

## Training Forum

# Match as Match Can: An Insider's Look at the APPIC Clearinghouse

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It happens! More than 700 times a year *it* happens. *It* happens to applicants of all calibers, with a variety of experiences, from a wide range of theoretical orientations, in assorted areas (i.e., Clinical, Counseling, School). Graduate students from behavioral and cognitive-behavioral-oriented programs, such as the readers of *the Behavior Therapist*, might feel they are immune from *it* because of their evidence-based training and scientist-practitioner background, but it happens to them, too. I came from such a program, and it happened to me. I failed to match with a pre-doctoral internship through APPIC's computer matching program. I then participated in the APPIC's Clearinghouse with the 743 other individuals who, just like me, did not match. The purpose of this article is to provide the next generation of unmatched graduate students with a description of the process, helpful hints, and reassurance that you can successfully survive the Clearinghouse. These hints are drawn only from my own experiences and the experiences of those who helped me through the process. Others' experiences may differ, but I hope that our thoughts are helpful nonetheless.

To begin, I should provide a few background details. I applied for internship as a 4th-year graduate student in a clinical psychology program that has one of the highest match rates in the country. I do not attribute my not matching to a lack of quality training or a lack of any specific qualifications. I may not be the perfect applicant, but I did have 1,500 clinical and assessment hours, over 30 integrated assessment reports, more than a dozen research presentations at major conferences, and three articles undergoing review. My interests lie primarily in working with children and adolescents. I applied to 14 internships, interviewed at 7 of them, and ranked all of them. My story, however, really begins after all of this on Friday, February 22: Match Day.

### Friday

I had gone to sleep Thursday night with nervous thoughts, wondering which of seven new cities I might be living in next year. I knew I would be receiving the first of two e-mails early in the morning, so I had planned on waking up every hour, starting at 5:00 A.M., to check my e-mail. 5:00 A.M. ... nothing. 6:00 A.M. ... nothing. 7:00 A.M. ... an e-mail! I half-groggily, half-excitedly clicked. Looking back, I question whether I even read the e-mail the first time my eyes passed over it. I forced myself to re-look and saw one phrase, "We regret to inform you that you did not match to a position." I stared at this phrase (helpfully sectioned off from the rest of the e-mail by those kind folks at APPIC), trying to decipher what it meant. If its meaning seems obvious to you, it is because this phrase did not decimate 9 months of planning and preparation. I reread it. I reread the rest of the e-mail to make sure the body agreed with this sentence. I reread it again. It wasn't until 7:20 A.M. that I finally stopped rereading the e-mail and stood up from my desk. Every reaction that you can think of—scream, cry, hit things, denial, quit psychology, etc.—I wanted to do all at once.

My first phone call was to my fiancée. My next few calls were to fellow internship applicants to make sure they had matched (and to see if they had somehow received my e-mail by mistake). I did not call my parents, and I did not call my adviser. I did, however, forward my adviser the e-mail with a note saying, "I think we will need to meet to discuss options"—understatement of the year. For 2 hours in my apartment, I called and e-mailed, but mostly paced, in a vaguely dissociated state. The first useful thing I decided to do was go to work. I was miserable at home and some part of my brain remembered that returning to normal routines is a good thing after a tragedy. Over the course of the day I did several things that helped ease my mind, and

by the end of the day I was committed to attempting the Clearinghouse on Monday. I found the following points particularly helpful.

### Meet With Advisers

One of the most important, initial tasks on Friday, once you have passably worked through the emotional turmoil, is to meet with your adviser. Your adviser is someone who can, hopefully, offer support and understanding during this difficult time (odds are he or she is experiencing, on a smaller scale, many of the same reactions that you are). Even if he or she cannot provide you with all of the support you need, your adviser does possess the knowledge and experience to help you carefully consider your options. As advisers differ in their level of experience with the match process, I recommend consulting with at least two. Multiple perspectives will be useful. In addition, you may find it reassuring to have multiple respected psychologists expressing how shocked they are that you did not match and how great a candidate you are. I think my day was completely turned around when I spoke with one of my letter-writers and he exclaimed, "I told them you walked on water, what the #@&% else do they want!?!!"

### Consider Your Options

Most of your Friday is likely to be focused on one important question: What do I do next? During your meetings with your advisers, and in consultation with colleagues and loved ones, you should consider the paths available to you. The APPIC Clearinghouse is obviously the only way to obtain an internship for the next year, but there are many other possibilities. Another year of graduate school and practicum may offer the opportunity to increase clinical and assessment hours, make progress on/finish your dissertation, or publish. In addition, some programs may allow their students to take a year without

classes or responsibilities so that students can be with loved ones, work (yes, you can actually make money!), or even take the EPPP. Of course, waiting a year also carries with it the uncertainty of another match process.

One thing that is important to consider when making this decision is the reason(s) that you did not match. Your first response will almost certainly be that you did not match because you are an unqualified hack who never belonged in this business in the first place and you will never achieve your deepest hopes and dreams. Challenge these negative, automatic thoughts! Be frank and ask your advisers. One way to do this is to ask if they have any suggestions on what you could improve if you took a year and applied again. Even if you do not intend to wait, knowing your weaknesses will help you to become a better Clearinghouse applicant. That said, do not spend all of your time obsessing over this point because the inscrutable methods of the computer match do result in very good applicants not matching.

You will need to focus all of your energy on giving your best performance to the Clearinghouse, so make up your mind by the end of Friday. Remember, the Clearinghouse is nonbinding (at least until you accept an internship), so you can back out at any time if you change your mind. There are a lot of significant (and negative!) existential questions you will want to ask yourself in this process. *Is this a sign that I was never meant to be a psychologist? Are my plans for the next year completely ruined? Does my partner/adviser/mother still love me even if I didn't match?* Work, talk to peers, consult with faculty, or whatever you need to do to distract yourself from questions like these and maintain a positive perspective during this process. To be clear, I am recommending avoidance here, as next week there will be plenty of time to think about these things.

### **Social Support**

As we would tell any of our clients facing a significant stressor, maintaining strong social support is a key to surviving the Clearinghouse process. In actuality, many of the tips I can offer boil down to nothing more than "practice what you preach!" Unmatched applicants may be tempted to isolate and avoid contact with graduate student colleagues. I did exactly the opposite. On Friday, I did not hide the fact that I had not matched; I e-mailed my friends, consulted with numerous colleagues, and even spoke about what happened to first-year students I barely knew! For me, this level of disclosure demystified and destigmatized not matching and I became someone who my classmates could rally around to help out of a bad situation. Your internship applicant cohorts will want to celebrate. Join them. You do have a reason to celebrate after all; many of your peers have finished the process! You will need the

support, so seek it out early. It is for these reasons that you have built and maintained relationships with the others in your graduate program for so long. It is time to take advantage of those relationships.

### **The Weekend**

I had survived Friday and went to sleep knowing I was going to give the Clearinghouse a shot. I woke up Saturday, feeling refreshed, depressed, and ready to work. Applications for the Clearinghouse consist of a 10-page document that contains at least your vita and an optional cover letter. I had to slim my vita, and I wrote about three different cover letters to be sent to different types of sites (in my case, child clinical, pediatric psychology, and generalist programs). Between fielding calls from people worried about me, I attempted to learn everything about every internship site that existed. Below are several things I did over the weekend that were most helpful to me on Monday.

### **Clearinghouse Application**

It goes without saying that you will spend much of the weekend working on your vita and cover letters for your application. Obviously you will send these documents to your adviser for his/her feedback, but I would say you should go one step further—send them to everyone you can. For instance, I had my fellow internship cohort, several faculty I knew, my parents, and my fiancée all reviewing my application. My parents (neither of whom do anything at all related to psychology) offered perhaps the best advice I received by encouraging me to make my cover letter as eye-catching (in terms of content, not style!) as possible so that internship coordinators who receive literally hundreds of applications can quickly identify me as an excellent candidate.

### **Broaden Your Search**

You have not done enough research into internships sites to be prepared for the Clearinghouse. Part of this is because none of the sites you ranked and only 15% of the other sites you initially researched will be on the Clearinghouse vacancy list. These are statistical realities (APPIC, 2008). During the Clearinghouse, you will need to know very quickly which sites to apply to. This is a daunting task, and it requires you to be explicit about what you are willing to consider. For myself, I asked if getting a site with certain (less desirable) features would be better for me than spending another year in graduate school. Some features about sites to consider: Are you willing/able to move anywhere on the continent (including Hawaii, but who wouldn't live there for a year!)? Are there any experiences you must have on internship (I insisted on some form of experience

with children or adolescents)? Are you willing to consider non-APA accredited internships? There are about twice as many nonaccredited sites on the Clearinghouse list as there are accredited ones, but be careful about what your graduate program and future licensure board(s) require for your internship—consult your Director of Clinical Training first. Don't lose hope about there not being any great internship sites on the list. Just as fantastic applicants can be mistreated by the matching algorithm, so too can fantastic sites. You can expect that at least one or two of these sites will appear on the Clearinghouse list.

### **Your Team**

Despite the intense desire to isolate, seeking out assistance from other people will be extremely helpful in the Clearinghouse process. I recommend getting a team together of fellow graduate students who will help you on Monday. These should be people with whom you can work easily, especially under stress, and they should be willing to give up at least half of their Monday. You may want to bribe them with such things as food, eternal gratitude, and stats help. Over the weekend, compile this team and get them organized and ready for Monday. Decide where to meet and formulate a plan about what you want each of them to do, with specific instructions. In my case, I actually had other graduate students mailing applications from my e-mail address in order to save time. You definitely want well-prepared people doing that! You will also want to prepare your team for the madness that will occur at 10:00 A.M. The list of open sites is likely to be at least 30 pages long, and your team can help you sort, research, and apply in the shortest amount of time possible. There are few things as formidable in this world as a room containing 4 to 10 highly motivated and intelligent graduate students; having that kind of resource on your side will allow you to tackle anything that the Clearinghouse gives you.

### **Start Networking**

Networking will be a crucial part of the process, and the more people who know that you are looking for sites, the more people available who can recommend you or let you know should an opening arise. I spent a fair amount of my time over the weekend e-mailing every person I could think of to inform them that I would be in the Clearinghouse and asking them to let me know if they knew of any good openings. I e-mailed graduate students on internship, friends, family, and the entire faculty of my program. Your faculty advisers will have many friends across the country, and I cannot state strongly enough how important it is to be tapped into their networks when Monday rolls around.

In the end, have everything ready and get a good night's sleep in preparation for Monday. Despite my advice to not do this, you will spend much of the weekend contemplating if this is the right decision for you, and this is natural (and exactly what I did). Before you go to sleep on Sunday, however, make sure you recommit yourself to your decision and be ready to hit the ground sprinting on Monday.

### Monday

Monday morning I woke up, ran to the store, bought doughnuts, and was in the basement of the psychology building until well after the sun had set. When the 10:00 A.M. bell rang, my team was a flurry of activity, all somewhat choreographed by me. The adrenaline rush of having a team to manage and applications to send completely drove from my mind, until early evening, the self-pity and self-doubt that I had been fighting off all weekend. Being in the psychology building also helped because I was frequently visited by my faculty advisers who were always supportive and interested in the process (I don't think my program has ever seen anything quite like what we put together that morning). By lunch time, I had applied to more places than I had originally applied to, and I was able to be fairly selective in those Clearinghouse sites to which I applied.

That being said, this was not a fun process. The first internship filling was posted 66 minutes after opening. The majority of the sites I applied to never even responded to my initial e-mail. By the early evening I was out of sites to apply to and had little motivation left to do anything, least of all think about what to do next. The numbers say that approximately 24% of applicants who find a match through the Clearinghouse do so on Monday, and I was one of the other 76%. I held on to the hope that I would be among the 50% that match in the first week, but I knew that about 44% of those unmatched on Match Day remain unmatched. While those two numbers loomed, my team disbanded, and I was left alone with nothing left to do but wait (and speak to my parents who had been calling me every 3 hours since Friday). Monday night may have been the worst night of the process. Here are a few tips that may help you become one of the 24% that does match on Monday!

### *Inform Faculty and Advisers*

Networking is one of the most important tools you have during the Clearinghouse process—take full advantage of it. Inform your advisers of all the sites you have applied to and see if they know anyone at those sites who they might contact on your behalf. Sites are looking for anything to help them weed through the hundreds of applications they receive. If a recommendation from an old col-

league accomplishes that for your application, so much the better.

### *Call Internship Sites*

One thing I regret not doing more of is calling sites to make sure they received my materials. Some advice I received from another successful Clearinghouse intern was to call the sites in which you are most interested. This way the site knows that you are truly interested in them, and they may give you valuable information. Of course, you should also be prepared for limited information—if they even answer the phone. It is a hectic time for them too! Regardless, it is vitally important that you be reachable not only by phone, but also via e-mail constantly in case sites ask for more information or change their application requirements.

### The Rest of the Week

Here are some tips on how to handle the rest of the first week and beyond. Don't forget, only 50% of those who find a match through the Clearinghouse do so in the first week!

### *Phone Interviews*

Once you've sent the initial barrage of applications, begin thinking about how you want to handle phone interviews when they come. You will need to be prepared at a moment's notice because you will probably not be able to reschedule them. Sites probably do not expect you to know everything there is to know about them. They know they are in the Clearinghouse and how it works. Prepare in advance a list of crucial things that you will want to know from each site (e.g., hours, rotations, theoretical orientation, benefits). Much of your material/knowledge from regular internship interviews will be of use here. However, time may be limited, so prioritize and try to take away the most important information from each interview.

### *Offers*

You will likely not be able to predict in advance how many offers you will be receiving, so plan for getting more than one. APPIC guidelines suggest that when sites make an offer, they do not require you to decide immediately. Further, APPIC *suggests* that sites give you at least 4 hours to make a decision after an offer has been made. While 4 hours may seem like a very short time, the truth is that sites do not have to do either of these things! If they make you an offer, no matter how certain you are, ask them for time to think the offer over. Remember, once they make you the offer, they cannot take it back; the ball is in your court! If you are given some time to make a decision,

make a realistic estimate about your chances with other sites, call the ones that you are most interested in, and let them know you are considering another offer, and ask them when they will be making offers and where you fall in their rankings. In the end, use your best problem solving, and do not look back on your decision.

### *Resume Normal Life*

When you feel ready, it will be time to resume doing all the things you were doing the week before Match Day. This will mean seeing clients and working at practicums, research, and classes. For each, you should make an informed decision about whether you are ready to return. Do not under any condition see clients on Monday! You cannot afford to give them your undivided attention, and you probably aren't in a satisfactory mental state yourself. As the week goes on, you can take longer breaks between checking your e-mail—though I still kept my cell phone on and with me at all times. No matter what happens with the Clearinghouse or what decisions you make, remember that you are still a normal graduate student for the next 3 months with the same expertise, skill, and expectations you had before Friday. You were good at your job before and you still are!

### *Consider Your Options Again*

As the week wears on, if you can maintain a positive or, at least, a realistic perspective, you will likely have a better idea of how things are going. Do you have several promising sites that you know are still considering applications? Have you not heard back from any sites at all? If nothing else, by the end of the Clearinghouse process, many unknowns have now been made known, and you can make a more informed judgment about what to do next. What would another year of graduate school look like? Have you learned of anything in your application that you could improve by next year? Whatever you do, practice what you preach and use solid cognitive restructuring, emotional awareness, social support, and behavioral activation to make the best of the situation.

### My Success Story

In the end, it was networking that made my Clearinghouse process a success. I awoke on Tuesday, not quite sure how to proceed. Over the day, I ended up calling several of the sites to which I had applied to ask about their process. Some were helpful (in the sense that they told me they had filled their position) and some were not (not answering their phones). But later Tuesday afternoon a site that had a previous history with my program called to schedule an interview. At the time, I still had some other sites I was wondering about, but

by the time the interview came on Wednesday, I was down to almost none. The interview went very well, and they made me an offer on the spot, giving me until Thursday morning to decide. Conversations followed with my family, advisers, and fiancée, which involved many a “bird in the hand” or “glass half full” or “make lemons from lemonade” analogy. Despite the site not being in the exact area of my interest (rehabilitation psychology vs. child/adolescent), they were willing to make accommodations for my interests and training. The atmosphere of the site fit my experience and preference perfectly, and the answer was fairly obvious. I made my final decision at 5:00 P.M. Wednesday and haven’t looked back.

In the end, I found a very good, APA-accredited site that will provide me with excellent training and (also important) the ability to graduate in 2009 rather than 2010! Social support, my advisers, and practicing the cognitive restructuring we so regularly preach were the keys to my success in the Clearinghouse and would have resulted in success for me regardless of the outcome. I truly believe that whatever happens can turn out for the best if you take care to approach it from the correct perspective.

So whether you experience the Clearinghouse firsthand, advise a student or friend who does, or just better appreciate the struggles of those who do, I hope my advice has been helpful. For me, this process has been the final step in taking the lemon of not matching and making it into the lemonade of passing on what I learned to others. Good luck!

#### Reference

APPIC. (2008, February 25). *2008 APPIC Match Statistics: Match Report from the APPIC Board of Directors*. Retrieved February 3, 2009, from [http://www.appic.org/match/5\\_2\\_2\\_1\\_10\\_match\\_about\\_statistics\\_general\\_2008.html](http://www.appic.org/match/5_2_2_1_10_match_about_statistics_general_2008.html)

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