

Student Forum

SPECIAL SERIES: THE GRADUATE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

The Predoctoral Clinical Internship: Applying, Interviewing, and Making the Most of the Year

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Similar to the situation with graduate school in general, many books and articles have been written about the internship application process. The focus has been on “getting in,” with numerous tips provided for developing an excellent application, preparing for interviews, and ranking internship sites. Although the predoctoral clinical internship is truly a unique year in the process of earning a doctoral degree, substantially less has been written about the experience of completing the internship year.

This article provides a brief overview of the application, interview, and ranking phases. Emphasis is placed on how internship training fits into the larger context of the graduate school experience. The assumption is that graduate students will seek out additional information as they approach each of the stages (e.g., Megargee, 1997; attend AABT panel discussions, participate in internship functions sponsored by AABT). The article ends with a discussion of the clinical internship’s unique challenges and opportunities. The advice and perspective offered here is based on my own experiences as an intern at the Boston Consortium this year, as well as information gleaned from consultations with classmates at several other APA-approved internship sites.

Preparing for Internship Applications: You Cannot Start Too Soon

Most students begin practica and become involved in clinical research as early as the first or second year of their doctoral programs. Keeping track of these hours from the beginning will make things much easier when, several years down the road, you need to complete the APPI (APPIC Application for Psychology Internship). Some doctoral programs have structured systems that require students to obtain supervisors’ signatures to validate their hours and other aspects of experience. Whether or not your program has such a system, it is to your benefit to maintain such records.

While the specific information required on the AAPI may change from year to year, it is probably helpful to keep track of some basics. These include (a) basic demographic information about your clients, including gender, age group, race, sexual orientation, and presenting problem; (b) information about the type of therapy provided (e.g., individual, group, family, career counseling, school counseling) and the theoretical orientation(s) on which your work was based; (c) assessment instruments used and whether or not results were written up in a report; (d) other activities, including supervision (both received and provided), support activities (e.g., writing progress notes, consulting with other providers, reviewing audio/videotapes), and other relevant volunteer experiences.

Although you will probably spend the first few years of graduate school immersed in course work, research, and teaching, it is important to begin considering training experiences that will affect your decisions about where to apply. Several factors to consider include the relative emphasis of research versus clinical experience, primary theoretical orientations, quality-of-life issues, and location. Part of this process entails the identification of (at least tentative) longer-term goals and career directions. For example, if your projected career trajectory involves a tenure-track academic position, you will probably want to apply to internship sites that include the opportunity to get involved in research. While many factors are involved in the number of hours that you work per week, some internship sites have a reputation for being more “rigorous” than others. Do you have the time, energy, and motivation to devote 70 hours per week to internship, or would you prefer to have the 9-to-5 lifestyle that you have been fantasizing about for years? Location is an often-disputed factor. On the one hand, some students wish to find the “best” internship site possible and are able to use the internship year as an opportunity to spend a year of their lives in some part of the country that they otherwise would probably

never visit. On the other hand, some students have more pressing reasons for limiting themselves geographically. Ultimately, these types of questions can only be resolved by closely and repeatedly examining your personal priorities and values. The earlier this process begins, the more likely you are to make meaningful decisions when the pressure of the application process begins.

As a side note about location, if you are someone who, for whatever reasons, is limited to a small geographical area, it can be helpful to investigate your options and make contacts with individuals at the internship site(s) early on. Given that it can be risky to apply to a very small number of sites, building connections (e.g., through a clinical practicum or joint research projects) may increase your chances of acceptance at a particular site.

Choosing Sites: The Common Wisdom

Depending on the rate at which you are progressing through program requirements, at some point during the early fall of your third, fourth, or fifth (or later) year of graduate school, you will face the daunting task of compiling a final list of internship sites. In addition to the personal priorities discussed above, several considerations may help you to choose sites that maximize your chance of acceptance.

First, it is a good idea to find out about your graduate program’s track record at particular sites. If others from your program have already impressed supervisors and training directors at a particular site with their strong training and academic background, you may have a better chance of gaining admission to that site. It may be a good idea to speak with more advanced graduate students about their impressions of specific internship sites, whether gleaned through completed or “in progress” interns or even through interviews at the sites. Faculty members can also be a very useful source of information. While it is important to be aware of potential biases that may affect others’ impressions, talking to people within your department can help you nar-

row down what may feel like an infinite number of possibilities. The APPIC Web site (www.appic.org) is also an invaluable source of information for internship applicants. Not only does this Web site allow you to search by major and minor rotations, location, stipend, class size, and APA accreditation, you can also view the qualifications of the previous year's applicants and what types of positions the site's recent graduates have obtained. You can also learn how to obtain more information about programs (e.g., whether materials are posted on a separate Web site, or if you should call, write, or e-mail the training director to obtain the program brochure).

With regard to the number of sites to which you should apply, a general rule of thumb is to apply to between 10 and 15 sites. While this is certainly not a magic number, applying to a decent number of sites without overextending yourself should maximize your chances of securing a position (you can even find data on this issue on the APPIC Web site). Like applying to any other type of academic program, it is a good idea to apply to a range of sites with regard to competitiveness (including some that may appear to be "safety" sites). If you later decide that a site is not a good match, you can always choose to not rank the site.

The Application Process: Pulling It All Together

If the process of choosing internship sites seemed daunting, completing the AAPI and compiling other parts of the application may seem even more overwhelming. However, with the planning and organizational skills that you have honed during graduate school, the application process need not be such a challenge. Standard components of internship applications include the AAPI, letters of recommendation, and transcripts of graduate (and sometimes undergraduate) course work. Some sites require additional material, including their own application form, a curriculum vitae (you may wish to include your CV even when a site does not require it), or work samples (e.g., reports from assessment or therapy cases, publications). As alluded to previously, I will not focus on the specifics of these components (e.g., the relative merit of three versus four letters of recommendation), given that there are numerous resources that contain a wealth of information addressing these questions. However, several points about the AAPI are worth mentioning.

First, as you approach the task of whittling down 3-plus years of experience into numbers that you enter onto a form, it is easy to get hung up on perceived weaknesses (i.e., gaps in your training). It is important to keep in mind that the AAPI is an attempt to assess every possible experience or qualification that any site might find interesting. If you are applying to programs that are predominantly cognitive-behavioral in orientation, chances are that the site's training directors will not be disappointed if you have not received training in

administration of the Rorschach. The most important variable is how your training and interests match the goals and opportunities of the training site.

Completing the AAPI also involves writing several essays. Although the specific questions change from year to year, topics in recent years have included research interests, perspectives on diversity, case conceptualization, match with the particular program, and an open-ended autobiographical statement. Writing these essays can be a good opportunity to reflect on where you have been, what you have learned over the past several years, and where you hope to go in the future. Allow yourself some time to consider these questions and think about how you will tie together what is often a diverse set of experiences.

Interviewing: It's About Match

If you are successful in compiling competitive applications, December, January, and February can be hectic months. The logistics of scheduling and the costs of traveling and dry cleaning aside, interviewing can be an enjoyable part of the application process. It is a good idea to think about the types of questions that will be asked. More advanced graduate students, as well as books/articles on the topic (e.g., Megargee, 1997), can be helpful in this regard. My overall impression of internship interviews was that they were a lot less formal than I had expected. Once again, the most important issue is one of match or your fit with the site. Use the interview as an opportunity to get a sense from the training director, faculty members, and current interns whether or not the site is a place where you would want to spend a year of your life and build connections for the future.

Guidelines for appropriate communication between interviewers and interviewees regarding the relative ranking of applicants/sites are available on the APPIC Web site (most communication of this nature is prohibited). Violations of APPIC guidelines do happen and can create challenging situations. It is important to be aware of the informal and formal systems of resolution within the organization should you find yourself in a potentially compromising position.

The Internship Experience: Unique Opportunities and Challenges

One of the most challenging aspects of the internship year is simply not having a clear sense of what to expect. The following overview will help you anticipate what to expect during the internship year and how you can make the most of its opportunities.

First and foremost, the predoctoral clinical internship provides an opportunity (for some of us, the first and last opportunity) for full-time clinical work. While we all obtained clinical experience through various practica and/or clinical research projects, this generally occurred a few days per week at most. We be-

came proficient (or at least sufficient) at juggling our clinical responsibilities among our course requirements, our obligation to the research lab, our teaching duties, and whatever else we had on our plate at the moment. Internship year allows you to devote yourself exclusively (or almost exclusively) to clinical work. Even if you are convinced that you do or do not want to follow such a career path in the future, the internship year gives you the chance to make sure.

As we have probably all learned by the time we reach the internship application process, it is to our advantage to obtain specialized knowledge and training with a particular population or presenting problem. That said, there are obvious benefits of being well-rounded and gaining a breadth of knowledge and experience. The internship year is probably the last year to acquire a breadth of experience before moving on to a more specialized postdoctoral fellowship or a job. Depending on the structure of the internship year, you may be able to gain relatively in-depth knowledge and specialized experience in several different areas by completing three, 4-month clinical rotations or by choosing a major rotation and several elective experiences.

In addition to the accumulation of clinical knowledge and experience, there are often opportunities to get involved in ongoing research projects and volunteer for various committees. Given the plethora of training opportunities offered by most internship sites and the fact that you have but one short year to take advantage of all of these, there are choices to be made about how you spend your time. Your time may be even more limited, depending on where you are in the process of completing your dissertation. If you hope to defend your project before the end of your internship year and the site does not set aside "protected time" for dissertation or other research, you will probably be completing your dissertation on the weekends, early mornings, and evening. As always, be sure to allow time for unanticipated delays or setbacks.

Assuming that you do not already have a plan lined up for after the internship year, sometime during the first few months of internship you may begin to realize that for the first time in many years the next step in the process is not already laid out for you. When I casually remarked to one of my supervisors that this was an "interesting" phenomenon, he emphatically replied, "Are you kidding? It's terrifying!" Very quickly we are again faced with all of those pressing considerations (career goals, quality of life, location, etc.) with a slightly different twist (e.g., Should I apply for academic jobs now or do I need to do a postdoc first?), as well as with a long list of application to-do's.

Dealing with the increased responsibilities and emotional intensity of the clinical internship year (along with dissertation, job application, and other pressures) can be quite challenging. If your internship involves moving to a new area, you may feel like you are facing many of these stressors alone. It

may be extremely helpful to establish a social support network, particularly with internship classmates who are facing many of the same challenges. Some internship sites facilitate this process by having interns participate in weekly support groups. Interns at other sites may get together for weekly postseminar outings. As is the case for the entire graduate school process (and beyond), it is also essential to carve out time for activities that you enjoy. Whether this means spending time with friends or family, regular physical exercise, journal writing, or listening to music, striving for the elusive balance between work and play will allow you to keep things in perspective and find renewed enthusiasm and passion wherever the next application process takes you.

Reference

Megargee, E. I. (1997). *Guide to obtaining a psychology internship*. New York: Hemisphere.