The Internship Supply and Demand Issue: Graduate Student’s Perspective

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The increasing gap between the number of internship applicants and the number of students applying for internship is of great concern for psychology graduate students and the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS). APAGS sees this concern as multifaceted and has been involved in a variety of efforts to address this imbalance since the early 1990s. This article outlines in greater detail APAGS’ view of the internship supply and demand concern, how this problem affects students, and how APAGS has worked to address the issue. It also presents APAGS recommendations for advancing psychology’s collective efforts to address this concern.

Keywords: predoctoral internship, graduate psychology training

The predoctoral internship has a long history in the training and preparation of professional psychologists, dating back to 1949, when the American Psychological Association (APA) recommended that clinical psychologists complete an applied clinical internship experience in addition to their course studies. Three years later, the Division of Counseling Psychology (APA Division 17) endorsed a training model that included a predoctoral internship requirement. In the mid 1950s, the APA had begun accrediting predoctoral internship training sites; and in the late 1960s, the Association of Psychology Internship Centers was formed (Stedman, 1997). As a membership organization, the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) remains the primary organizing body over the predoctoral internship training experience and provides services and resources for both training sites and students seeking internships in professional psychology.

The predoctoral internship is a culminating capstone experience for practitioner psychologists-in-training (Lamb, Baker, Jennings, & Yarvis, 1982). It is a necessary training requirement for state licensure eligibility, and any psychologist who wishes to practice psychology independently must be licensed (Gayer, Brown, Gridley, & Treloar, 2003). It has been shown that interns often pursue future professional positions in settings similar to their predoctoral internship (Thorpe, O’Donohue, & Gregg, 2005).

Yet, obtaining a predoctoral internship placement is a very competitive process for students. It is costly for many students, and in some cases it can be psychologically and emotionally draining (Madson, Aten, & Leach, 2007). Williams-Nickelson and Prinstein (2007) have noted that “the psychology internship application process
can be a simultaneously rewarding, exhausting, stressful, and exciting process” (p. 3). For example, in the 2007 APPIC Internship Matching Program (Match), there were 640 APPIC predoctoral internship programs listed (not all APPIC programs have APA accreditation), resulting in a total of 2,884 predoctoral internship positions (funded and nonfunded) available for the Match (APPIC, 2007b). Despite the consistent increase in APPIC predoctoral training programs over the years, there still remains a large disparity between internship training positions and the number of applicants, which results in a significant number of unplaced students each year (Dixon & Thorn, 2000; Lopez, Draper, & Reynolds, 2001; Oehlert, Sumerall, Lopez, & Merkley, 2002). Of the 3,698 students who registered for the Match in 2007, an increase of 219 from 2006, 842 did not receive a placement through the APPIC Match process. This represented an increase of 111 unmatched applicants (APPIC, 2007b). Although 842 registered applicants remained unmatched in the 2007 Match process, there were 296 unfilled internship positions on Match Day. In 2007, and every year, most of these positions are filled shortly after Match Day through the APPIC Clearinghouse process.

Over the years, the number of internship positions has been rising, but the number of positions has not kept pace with the increasing number of students registered for the Match. Between 2002 and 2007, new internship programs have been developed and some programs have closed, yet there has remained a steady increase of sites from 30 to 132 over the past 5 years. In 2007, there was a particularly large increase of 105 more internship positions offered compared to 2006 (APPIC, 2007b). In contrast, the number of registered applicants grew by 219 in 2007 and by 625 over the past 5 years (APPIC, 2007b). These data demonstrate the real and pressing problem of internship supply and demand that will continue to worsen if trends remain consistent and if the problem is not appropriately addressed. The increasing internship supply and demand gap is deeply concerning to trainees who are the consumers of internship training. Likewise, this problem is of great interest to the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS), the largest organization of psychology graduate students worldwide. Given the gravity of this issue to students and APAGS, we (throughout this article, “we” refers to APAGS) welcome the opportunity to comment on this problem from a diverse perspective—that of the consumers of internship training who are directly and negatively impacted. Our goal in this article is to discuss the supply and demand issue from the APAGS (student) perspective, emphasize how APAGS views the problem and its solutions, and outline what APAGS has done to address this concern.

What Is the Problem?

APAGS strongly believes that discussions that focus only on either increasing the number of internships or limiting class sizes fail to acknowledge the complex nature of the problem, result in attribution of blame and divisiveness, and limit the abilities of those concerned and involved to engage in creative problem solving. As such, both the supply and demand sides of the internship imbalance must be addressed to reach a viable long-term solution to this issue of paramount concern for psychology graduate students.

Supply

Psychology has faced significant funding challenges in recent years due to overarching economic, political, and social factors. One example of how these have adversely impacted funding for internships is the reduction in funding for the Graduate Psychology Education (GPE) program. In 2002, APA successfully advocated for the establishment of the GPE program, the only federal program dedicated solely to the education and training of psychologists. GPE was created to provide funds through a competitive grant process to APA-accredited doctoral, postdoctoral, and internship programs to work with other health professionals in the provision of mental and behavioral health services for underserved populations. The GPE program was initially funded in 2002 for $2 million, which increased to $4.5 million for 2003, 2004, and 2005. However, as funding for health professions programs declined, GPE funding was reduced to $1.8 million in 2006 and 2007 (APA, 2007b), resulting in the elimination of multiple training programs that benefit both psychology interns and those that they serve.
Despite funding limitations, the numbers of participating internship sites and available internship positions have each increased by 5% from 2002 to 2007. However, this growth is insufficient relative to the 20% increase in registered internship Match applicants over the same period (APPIC, 2007b). Complicating matters for students is the fact that many of the new positions added during this time have been in APPIC-member sites but not APA-accredited internship programs. The addition of these non-APA-accredited positions does not benefit students whose programs strongly encourage or require them to complete APA-accredited internships.

The dearth of internship slots relative to the demand for them also reflects the field’s failure to develop other viable mechanisms for internship training that may help better meet the varying needs of an increasingly diverse graduate student population who often have significant demands beyond those related to their graduate training. For example, the number of half-time APA-accredited and APPIC-member internships positions has decreased from 106 in 1995 (APPIC, 1995, as cited in Emmons, Kenkel, Newman, Perl, & Mangione, 2006) to 37 positions in 2007 (APPIC, 2007a). Only 8 of these 37 positions are within APA-accredited sites. Furthermore, 19 of the 29 positions at the nonaccredited sites are unfunded positions. At first glance, these additional sites might seem to help the internship supply, but APAGS strongly believes that providing internship stipends is necessary to uphold the value of our professional training and services and to provide interns and their families with much needed funding and other benefits for sustenance. In 2006, the APAGS committee unanimously endorsed a policy on half-time internships, which emphasized that all interns should be competitively compensated for their work to enhance their professional identity and avoid their exploitation.

**Demand**

The number of PhD and PsyD graduate psychology programs continues to grow, which strengthens the demand for internship training experiences. In 2001, there were a total of 290 PhD and 56 PsyD APA-accredited graduate programs in combined, clinical, counseling, and school psychology (Peterson, 2003). Currently, there are 301 PhD and 72 PsyD APA-accredited programs (APA, 2007a). This is an increase of 27 accredited programs in 6 years. In addition to this growth, the National Council of Schools and Programs of Professional Psychology (2007) lists 17 associate members of its organization, indicating these PsyD programs do not hold APA-accreditation but have provisional or full accreditation by a regional accrediting body and are on the path to obtaining APA accreditation. Thus, nonaccredited APA programs are also training students that will need and are currently competing for internships. Despite a call to action, there has not been voluntary restraint by graduate programs to reduce admissions or delay the creation of new programs (i.e., McCutcheon, 2007). As a result, the internship market has not been able to keep pace with this overall growth.

Both PsyD programs, which in aggregate tend to admit larger numbers of students each year, and PhD programs, some of which also have large class sizes, are contributing to the overwhelming demand on the internship market. However, APAGS’s position is that individual graduate programs must consider whether they are putting more than their “fair share” of pressure on the internship market by admitting large class sizes without directly creating or supporting similar growth in the internship market and must take some responsibility for solving the imbalance problem. Little has been written about what existing and new graduate programs are doing to increase the number of internships locally (Cornish, Smith-Acuna, & Nadkarni, 2005) or what they are doing, if anything, to voluntarily limit their admissions to better keep pace with internship training slots. Perhaps even more important, APAGS urges programs to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that their students are receiving quality training experiences so that they can be competitive in the job market.

The growing number of students applying for internship each year is compounded by the number of unmatched students reapplying for internship in subsequent years. In 2006, 142 students reported participating in the APPIC Match for at least the second time after failing to secure an internship previously (APPIC, 2006). As the internship imbalance continues, students are reentering an already crowded pool...
of applicants and adding to increased demand. In recent years, APAGS has also learned anecdotally that some graduate students are bypassing the Match and are using the APPIC Clearinghouse to find an internship after Match Day. Although there are no data about the frequency or success of this practice, it is potentially worsening the demand. Likewise, APAGS agrees with Williams-Nickelson and Prinstein (2007) and believes that there is inherent value in a student going through the process of preparing, applying, and interviewing for internship, as an excellent method for taking stock of one’s training, skills to date, and areas for growth and for comprehensively preparing for future job interviews.

In sum, the growing number of psychology graduate programs and students, lack of voluntary restraint in admissions by some graduate programs, and students reentering the internship market after not placing previously are largely contributing to the problems with demand. These factors are compounded by reductions in federal funding (e.g., GPE) to support expensive internship training, slow growth of internship sites compared to student growth, and a lack of creative solutions for enhancing the number of sites, such as paid part-time internships.

The Impact of the Problem

The imbalance between the number of students seeking internships and the lack of available quality APPIC-member and APA-accredited internships has multiple deleterious implications for students, which can be best understood within the context of current student demographics and trends.

According to the 2003 Doctorate Employment Survey conducted by the APA Research Office (now referred to as the Center for Workforce Analysis), the mean age of new psychology doctorates is 35.1 and 73% of all new doctorates are women (Finno, Salazar, Frincke, Pate, & Kohout, 2006). According to the same study, it takes an average of 7.3 years to earn a doctoral degree in psychology. Seventy-four percent of new doctorates are in health service provider subfields, and 74% of these individuals graduate with significant debt related to their education. Indeed, over 37% of these new doctoral graduates owe over $75,000 in student loans, whereas the median average starting salaries for employment in clinical and counseling settings range from $42,000 to $50,000 per annum (Finno et al., 2006).

Students invest significant time and money in their graduate education. They enter a doctoral program with the expectation that training opportunities, which must be completed in order to graduate, will not only be available but even guaranteed for those who are adequately prepared. When a qualified internship applicant cannot get matched to an internship, it not only is demoralizing but also has the negative effect of further delaying entry into the job market with the additional loss of potential income in a field with embarrassingly low starting salaries. This problem is exacerbated when a competent student cannot get matched a second or even third time. Conversely, the quality of training and the fundamental purpose of the predoctoral internship is jeopardized when students are forced to cobble together some type of training experience that can pass as an internship, which is likely to be unpaid and may offer substandard supervision and opportunities for skill development. If given the choice, most students would prefer to attend an APA-accredited and APPIC-member internship site. Students prefer APA or APPIC sites not only because of the level of quality that these designations promise but also because of the implications for licensure, mobility, employment, and eligibility for federal loan repayment programs.

Despite some of the known reasons why students may not match to an internship, such as applying to too few sites, being geographically restricted, needing a part-time internship, applying primarily to competitive sites in terms of the ratio of applicants to positions available, or applying to sites in large metropolitan cities, the problem is not one that students can solve simply by modifying their strategy or behavior (Williams-Nickelson & Prinstein, 2007). Some students are not in a position to change some of the factors that may place them at a disadvantage. For example, according to APPIC data, older students have more difficulty getting matched, tend to rank fewer sites, and may be more geographically restricted (APPIC, 2006). Similarly, women and men with children or students who must care for aging parents may be more likely to need a paid part-time internship, as might applicants who must work to support themselves financially while attending
school and internship. Thus, the process as it currently exists may be inherently discriminatory toward nontraditional students, women, and those with caretaking responsibilities.

Students also make significant personal sacrifices for their graduate education. Most students spend considerable time away from family, friends, and significant others to study, receive practicum training, conduct research, and participate in professional development activities all on the path toward building their skills, professional identity, and reputation. Many students find themselves postponing relationships, marriage, and childbearing to make these necessary career investments. Many students relocate to begin graduate school. Uprooting again to attend internship, again for postdoctoral training, and potentially again for a job is excessively taxing on graduate students and is known to be a stressful major life event. Graduate school is difficult enough. The fact that a large portion of graduate students are faced with the additional stress and challenge of not being matched to a quality internship, having to reapply the next year thus prolonging their education even more or being forced into the awkward position of trying to find the closest comparable training opportunity they can, is a sad and unwelcoming entrance into psychology.

APAGS believes that the training community and profession are facing a serious impasse that must be resolved in a timely and effective manner. There are moral and ethical concerns when the profession continues to bring competent trainees into a process where they are required to demonstrate competencies and commit large amounts of time, money, and emotional investments, yet there are no guarantees that appropriate training opportunities will be provided for those who have properly advanced and earned them.

Solving the Problem

APAGS Efforts

APAGS’s advocacy efforts relative to the internship supply and demand issue have been multifaceted. These efforts have been directed in three major areas: (a) engaging in legislative and association advocacy, (b) encouraging open communication, and (c) providing education to students and the training community. All of APAGS’s advocacy efforts have been targeted toward reducing the supply and demand gap without assigning blame but recognizing that the professional training community as a whole is responsible for addressing this concern. In an attempt to continue moving this discussion forward and working collectively to resolve this problem, we present a brief overview of APAGS’s specific activities on behalf of psychology graduate students. An outline of APAGS initiatives related to the supply and demand issue can be found in Table 1. We then provide our recommendations for moving forward toward resolution of this problem as a profession rather than in isolation by individual groups.

Advocacy. APAGS has engaged in advocacy on behalf of students and psychology in relation to the internship supply and demand issue. On a national level, APAGS has a network (the APAGS Advocacy Coordinating Team [ACT]) of more than 350 students who serve as campus representatives. Campus representatives educate their colleagues about legislative issues related to psychology and initiate grassroots advocacy initiatives in response to those legislative issues (Madson & Wood Barcalow, 2005). Members of this network are trained in the legislative process and learn about effective methods of rallying support and action on an issue. In recent years, ACT has responded regularly to requests to advocate against reductions of funds for GPE or cuts to Medicaid; issues that have an affect on funds for psychology training.

On the professional level, APAGS enjoys strong working relationships with many groups involved in professional psychology training and practice. For example, APAGS values working relationships with groups external to APA such as APPIC and the Council of Chairs of Training Councils (CCTC) as well as internal to APA such as the Board of Directors, the Education and Practice Directorates, the APA Board of Educational Affairs, and the APA Committee on Accreditation. Relationships, such as those developed with APPIC, were pursued as a result of the concerns students expressed in APAGS’s surveys about student internship experiences (Williams-Nickelson, 2003). These relationships help APAGS advocate the student perspective in relation to a wide variety of internship-related issues. APAGS’s advocacy efforts have helped to contribute to
the creation of the APPIC Uniform Application (APPI) and computer Match program, the publication of Match rates for individual graduate programs, and efforts resolving the problem of internship supply and demand.

APAGS also advocates internally at APA on issues related to internship supply and demand. For example, APAGS is a strong supporter of full funding for the APA Center of Workforce Analysis. We believe this center will produce data that will help us better understand the various issues related to supply and demand, including the current pipeline of students and whether the economy and health care field can financially support the number of psychologists entering the field. We are hopeful that various groups within psychology can use these data to generate solutions to the supply and demand issue. For example, legislative advocacy for additional internship training funds may be more effective once data are available to demonstrate a need for more psychologists in the workforce.

Communication. APAGS supports and has facilitated the dissemination of open and accurate information about the internship supply and demand issue. On a student level, one concrete example of fostering open communication was the creation of the APAGS Internship LISTSERV, APAGSINTERNSHIP. This LISTSERV focuses on issues faced by students currently on internship and applicants. At an organizational and

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>APAGS committee members began to attend BEA meetings.</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>APAGS surveyed students about their internship experiences.</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>APAGS established a liaison with the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) to address issues related to decreasing numbers of internship sites, increasing numbers of interns, and the loss of funding for several internship sites.</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>APAGS obtained a full-voting member seat on the Committee on Accreditation.</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>APAGS began fervent advocacy efforts around supply and demand issues, influencing a new uniform notification day and the Clearinghouse.</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>APAGS Internship Taskforce developed into the Committee on Internship and Related Training Activities and advocated with APPIC for the creation of the APPIC Uniform Application (APPI) and computer Match program and for a remedy to the problem of internship supply and demand.</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>APAGS participated in the APPIC internship supply and demand conference.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The APAGS internship LISTSERV was created.</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>First APAGS Special Preconvention Workshop on the Internship Application Process was conducted at the 2000 Annual APA Convention in Washington, DC.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>APAGS internship workbook materials were created.</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>The 5th edition of the APAGS Internship Workbook was published.</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>Internships in Psychology: The APAGS Workbook for Writing Successful Applications and Finding the Right Match (Williams-Nickelson &amp; Prinstein, Eds.) was published by APA Books for broader distribution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004–2005</td>
<td>The current APAGS Chair identified the internship supply and demand problem as a focus for the year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005–2006</td>
<td>The current APAGS Chair continued to highlight the internship supply and demand problem as a focus for the year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>APAGS endorsed a formal statement to create more high-quality half-time internships that meet similar standards to full-time accredited internships.</td>
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<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>APAGS member-at-large education worked with the CCTC workgroup on internship supply and demand.</td>
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<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>APAGS endorsed the publishing of internship match rates information for graduate programs (APAGS memo to APPIC, March 8, 2007).</td>
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<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>APAGS advocated maintaining the support hour’s section on the AAPI as a numerical number and not as a descriptive category (APAGS memo to APPIC regarding the proposed changes to the AAPI, June 7, 2007).</td>
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Note. Some of this history was taken from the APAGS history timeline developed by Williams-Nickelson (2003) to celebrate APAGS’s 15th anniversary. APAGS = American Psychological Association of Graduate Students; BEA = APA Board of Educational Affairs; CCTC = Council of Chairs of Training Councils.
training council level, APAGS has openly communicated its belief that the various training councils need to address the internship supply and demand problem in a frank and open manner, starting with acknowledging their contribution to the problem. In fact, this call for open communication, and related internship supply and demand concerns, has been a key initiative for the past three APAGS Chairs. APAGS believes that only through open and frank communication can our profession address such a large issue collectively.

**Education.** APAGS empowers graduate students by producing educational materials and workshops regarding the internship Match, successfully completing internship applications, and finding the right internship. In 2000, the first APAGS Special Preconvention Workshop on the Internship Application Process was conducted at the Annual APA Convention in Washington, DC. The workshop’s success revealed that prospective internship applicants were in need of practical, professional, and student-centered resources to guide them in completing their internship application process. Given the success of this workshop, it has become an annual APAGS preconvention workshop and is presented across the country.

Moreover, the materials from this workshop evolved into the book, *Internships in Psychology: The APAGS Workbook for Writing Successful Applications and Finding the Right Match* (Williams-Nickelson & Prinstein, 2007). During 2000 to 2003, the workbook had been revised five times and distributed to approximately 4,000 internship applicants. In 2003, APA Books began to publish the workbook for broader distribution. The workbook is currently a top seller for APA Books, and it is revised often to keep pace with the changing nature of the internship application process. The cost of both the convention workshops and the workbooks has remained low in consideration of graduate students’ limited budgets.

Consistent with the truth in advertising philosophy, APAGS continues to educate graduate students about the supply and demand problem using multiple methods. These include organizing related APA convention programs. For instance, at the 2007 Annual APA Convention, APAGS sponsored two relevant symposiums: A Forum on Internship Training Issues: Preparation, Developing Competencies, and Supply and Demand and Meet the Decision Makers: Internship Panel and Social. APAGS regularly covers perennial and emerging internship and the supply issues in *gradPSYCH*, the quarterly APAGS magazine, and in the electronic quarterly *APAGS Campus Bulletin* that is distributed through the APAGS’ various networks. Undergraduates who join APAGS receive these communications. Thus, APAGS believes that undergraduates in psychology and the faculty advising them need to be made aware of the various issues involved in graduate training in professional psychology. Specifically, undergraduate students should be made aware of (a) the nature of the developmental span of professional training, (b) the need to do a predoctoral internship, and (c) the implication of the current supply and demand gap for their training. These issues are often placed aside in undergraduate advising, and emphasis is placed on how to gain admission to graduate school.

**Recommendations**

APAGS hopes that this special issue will foster specific actions toward appropriate resolution of the internship supply and demand problem. It is essential to provide recommendations for addressing the problem from a student perspective, and the students’ needs and requests should be seriously addressed. The supply and demand imbalance will resolve when we collectively engage in advocacy, communication, and education that will help to reduce the number of graduate students entering the internship pipeline and increase the number of APA-accredited and APPIC-member internships.

Unlike practitioners in other health care professions such as nursing and medicine, psychologists have historically been less involved in legislative advocacy. Even though psychology has improved in this area, there is room for more involvement. Only a fraction of the profession engages in active grassroots efforts to act on legislative issues that affect psychology. It is also our experience, and the experience of students who regularly talk to us, that few from the academic community engage in or even discuss how legislative policy affects the practice, study, research, and training of psychologists. Given this, APAGS challenges the training community to become more actively engaged in legislative advocacy and encourages students to
participate in this important process. It is through legislative advocacy that we can educate others about the role of psychologists as health care professionals and attempt to secure and retain valuable funds to support psychology training.

APAGS calls all of the respective training councils to engage in open and honest discussions about the variety of issues that contribute to the supply and demand problem and to make individual commitments to solve the problem. We recognize that each group at the table will have some vested interest in preserving important training philosophies, program development, and admission numbers. In spite of some programs sharing similar training philosophies, there are clearly some programs that are contributing more to internship demand. We ask psychologists in positions of leadership to reignite their colleagues in discussions about how they can help contribute to a solution as it pertains to internship demand. APAGS does not support the notion that any one group is at fault nor that any one group is absolved from contributing to the problem. APAGS, as the largest group of organized psychology graduate students in the world, represents students from the full spectrum of psychology regardless of specialty area or training model. As such, we ask that leaders step outside of their model or specialty to make some difficult decisions and sacrifices that will benefit the whole of psychology. We are sensitive to the fact that having open and direct discussions may lead to conflict, disagreement, and uncomfortable feelings. However, difficult conversations are necessary in times like these and have the potential to reveal a different facet of the situation, appreciation for diverse opinions, and most important compromise and collaboration that will make our profession stronger and more secure for our students and their futures. Great strides have been made in this direction through the cooperation of groups such as the CCTC. However, some distancing and defensive posturing still exist and must be eliminated to reach a compromise and resolution.

APAGS views the internship supply and demand issue as multifaceted with considerable room for improvement on both the supply and demand sides. This problem has reached a tipping point that has serious negative implications for students, because the current internship market is preventing many qualified and competent students from obtaining required training for their doctoral degrees. There is no one magic answer that will solve this problem. However, increasing our advocacy within and external to the profession can help to raise awareness of psychology as an important health care profession and secure much needed funding to support internship programs. Most important, however, we believe that the profession must engage in a more thorough and complete examination of the various factors that are sustaining and increasing the supply and demand gap. This examination should result in a call for various training groups and specialties to suspend vested interests and take clear steps to ameliorate the internship supply and demand problem.

References


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