The Quest for an Internship: Four Students' Perspective

Drema Albin, Mark A. Adams, Sarah J. Walker, and Brent D. Elwood
University of Texas at Austin

What are students' experiences in applying for internships? Although the preponderance of recent internship literature addresses marketplace issues and competitive strategies, narratives of the applicants' experiences have been largely absent. Using an interpretive approach, 4 recent internship applicants reflect on the process of applying for internships as it contributes to the development of a psychologist. The authors highlight 3 values of professional practice—community, respect, and authenticity—that can inform the dialogue of internship reform and suggest practical implications for student applicants, internship training directors, directors of clinical training, and the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers.

Sedman (1997) described the internship applicants' process as a "quest for the internship holy grail" (p. 479). Yet, in 22 years of articles, conferences, and books published on the internship process, very few studies have focused on the phenomenology of that quest from the viewpoint of the applicants. Current discussions of the predoctoral internship application and selection experience tend to focus on two interrelated issues: (1) the disparities between supply and demand and the subsequent anxiety, competitiveness, and even despair of students pursuing an internship (e.g., Constantine & Keilin, 1996; Constantine, Keilin, Litwinowicz, & Romanus, 1997; Gloria & Robinson, 1994); and (2) strategies for success that are targeted toward prospective internship applicants (Levinger & Schefres, 1996; Megargee, 1997; Oehlert, Sumerall, & Lopez, 1998). What appears to remain invisible is the lived reality of the prospective applicant's quest for an internship.

This article follows our experience as it unfolded over the course of the 1999 Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) Match. Using an interpretive approach, our aim is to present an applicant-centered account that reveals the increasingly strained conditions and circumstances that animate the internship application process. Reflecting on our often difficult experiences led us to wonder, What do psychologists-in-training learn about being a psychologist from the internship application and selection process? This question, which we also pose to the field, is a substantive training question that seems to get lost in the supply-and-demand discourse. On a related point, we ask, Does the character of the internship application and selection process embody the values held by our profession?

Guided by these questions and concerns, we generate a construction of the phases of the application process and discern three values—authenticity, respect, and community—that shape our sense of what we hold important as trainees and emerging professionals. We, in turn, use these values to encourage a broader approach to addressing the "internship crisis" and make specific recommendations to students, directors of clinical training, internship training directors, and APPIC.

Who We Are

We are all Caucasian with a mean age of 34; 1 is married, with two children; 1 is a single parent, with two children; and the other 2 are in long-term relationships. We are enrolled in the same American Psychological Association (APA)-accredited doctoral program in counseling psychology, housed in the Department of Educational Psychology at a large southwestern university. As a group, we submitted 52 applications, with a mean of 13 applications submitted per author. The 52 applications included the full range of APA-accredited internship sites, including university counseling centers, medical schools, hospitals, Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers, and consortiums. Comparatively, APPIC's 1999 survey of approximately 350 recent applicants reported that students applied to a mean of 13.79 sites and 70% applied to geographically diverse sites (beyond a 200-mile [320-km] radius; W. G. Keilin, personal communication, April 1999).

Our 52 applications also represented a broad geographical area that included 24 different states. We applied exclusively to APA-approved internship sites. We were invited to three open-houses and participated in 32 interviews. We were selected for interviews...
at each of the different types of internship sites, with half of the interviews being on-site and half by telephone.

For the three of us who traveled to on-site interviews, the mean cost of the internship application process was $1,700. The costs were $400 for the author who did not travel. In terms of traveling, the mean was 19 days of travel per individual. For our group, the various costs associated with the internship process were the National Matching Service registration fee, transcripts, books, paper, postage, portfolios, telephone calls, airfare and other travel expenses, clothing, dry cleaning, kennel fees, and lost wages.

The Internship Application and Selection Process

Prelude

The internship application and selection process is both lengthy and cumbersome, involving multiple steps and determinations over a considerable period of time. We were taken aback by the energy required to complete this process, the emotional toll it exacted, and how it consumed our lives. Reflecting on our experiences, we have found an interplay of four phases that unfolded over the course of the internship application and selection process: a preliminary phase, which began with watching previous applicants go through the process; a second phase of starting our own substantive engagement with the APPIC Application for Psychology Internship (AAPI) form and the other application materials; a third phase in which applications were being completed; and a final phase, which began to take shape during the interviews through post-match day.

Preliminary Phase: Phase 1

Two years prior to the application period, we formed a dissertation group that met biweekly to support, read, critique, and listen to one another's dissertation work. As the internship application period began in earnest, we found that our collective attention shifted from dissertations to internship applications. As a group, we chose to subvert an individualistic approach to the internship application process, embracing instead an approach that emphasized community and provided support.

In each of the prior 3 years, one to two intern applicants from our program were placed on uniform notification day. This reality highlighted for us the shortage of internship openings relative to applicants. This awareness propagated several themes that lasted throughout the process: (a) the need to apply to a wide range and number of sites, (b) the subjective nature of the application acceptance process, and (c) the critical search for "best fit" sites. Out of this period we began our own process with hope, anticipation, and dread.

The challenge of determining best fit sites requires accurate, timely, and complete information from internship sites. Guided by the steps-to-success literature, which recommends geographic diversity, and 12 (±2) applications (Megargee, 1997), we eagerly pursued site information beginning in the summer. As a group, we gathered and reviewed more than 250 brochures, pamphlets, and websites. Although the quality and range of information varied widely, the most helpful sites provided in-depth program overviews, gave information on available rotations, provided adequate contact information for prospective applicants, elaborated aspects of the timeline from receipt of the application to the interview times, described staff backgrounds, and were respectful to the student process.

Energy and Anxiety: Phase 2

Students each year vie for internship positions against national applicants as well as applicants from their own programs. Our program this year had 20 applicants. As we began to focus on the application process in earnest we discovered our energy and excitement rising at the possibilities we faced. We discovered that our anxiety experienced a concomitant rise also.

Constantine et al. (1997) suggested that the "perceived applicant-to-slot imbalance contributes to the stress and competitiveness that already exist as part of the selection process" (p. 388; see also Constantine & Keilin, 1996; Gloria & Robinson, 1994). Such competition may breed an individualistic approach that can isolate the applicant from support sources that are much needed. Gloria and Robinson (1994) reported students' experiences of the application process included anxiety, fear of negative evaluations against one's peers, and depression. To ameliorate these feelings, our group openly discussed choices, balancing information received from the group with personal goals, needs, and options. We found this to be emotionally challenging.

Today's internship competition may limit aspects of personal choice in terms of application decisions. We found that our own decisions on whether to apply to particular sites, or particular types of sites, were weighted with a variety of other goals. The type of training offered, the populations served, and the fit of the site with professional goals were prominent considerations. Other personal reasons that we took into account were concerns about family, benefits, work schedules, postinternship opportunities, and partner employment needs (see also Gloria & Robinson, 1994; Stedman, 1997).

Even with the AAPI uniform application, we found that gathering data on clinical service and supervision hours was time consuming and anxiety provoking. We each worried about being honest, accurate, and whether the numbers really reflected the scope of our work. However, the AAPI form is not used by all sites, and many sites require different sets of information. Some sites requested materials or essays in addition to the form, and we appreciated the opportunity to provide such material because it offered us a clearer sense of what was valued at that site. Unfortunately, because such supplemental material often required extensive extra effort, we limited the number of sites to which we supplied additional materials.

Authenticity Versus Competitiveness: Phase 3

As we began to work on our applications, we would ask ourselves, "Do I really want to be at a site where I feel unable to express what is important to me?" Although one may desire to present honestly, there is an evaluative component existing at each step as well as the reality of the imbalance of the application-to-opening ratio. Related to this concern, we often felt at the mercy of an application and selection process that we experienced as not always mindful of the power differentials that operate over the course of a prospective internship applicant's search.

The rolling application deadlines as well as site timelines created an intense 2-month period in which applications were due
even as other sites were calling to set up an interview. Additionally, rejection letters from sites with early deadlines were received. Thus, anxiety was high when we received calls for interviews. We each felt a lot of pressure to accept the days or times meted out by sites, which was sometimes detrimental because of the resulting demands of travel and the emotional toll that it exacted.

We found that sites ranged in their helpfulness to the applicant after setting up the interview. Some sites followed up by sending information with directions, information on public transportation, and places to stay, whereas other sites were perceived as being unavailable once the interview date and time were set. Certainly, sites hold more power than do applicants at this point: Applicants are excited and eager to interview. Generally, an applicant does not want to risk being seen as disinterested by questioning too many aspects of the interview situation. Yet, one can argue that applicants should be given adequate information so that they may give “informed consent” as to the viability of interviewing at a particular site. For example, 1 author was dismayed and displeased to find that she had made a long journey only to find herself 1 of 100 people being interviewed for five slots. She commented on that experience:

Had I known that I was among that many people, I never would have chosen to go there to interview—I thought that being asked to come on-site meant that I had made a selective cut, not a cut that apparently only rejected a minimum of people!

Overall, the interviews we experienced seemed aimed toward a mutual goal of information exchange. However, we also experienced questions that appeared to have a “right” answer rather than those aimed at prompting reflectiveness or an understanding of who we were. In a profession where authentic interaction is not only important but also vital to our success, we were sometimes frustrated by a process that often failed to encourage, if not actively discouraged, authentic interaction. What makes one’s approach to being authentic in this process particularly difficult is the often standardized nature of questions in an atmosphere of sometimes bland interest. Training directors and other persons associated with interviewing should have an obligation to read the applicant’s material before the interview. For an applicant who has invested time, money, and energy into an application, and who is likely excited to be selected for an interview, it is deflating to sit across from someone showing minimal interest in the process in which you are intensely engaged.

Another challenge to being authentic was the sense that feedback, whether giving it or getting it, was actively discouraged at some sites. One applicant was told by a training director in the rejection letter not to contact him for feedback because he would provide none. It is easy to argue that receiving an internship is the best feedback; however, it seems reasonable to provide feedback to those candidates who take the time to request such. Often, we were given no information about why we were not given interviews or why we did not progress beyond the interview to being ranked. This was particularly disturbing given our attention to applying to best-fit sites. We recognize the amount of effort such feedback would require on the part of the sites, but given the effort expended in applying it seems both a courteous thing to do as well as ensuring that sites are accountable for their selections.

Well, How Did I Get Here? Phase 4

Prematch day. The last major aspect of the current selection process prior to match day is the ranking of sites. Applicants are required to rank their preferred sites in order of desired preference. Ranking sites was harder than we anticipated. The factors that prompted us to apply to some sites initially (training opportunities, supervision, geography) now had to be weighed with the potential ramifications of being selected for that site (moving, postdoctoral opportunities). Then, even after submitting the ranking list, doubts crept in about the possibility of not having made the best choice.

Match day. Our tension was high—we each realized that there still existed a possibility that 1 or more of us may not get an internship. Although we were prepared for this situation, we also recognized the difficulties that we could face in mitigating our pleasure with a colleague’s pain, or vice versa. We were all matched with one of our top choices.

Postmatch day. In retrospect, perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the internship application experience was that the energy and attention necessitated by this process results in a 1-year position for the vast majority of applicants. It would seem that we would just begin to be effective participants at our sites when our internships would draw to a close. As Oehlert and Lopez (1998) stated, “These challenges occur when students should be integrating their training experiences and defining their professional identity. They also occur at a time when the student is basically at the mercy of the internship placement system” (p. 192).

As we move into our respective internship slots, we are left to wonder what we have learned from this process about being students and future psychologists. What seems overlooked at times is that this is also a socialization into the field: At the very time that a doctoral candidate should be working to complete a dissertation there exists a process that, for most applicants, supplants the energy needed for that work. It would seem that internship has supplanted the dissertation as a rite of passage for many students.

Discussion and Implications

In the current milieu, the emphasis on securing and completing a predoctoral internship seems to be out of proportion with its appropriate role in a psychologist’s development compared with other aspects of professional training. We feel that internship is an important opportunity to synthesize therapeutic skills and focus on applied work. Yet, it is only one piece of our professional development. The pressure to “do what it takes” to be competitive for an internship can create a burden on students emotionally, financially, academically, and in terms of their significant relationships.

During the internship application process each of us struggled not to forget the broader view of our academic goals and our professional development. Caught in the swirl of energy and emotion required to apply for internship, it is not surprising that we lost sight of the longer-term issues and values related to becoming a psychologist. Indeed, we believe it is a reflection of the dynamics of the application process that each of us began by feeling well-prepared and competitive, yet lost sight of this as we entered more deeply into the process.

We ask, Does the character of the internship application and selection process embody the values held by our profession? We suggest a broadening of the dialogue about the internship process.
by examining three core values: respect, community, and authenticity. We believe that these values should be emphasized among the various entities that have a role in the internship process, and suggest that if these values received more attention, with participants seeking to incorporate these values in their procedures and attitudes, the effectiveness of the internship application process will improve. Concomitantly, the possibility of applicants and others having a positive experience will increase. We also believe that this will align the process more closely with the values that guide psychotherapeutic work.

Community

Community has been a key element in our approach to surviving the road to internship. Our dissertation-internship group formed and helped to contain our anxiety and fears as well as providing ongoing support, and, concomitantly, it is the source of this article: an agreement between colleagues to continue our work together, working to ensure that our collective creativity and collaboration as well as our hard-earned knowledge could be passed on to the next generation of internship applicants. Perhaps it is fitting that we now move beyond our own community, becoming part of some other community, so that our idealism can be tested.

Respect

Psychologists practice the value of respect through the ethical treatment of their clients and colleagues. Our experience was, for the most part, respectful treatment from internship sites during the application process. Respectful treatment of intern applicants includes clarity of communication between sites and students in terms of expectations, timelines for decision making, and upholding the ethical standards set out by APPIC. In addition, internship sites that value respect during the process take into account the anxiety, expense, and time limitations involved in applicants' lives.

Authenticity

We include the value of authenticity due to our belief that genuine interactions benefit all parties involved. Conversations with training directors, interns, and other individuals who presented the realities of training programs provided a true sense of whether the site would indeed be a fit between our goals and that of the site. Authentic interactions also gave a sense of personal fit potential, an important aspect when one is considering the possible ramifications of geographic relocation, a disruption of family, and other personal concerns.

We believe that a substantive engagement with these values creates a richer framework within which to consider, discuss, and address the "internship crisis." We also hope that our discussion raises questions and concerns that move beyond training issues and into the broader context of the character and future of the field of professional psychology. With this article, we offer our specific experience in an effort to expand the dialogue and to encourage the participation of student voices. It is our hope that training directors, current and prospective interns, as well as others connected with the internship process will continue and broaden the dialogue.

Recommendations

Beginning with the following list of recommendations, modification in application practices may better reflect what we see as the core values in the field of psychology.

For students, our recommendations are as follows:
1. Create a shared community of peer applicants to manage anxiety and counter individualism.
2. Build extensive information networks with former applicants and staff at your training program as well as sites of interest. Current and former interns should reach out to students currently undergoing the application process.
3. Create student-centered information that moves beyond strategies for success, for example an Internet-based initiative to gather information about each internship from applicants and interns.
4. Respect that internship directors and staff must manage a deluge of applications on top of business as usual. Make contacts and questions brief and to the point.
5. Reflect closely on personal-professional goals and training needs and ask questions accordingly.

For training directors, we make the following recommendations:
1. Create avenues for applicants to communicate with current interns outside of the evaluation process to learn more detailed information about the internship program.
2. Promote an ongoing sense of community at sites by facilitating connections between past, current, and incoming interns.
3. Institute mentors to usher in new interns as they transition to the site as well as a new city and community.
4. Update brochure information each year to reflect changes in training and desired qualifications and to promote applicants' assessment of their fit.
5. Seek honest feedback from incoming interns regarding their application experiences and modify the process as appropriate.
6. Respond promptly and honestly to applicant questions.
7. Set reasonable timetables for interview decisions. This may include some flexibility for applicants who have tight travel schedules or face unforeseen weather delays, and so forth.
8. Be punctual in both phone and on-sight interviews. Consider whether the length of interviews promotes a mutual assessment of fit.

For director recommendations, our recommendations for the APPIC are as follows:
1. Write a bill of rights and responsibilities for internship applicants that reflects a broader vision of ethical practice than do the current APPIC guidelines.
2. Create a more extensive template of information about each internship site for the APPIC directory.
References


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