to buy textbooks?

A: Most schools require that you purchase certain books.

Q: Does your school create any technique manuals?

A: Some schools publish their own technique manuals to teach their own curriculum.

7. Starting the Program

Q: Can I start a program right away, or do I have to wait for the next scheduled class start date?

A: It may seem like an advantage to join a school that lets you start almost anytime you want, but there can be shortcomings to such a policy. An established massage school tends to limit when you can start the program for several reasons. Here are three reasons:

1) Massage education is personally transformative. It is helpful to the process of change to create a stable, safe environment for the class. Having new people join the class at random times after the group bonds at the beginning is definitely disruptive, and upsets the sense of safety in the group.

2) Massage curricula unfolds in a certain sequence. It is best to learn about touch in general at the start of technique study. Massage sessions are also taught in a certain sequence. If you join a course somewhere in the middle, you don't have the right foundation for what is going on and you hold the class back as they try to "catch you up."

3) All schools need to generate income to exist. However, most are unwilling to sacrifice the quality of education in order to increase income.

Q: If you do let people start whenever they like, what is your reasoning?

A: Check out how they defend this policy if they allow this. If starting sooner is more important to you than the quality of your education, then this may be OK with you.

Conclusion

This is a brief look at the kinds and categories of questions you might ask a massage school. And there may be more.

Ultimately, however, the best question to ask is not one you ask of the schools. It's one you ask yourself after you've checked out the schools thoroughly. That question is: which school is a fit for me? You are going to spend a lot of time at a school for a number of months. It has to feel right to you.

Good luck with your career in massage. Good luck at whatever school you pick. The world needs more good massage therapists.