

Early Doctoral Student Questions About Predoctoral Internship Preparation and Application: Responses From the Experts

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According to the most recent Association of Psychology Post-doctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) Board of Directors (2006) "match" statistics, 2,479 graduate students applied for predoctoral internships in clinical psychology in 2006. Many more graduate students worried about what it will take to one day get into the predoctoral internship of their dreams and how best to prepare for application to that internship. The sheer volume of predoctoral internship applicants could discourage future hopefuls. Students may suppose, "With so many applicants, there must be many with experiences and competencies that match or rival my own—I won't have a chance at getting into a good internship!" As reassurance, the 2006 APPIC Board of Directors match statistics also provide encouraging news. In 2006, 45% of applicants received their top-ranked choice of internship, 66% received their second-ranked choice or better, and 79% received their third-ranked choice or better.

Still not persuaded that the sky is not falling? You are not alone. While the Matching Program statistics provide hope for future applicants, many graduate students still struggle with application-related issues and concerns. This article describes a few of my concerns and those shared by other early doctoral students. In reply to these concerns, faculty and internship directors provide insight from their experiences. There are already a number of useful resources on predoctoral internship application and navigating practica and the predoctoral internship successfully (e.g., Baird, 2001; Megargee, 2001; Oehlert, Sumerall, & Lopez, 1998; Williams-Nickelson, Prinstein, Lopez, & Keilin, 2004). The APPIC Web site (<http://www.appic.org/>) provides essential information for future and current applicants.

Given the rather comprehensive resources already available to internship applicants, the present article sets out to accomplish two rather specific aims. The first aim is to normalize student internship concerns by presenting issues and concerns expressed by cur-

rent early doctoral students in clinical psychology. The second is to present these concerns and issues to those in charge of internship sites, doctoral programs, and clinical professionals at large.

To sample the variety of issues and concerns graduate students possess about predoctoral internship preparation and application, I surveyed early graduate students in our clinical psychology program at Suffolk University (first- through fourth-year students). In an e-mail message, I asked them to provide questions that they had about internship application or preparation. I compiled a list of all of these questions, highlighted the questions that students posed most frequently, and sent them to several faculty members and present and former directors of clinical training at predoctoral internship sites across the country.

Several knowledgeable and seasoned professionals responded. Some provided detailed answers to the list of questions while others provided quick comments and a summary of what their site values in an internship applicant. Two current directors of clinical training at cognitive-behavioral (CBT), research-focused predoctoral internship sites responded. Dr. David Elkin, ABPP, Associate Professor at the University of Mississippi and Director of Clinical Training at the University of Mississippi Medical Center/VA Medical Center in Jackson, and Dr. Anthony Spirito, ABDD, Training Consortium Director in Clinical Psychology at the Brown University Medical School Training Consortium in Psychiatry and Human Behavior, offered their advice. Three full-time and adjunct faculty members at Suffolk University also responded. Dr. Lynda Field, an adjunct professor and full-time staff member in the Suffolk University Counseling Center, provided advice for clinically minded internship applicants. Dr. Gary Fireman, full-time professor at Suffolk University, Director of Clinical Training for the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program at Suffolk University and past professor and clinician at Texas Tech University, also offered his

insight. Finally, Dr. Susan Orsillo, full-time Associate Professor at Suffolk University, past Assistant Professor at Oklahoma State University, and past Clinical-Researcher and Internship Supervisor at the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder at the Boston VA Healthcare System, offered her knowledge.

One of the most striking findings was that many of the most commonly voiced student concerns were not necessarily areas emphasized by faculty as important for internship success. For example, most students that I surveyed reported being most concerned about the total number of APPIC-approved practicum hours necessary to obtain a good internship. However, almost unequivocally, each of the experts reported that it is not the number of experience hours, per se, that make a successful applicant. What matters is the overall quality of your training experience, including course work, clinical experience, research productivity, and professional mentorship. Drs. Elkin and Spirito both expressed that they do not evaluate candidates on the quantity of clinical hours but on what they experienced, how productive they were, and what they accomplished.

Match factors prominently into the internship selection process. Students significantly increase their chances of obtaining an internship at a site if the work that they performed prior to internship coincides with the orientation and goals of a given institution. For example, research-oriented internship sites, such as Brown University and the University of Mississippi, highly value research productivity from their applicants (they cited poster presentations at professional conferences, peer-reviewed publications, and institutional grant awards as examples). However, attaining a given quantity of research experiences in various domains is less important than showing evidence of drive and productivity in research in general. For example, while the University of Mississippi does not require a magic number of poster presentations or publications, the site does evaluate evidence of re-

search ambition. Furthermore, Dr. Elkin went on to say that at his training site, research is neither supplemental nor extra; rather, it is required of all students.

On the other hand, both Dr. Fireman and Dr. Field indicated that some more clinically oriented sites highly value the total number of APPIC hours a student accumulates. Dr. Field noted that, for many university counseling centers, the number of clinical hours an applicant attained (especially the number of clinical hours attained at university counseling centers) is a critical factor in the selection process. At the Suffolk University Counseling Center, they set a minimum of 1,500 total APPIC hours for consideration of applications. On the APPIC Web site, each predoctoral internship site lists the average number of clinical hours their matriculating interns accumulated. These averages provide a useful estimate of the number of hours necessary for a given site.

Students in the survey also frequently asked about the ideal distribution of total practicum hours and experiences necessary to obtain a quality predoctoral internship. The theme of match arose in the experts' responses once again. For example, Brown University would prefer to see that an applicant's pre-internship experience involve more direct provision of treatment, followed by assessment experiences (including diagnostic interviewing). As previously mentioned, university counseling centers prefer applicants with experience in those settings. As a further example, for applicants interested in working with children, the amount of experience an internship applicant has with children will have bearing. At Brown University, many applicants spent as much as 75% of their clinical hours with children. Dr. Fireman noted that the quality of your experiences with children is also taken into consideration. Dr. Orsillo added that a combination of research and clinical experiences, preferably under the mentorship and supervision of an active child researcher, would best prepare an applicant for internship.

Many students were searching for the one criterion or quality most valued by internship sites. However, the experts agreed that while there are many important factors, there was no single answer for every student or every site. Many sites, particularly research-oriented sites such as Brown University, prefer to see a good match between student research interest, experience, and background, and the interests of the faculty at the internship site. Dr. Fireman noted that many internship sites value student ability to benefit from supervision, openness to learning, professional responsibility, and ability to work independently. Dr. Orsillo emphasized the importance of the interview, noting that while many students are qualified to be interns, interest, enthusiasm, openness, and in-

terpersonal ease displayed by candidates during the interview often determine final offers. Those deciding on interns often wonder whether an applicant will prove to be an asset to the site, enhancing its goals and activities.

Students also asked about the extent to which an applicant's theoretical orientation plays a role in intern selection. The site in question often determines the answer. Dr. Orsillo noted that many sites highly value faculty-student orientation match as a facilitation of honing student ability and expertise in an area. For instance, Brown University highly values a cognitive-behavioral orientation. On the other hand, other internship sites value an emerging sense of professional identity and openness to experience and growth, as eloquently stated by Dr. Fireman.

Participants in the sample also posed questions about the role personal factors, such as geographic constraints, play in the internship selection process. In considering the location of an internship site, Dr. Fireman remarked that applicants should keep personal factors in mind such as family considerations, financial issues, interests, desire to live in a given region, etc. On the other hand, the student should also weigh these factors against professional considerations such as the local or national reputation of the internship site. Dr. Orsillo concurred. She recalled that Dr. Terry Keane, past Director of Internship at the VA Boston Healthcare System and her former colleague, once described the internship application process as containing "degrees of freedom." The more one constrains internship site selection factors (such as geographic location), the fewer choices one has with regard to other factors (such as area of clinical expertise). Dr. Orsillo emphasized that important professional contacts often develop during internship and can significantly influence your professional career. In addition, many sites now hire predoctoral interns as postdoctoral fellows. Finally, the local or national connection and reputation of a site may determine your appeal to similar sites.

Requirements for graduate school gradually increase in response to licensure requirements and as student dissertation projects become larger and more sophisticated. Given this, many students asked about the ideal time to apply for internship. Most of the experts agree that it is not so much a matter of whether you apply one year or another, but rather how much experience you acquired up to the point of application. On average, they note that most students apply during their fourth and fifth years of graduate school. Many internship sites prefer students who have completed their dissertations, although this is not a necessity. It is preferable for students to have made some significant progress on their dissertation before internship.

Dr. Susan Orsillo summed up the essence of good predoctoral internship preparation best (and professional development in general) by imploring me to follow my heart. If you follow your heart, the rest, she said, would fall in line. While useful as a guiding career philosophy in general, when consolidating all of the advice in this article, it also sums up the essence of the experts' advice. If, in your preparation for internship, you pursue clinical and research experiences and training that match your interests and passions, and then apply to internship sites whose passions and activities match these, both you and the predoctoral internship site will be the better for it. When seeking out and applying to internships, seek out those that further your interests and career goals and those whose interests and goals you also fulfill.

If you follow your heart to the experiences and knowledge that fill you with passion, you will best prepare yourself for a happy and successful present, a strong internship application, and a satisfying future internship experience.

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