Identifying, Obtaining, and Completing a Predoctoral Psychology Internship: Research Considerations

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The quality of clinical training is a critical factor to consider when selecting a psychology predoctoral internship placement. Yet, research activities are also an integral part of a scientist-practitioner training model. Pursuit of ongoing research training during an internship can impact an individual’s professional development and productivity, both during the internship year and beyond. Although many published resources have outlined the steps to obtaining a predoctoral internship, few sources have offered adequate consideration of research goals and training. To address this gap in the existing literature, the present article offers a discussion of research issues relevant to the process of identifying, securing, and completing a predoctoral internship in applied psychology.

The predoctoral internship involves a year of intensive behavioral health service training for applied (e.g., clinical, counseling, school) psychology graduate students. Currently, the assessment and treatment of psychopathology and related behavior problems constitute a major portion of internship training (Davison, 1998; Ellis, 1992; Peterson, 1991, 1995). This clinically focused training approach is utilitarian, meeting both training and health care needs. Yet, often overlooked is the fact that attention to training in behavioral research during the internship year is an equally important feature of a comprehensive applied psychological training program. The 1987 Gainesville conference (Belar, Bieliauskas, Larsen, Mench, Poey, & Roehlke, 1987, 1989) suggested that the purpose of internship training was to provide “the integration of scientific, professional, and ethical knowledge, attitudes, and basic skills to professional practice” (Belar et al., 1987, p. 4). Continued research instruction during the internship year is fundamental to this scientist-practitioner model of predoctoral training in psychology.

Many internship sites subscribe to a training model that is geared toward clinical and research applications of psychology (Society for a Science of Clinical Psychology; SCCP; 1998). However, real-world contingencies and practicalities often limit the research opportunities that these sites actually can provide. First, the internship is designed primarily to be a clinical training experience. Consistent with this goal, the governing board of internships, the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC), has developed membership standards for internship programs. Specifically, interns must receive a minimum of 2,000 hr of full-time clinical work, with a minimum of 25% face-to-face psychological service provision and 1 hr of supervision for every 4 hr of service provision (at least 2 hr of which must be provided on an individual basis by a doctoral-level psychologist). Although the estimated number of clinical hours with which interns enter internship ranges from an average of 1,000 (Hecker, Fink, Levasseur, & Parker, 1995) to upwards of 3,000–4,000 (Clay, 2000), continued intensive clinical experience during the internship is considered necessary in order to provide opportunities for greater breadth, more specialized training, and/or expansion of previous training in novel ways. Financial

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realities present a second real-world impediment to research opportunities while on internship. As stated by one internship supervisor, "The amount of clinical services necessary to generate revenues that subsidize individual stipends, clinical supervision and training, and the internship as a whole often leave little time for research." Taken together, these factors may limit time and resources devoted to research training during the internship year and may result in research being a valued commodity more in theory than practice.

Given the pragmatic obstacles that may limit research opportunities, students interested in research activities to integrate with clinical training must actively seek out internship placements that will permit such opportunities. Moreover, these students may need to take the primary role in initiating and maintaining the process of building research activities into the internship experience, both through more standard research activities (e.g., collaborating on an empirical paper, helping to collect data) and through more creative means such as the development of group research projects or journal clubs. Although much has been published regarding the steps to obtaining and successfully completing a predoctoral psychology internship (e.g., Grace, 1985; Megargee, 1997; Mellott, Arden, & Cho, 1997), few authors have directly addressed factors specific to research goals and training. In fact, in special sections regarding internship training published in the June 2000 issue of this journal, not one of the 11 internship articles discussed issues directly pertinent to research. To begin to address this gap in the existing literature, we discuss research-relevant issues to be considered in the process of identifying, securing, and completing a predoctoral internship in applied psychology. We illustrate these points with case examples and vignettes.

The Decision: To Apply or Not to Apply

Before beginning the internship application process, prospective applicants first must evaluate their readiness to advance to the internship stage of their training (Rodolfa, Haynes, & Kaplan, 1995). For applicants interested in a more research-focused internship and a scientifically oriented career beyond, the decision regarding whether and when to apply should include consideration of research progress and goals with respect to both the selection criteria of particular internship sites and the applicant’s personal long-term research objectives.

To determine readiness according to expectations of particular internship sites, an applicant should gather general information about the types of research skills and experiences that internship sites of interest value by carefully reading through brochures and other written materials. Additional information can be obtained through direct contact with site representatives, through telephone and electronic mail contact as well as interactions at conferences, including discussions at poster sessions and at symposia designed to provide the dissemination of internship information. The applicant should use information gathered from these various sources to assess the extent to which he or she possesses the relevant research skills and experiences that the sites of interest are looking for, including issues of "fit." Discussions with current graduate faculty, including the applicant’s advisor and the director of clinical training (DCT), who are likely to be familiar with both an applicant’s credentials and a particular site’s goals, also will be helpful. In addition to goals for the internship year, more long-term career issues also should be considered. Because application deadlines for academic positions often fall within the first 8 months of an internship, it is unlikely that research conducted on an internship will have been completed (e.g., reported in publications and presentations) in sufficient time to enhance the attractiveness of an application for positions such as postdoctoral fellowships and faculty appointments. Taken together, the applicant should attempt to determine readiness for the internship, while considering the potential advantages of deferring the application process a year to seek out additional research training. Although postponing the internship for a year initially may be disappointing, such a decision may have several benefits in regard to eventual internship placement and career development beyond.

Consider the following vignette. At the start of his 4th year of graduate school, Esteban began to consider whether he should apply for an internship. He met separately with his advisor and his DCT to review his progress within his program, including his clinical and research experiences and skills. At this meeting, his DCT suggested that Esteban likely would be quite competitive for a wide range of internship sites. Given Esteban’s long-range goal of pursuing an academic position, however, his DCT also suggested that he would be best served by considering sites that, in addition to providing valuable clinical experiences, also would provide research time and resources to finish his dissertation and to produce a few more publications and presentations. Following this advice, Esteban decided to apply for an internship, but also to narrow his choices to only those sites with a clinical and research balance that best met his training and professional development needs and goals.

Factors to Consider When Identifying Potential Sites

Once the decision to apply for an internship has been made and potential sites are identified, available research time and other resources should be considered strongly. Many sites indicate a commitment to research activities during the internship in their promotional materials. In fact, the Directory of Clinical Psychology Internships (SSCP, 1998), the only readily available information source that provides research-specific information across sites, indicates that as many as 64% of sites (96 out of 149) encourage—expect interns to conduct some form of research. Yet, despite this apparent emphasis on research, only 66% of the 96 sites provided designated research time, with the mean number of hours devoted to research being approximately 4 hr/week (SSCP, 1998). Thus, a number of sites that encourage or expect research are not able to provide guaranteed research time to interns. Even at sites where time is designated specifically for interns to engage in research activities, clinical duties may supersede this allotted time, and an intern’s successful participation in research during the internship training year may be largely dependent on additional factors such as institutional and faculty support for intern research endeavors.

To determine the availability of research time and research resources, potential interns should consider a number of specific points of inquiry. First, we recommend that they examine more closely protected research time by using the sources discussed above, consulting with their DCT, and inquiring from sites directly. In fact, we recommend asking internship supervisors and current interns at individual sites the amount of research that can potentially and realistically be conducted. For example, the appli-
cant should attempt to determine whether research time is truly protected in effective blocks of time or if these opportunities will have to be "squeezed," often in small blocks of time, around clinical duties or into free time. Similar questions also should be asked regarding institutional support such as access to libraries, photocopying privileges, computer equipment, statistical programs and consultants, and electronic mail and the Internet. In addition, applicants should assess whether there is sufficient time and funding to attend conferences, conduct new research projects, or finish dissertation work or existing research projects. Other resources about which to inquire include supplemental training experiences such as research meetings or research-based talks within the context of intern seminars.

In addition to the specific research resources available, clinical resources that may aid or enhance research opportunities also should be considered, including access to particular types of populations that can be studied. Consistent with the scientist–practitioner model, the applicant should consider actively seeking out sites with clinical rotations and experiences that complement his or her research interests. For example, someone interested in completing treatment evaluations of cognitive–behavioral therapy for depression would likely benefit from a rotation focused on inpatient and/or outpatient treatment for mood disorders. In contrast, an examination of depressive symptoms among a specific ethnic minority group would be difficult or impossible to conduct in settings where individuals who compose these target populations are absent.

Clinical rotations also can be used to provide a springboard into new research areas or provide a new perspective on the current area. For example, a rotation in neuropsychology might provide research ideas to extend interests and scope for an intern studying cognitive processes in depression. Although research can hypothetically be constructed independent of clinical rotations, finding ways to integrate the two may address time and resource limitations.

Consider another vignette. Patricia’s goal for selecting an internship placement included finding a site that offered both clinical rotations and research experience in the area of panic disorder. She was unsure of her exact future plans, but she knew she was interested in a career that included a balance of clinical and research experiences. Although she was interested in sites with anxiety-related rotations, she also was interested in other rotations (e.g., mood disorders, addictive behaviors) that might provide her with knowledge and experiences that would assist her future research on panic and might possibly allow her to extend her research into other areas such as comorbid panic disorder and substance abuse. After consulting several directories of internship sites, Patricia requested materials only from sites that offered protected research time and indicated in their informational materials that research was an important part of internship training. She was pleased to find that many such materials offered a bibliography of recent publications and presentations that had resulted from intern–faculty collaborations.

Next, Patricia discussed her list of potential internship sites with her DCT and with faculty in her department and asked what they knew about each site’s commitment to research training. In addition, she made contact with internship faculty and previous interns of particular sites to discuss opportunities to integrate clinical rotations with research. She also inquired about research resources including "truly" protected research time as well as factors such as Internet and library access, available workspace, and financial support for conferences and research projects. Through this process, Patricia identified several internship sites that had the rotations she wanted, as well as providing opportunities for research that she felt would maximize her research training and productivity and supplement her clinical training experience.

Securing an Internship: Applying and Interviewing

Although focused primarily on relevant clinical training, the APPIC Application for Psychology Internship (APPI) and specific-site applications, as well as subsequent on-site and telephone interviews, also may be used to highlight research skills and experiences. Using these means for the elaboration of career goals and the determination of how a particular internship site may assist in meeting such goals is beneficial because it allows both the applicant and the site to assess the relative degree of "match" in training philosophy and future professional plans.

The cover letter and research-specific letters of recommendation are relatively simple ways to outline research goals. The application cover letter can establish the applicant’s interests in both research and clinical applications of psychology, and the ways in which these goals overlap. If there are particular faculty members at the internship site in whose research the applicant is interested, this should also be specified in the cover letter to increase the chance that application materials may be forwarded to appropriate faculty for review. Others have explicated general strategies for obtaining effective letters of recommendation (see Megargee, 1997). In addition to these strategies, we suggest conveying a commitment to research by selecting at least one letter writer who can specifically addresses the applicant’s research abilities and potential.

Essays and interviews require considerable thought and time. In completing essays, we recommend discussing research interests when appropriate. Most obviously, one essay on the APPI 2001–2002 application asks for a description of dissertation and related research. In addition to a general description of the project, the applicant could also explicate how this project fits into a more long-term program of research and how it can be integrated with clinical practice. Research issues also may be discussed when answering a second essay question focusing on internship training goals. Specifically, this essay provides an opportunity to elaborate on clinically relevant research strengths including experience with empirically validated protocols and structured interviews. Further, accomplishments stemming from these experiences such as grant writing activities, conference attendance and presentations, and publications should be conveyed.

Similar to the application essay, on-site and phone interviews also allow for the discussion of research interests. Megargee (1997) listed three research-related questions that might be asked of potential applicants; however, these are primarily focused on dissertation research. We believe the potential applicant also should be prepared to answer additional questions regarding research (current research trends, methodological or statistical expertise) and be prepared to ask research-related questions of the interviewer. Again, keeping in mind that the internship is foremost a clinical training experience, the applicant should be able to answer questions not just about how his or her research is clini-
cally relevant in general but specifically about how it might be integrated into the training experiences at the site. In addition, the applicant need not limit discussion to an acquired area of expertise but also can discuss areas for future exploration. Some background work (e.g., literature searches) prior to the interview may provide the applicant with some knowledge regarding these opportunities and also demonstrates initiative and forethought on the part of the applicant. Especially for supervisors with heavy clinical demands, collaboration with a motivated and productive intern may be ideal for the implementation of new projects or the revival of stalled projects. Further, being prepared to discuss research ideas and bringing relevant preprints—reprints and/or handouts from conference presentations is likely to establish the applicant’s initiative and can demonstrate knowledge and interest in an area of study. Finally, the interview also is a good time to discuss long-term clinical and research career goals and inquire about how the internship might assist in the attainment of those goals.

Summary and Conclusions

There are a number of reasons to maintain a focus on research activities during internship training. First, consistent with the scientist-practitioner training model, nearly all applied psychology students are actively involved with both clinical work and research during their graduate education (Belar, 1998). Therefore, the shift to an internship year focused solely on clinical development is inconsistent with previous experience and future goals for many students and is seemingly discordant with the spirit of the scientist-practitioner model. Second, improving the translation of research ideas and findings into the practice of contemporary health care is likely to result in better clinical care to patients and therefore remains a top priority of the field and federal health care agencies (e.g., Onken & Bootzin, 1998). One way for internship sites to strengthen the interconnection between science and practice is the provision of instruction and/or development of guidelines regarding how clinical duties and research experiences can be integrated in this final training year. Third, it has been suggested that training during the predoctoral internship should prepare interns for the diverse activities they likely will be performing as psychologists (Humphreys, 2000). Indeed, it is the research component of doctoral-level training that most readily differentiates psychology from other mental health specializations (Belar, 1998; Ducheney, Alletzphauser, Crandell, & Schneider, 1997), and therefore a year of training that does not foster the continued development of research capabilities ignores perhaps the most distinguishing aspect of doctoral-level psychology. Even for individuals who intend to focus primarily on service provision after the completion of training, integrative experiences with research while on internship may increase the likelihood of long-term involvement in research activities or at least awareness of new research developments.

Although emphasizing research interests may not be seen as a strength at particular sites, it is important to focus on the objective of fit between an applicant and a site (Rodolfa et al., 1999). From a goodness-of-fit perspective, it is unlikely that an individual with a research focus would be happy and productive at a site where research plays only a minor role in the program’s training goals. Moreover, there are a large number of internship sites that report a significant interest in accepting candidates with research experience. Indeed, the Directory of Clinical Psychology Internships (SCCP, 1998) identified almost 50 sites that rated research as an important factor for admission, with preference given to applicants with research experience. Further, an additional 70 sites included in this resource listed research experience as relevant, despite pragmatic issues reducing it to secondary importance in practice. This suggests that applicants who wish to pursue research experiences during their clinical internship year will continue to have a number of viable options from which to choose, even after selecting only sites that will provide more extensive research opportunities.

For a variety of reasons, identifying the most appropriate internship sites can be a daunting task. Sources such as the Directory of Clinical Psychology Internships (SCCP, 1998) that provide more detailed information about particular sites should be used to help simplify the process. Nevertheless, we encourage continued collaboration between individual internship sites and APPIC to further impart more general research-related information regarding the internship experience, as well as more specific information from a more comprehensive list of internship sites. For example, survey questions addressing important research-related issues (e.g., the percentage of past interns that continued on to research-related positions) could be provided to all sites, with the results posted in the APPIC handbook and on the APPIC Web site for convenient access.

Even within sites that place the greatest emphasis on research, issues such as meeting the minimum number of direct clinical hours as suggested by APPIC and training students to a necessary level of clinical competency when they have little experience with a particular population or treatment modality must sometimes take priority over protected opportunities for research. As such, it becomes the responsibility of the individual to create research opportunities while meeting clinical expectations. Such opportunities might include joining an already existing and productive research team, preparing manuscripts from research conducted in graduate school, and considering more long-range projects at sites that offer the opportunity for postdoctoral fellowships and faculty positions following completion of the internship year. Most important, it should be recognized that even at sites that are extremely supportive of research endeavors, an intern’s diligence, planning, and creativity are necessary to maximize research productivity. For example, a student could make arrangements with a faculty member at the internship placement to arrive 1 month early to lay the groundwork for research so that it might run more smoothly once clinical demands began. Although unique opportunities may take work to arrange, our experience has shown that supervisors with research interests are eager to facilitate such arrangements, including the provision of the necessary resources.

In summary, there are numerous advantages to obtaining an internship that provides continued training experiences in both clinical and research domains. Although successfully obtaining such a placement requires forethought and preparation, it ultimately will allow for optimal growth as a competent and productive scientist-practitioner.

References


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