Getting a Foot in the Door: The Written Internship Application

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The predoctoral internship is one of the final clinical training requirements that graduate students must fulfill before obtaining their degree. The written portion of the application can be crucial in determining whether an individual will be viewed as a desirable intern candidate. This article offers guidelines for developing a written application that accurately and thoroughly conveys who the applicant is in a manner that is more likely to capture the attention of prospective internship sites.

For graduate students in counseling and clinical psychology, the predoctoral internship represents one of last opportunities to obtain extensive supervision and training. Articles concerning the predoctoral internship application process have focused a great deal on how prospective interns can evaluate and select internship sites (Grace, 1985; Kurz, Fuchs, Dabek, Kurtz, & Helfrich, 1982). Generally, a brief overview of each step in the application process is given, from gathering information about specific internship programs to what to do if the applicant receives no offers on the notification day (Belar & Orgel, 1980; Brill, Wolkin, & McKeel, 1985).

Although this approach helps applicants anticipate what to expect at various stages of the process, the focus is more on style than substance. Regardless of the type of internship setting, applicants are generally required to provide basic information about their education, clinical experience, teaching, affiliation with professional organizations, and research experience (Casey Jacob, 1987). However, it is also important to focus attention on how an application can be strengthened by going beyond the basics. This article provides an in-depth discussion of how increasing the substantive information in the written application can influence how an applicant is perceived by the internship site. The absence of a thorough and informative written application may make time spent gathering information about the internship site or preparing for the interview irrelevant.

The prospect of going on an internship calls to mind the "half-empty versus half-full glass" analogy. On the one hand, a student who is ready for an internship has fulfilled or will soon fulfill all of the academic course work, clinical practicums, and comprehensive exams set forth by his or her program. For all intents and purposes, the bulk of the work is done. On the other hand, applying for internship brings with it a great deal of change.

Just as the person has started to feel comfortable in the role of graduate student and has established relationships with faculty members and peers, along comes the internship application process to upset the equilibrium. Applying for an internship is a process that evokes anxiety in even the most accomplished and normally self-confident student. There is nothing comforting about being evaluated by a bunch of faceless strangers, whose knowledge of you is often based solely on written statements. Also, depending on an applicant's training interests, he or she may find that the most desirable internships are in another city or state. There is the added stress of taking into account the financial costs of relocating and the impact it will have on significant others.

Time does not come to a standstill while the applicant sorts through his or her priorities. Many applications are due between late November and early January. The deadlines come at a time when projects, papers, and exams are also in need of attention. In addition, during the winter holidays, students' low energy levels and lack of access to potential references or campus offices may create some difficulty in getting the application done on time.

Timeliness: You Snooze, You Lose

Given that 60 or 70 equally qualified applicants may be vying for three or four intern slots, applications that are incomplete or that are not completed until after the deadline may not be considered at all. If a students requests an application in August or September, he or she will have more time to complete it before academic responsibilities start to pile up. Applicants have control over the personal statement or letter of interest, the vita, the application form, processing fees, and transcripts. When these parts of the application are not sent in a timely manner, it conveys disorganization, lack of follow-through, or a lack of serious interest in the internship site. Training sites recognize that some variables are beyond the applicant's control, such as the prompt arrival of reference letters. However, this problem can be circumvented by periodically reminding reference writers of upcoming deadlines or even giving them faux deadlines that are earlier than the actual deadlines. Although some sites may be lenient about late reference letters, it is to the applicant's advantage to have the letters arrive before the deadline.

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Applicant–Internship Site Fit

Most internship sites ask for a personal statement or letter of interest to aid in determining whether there is a good fit between the applicant and their program. They want information about the applicant’s professional goals, theoretical orientation, and personality. A personal statement that merely echoes what is listed on the vita tells very little about what the applicant has learned from various training experiences or how those experiences coupled with coursework have shaped their therapeutic style.

Applicants sometimes make assumptions about the reader’s familiarity with their theoretical orientation. Declarations such as “I’m psychodynamic,” or “I’m humanistic,” or “I’m a self-psychologist” are made in passing. A candidate’s application can be greatly strengthened by adding a few sentences that describe what these labels mean or how theory is used to conceptualize and work with clients. Sometimes, significant life experiences have influenced thinking, personality, or clinical interests. For example, if working in the Peace Corps or coming from a visible ethnic minority has greatly influenced the applicant’s view of the world or psychology, he or she should mention it. A lengthy autobiography would be tedious to read, but some personal facts are helpful in portraying the applicant’s individuality.

An application is also weakened when a candidate fails to identify specific goals for the internship year. Does he or she want more experience working with a particular type of client or client issue? Does he or she want to develop supervision skills? Seasoned graduate students (those who have had years of experience before returning to school for their doctorate) and applicants who plan to go into academia should indicate in the application how those experiences coupled with coursework have shaped their professional development. This information tells the reviewer that the candidate has a genuine interest in working in this type of agency and has performed well at a similar agency in the past.

At least one of the references should come from a faculty member in the student’s program. This person can speak to the candidate’s academic status and how the candidate is perceived by other faculty, supervisors, and peers. Faculty members serve as excellent references because they usually have had enough contact with the student to be able to discuss his or her growth and progress over time.

Finding a good fit between the agency and the intern goes beyond clinical competence and shared interests. The selection committee is also looking for information that says something about the applicant’s interpersonal style. The reference writers should know the applicant well enough to be able to give a balanced description of his or her personal qualities as they relate to the work environment.

It may be difficult for some applicants to find three or four people who meet the above-mentioned criteria. In that case, the applicant should provide the reference writers with specific accomplishments or strengths he or she would like highlighted in the letters. These suggestions or reminders also help avoid the problem of faculty members writing virtually identical letters of reference for students who they do not know very well. It is hard to imagine how five applicants from one program could be described by the same faculty member as being “in the top 5% of students I have ever taught.” Although there is no set length for a letter, a reference letter that is less than one full page in length makes it seem as if the

Reference Letters: It’s Not Who You Know, But Who Knows You

Most internship sites ask for three or four letters of references. After selection committees read what the applicant has to say about himself or herself, the reference letters provide a way to examine the extent to which these perceptions match how he or she is seen by others. Generally speaking, at least one of the references should be from someone who is familiar with the candidate’s clinical work (i.e., someone who has supervised the candidate’s individual or group therapy). Ideally, this clinical reference should be written by someone who supervised the student fairly recently, for a reasonable length of time (3–4 months), and in a setting similar to the internship site. The danger of getting a reference from someone who supervised the candidate years ago is that a lot may have changed in terms of skills acquired or new theoretical influences. A strong reference letter from someone in a setting similar to the internship site conveys that the candidate has a genuine interest in working in this type of agency and has performed well at a similar agency in the past.

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writer either does not know the applicant well or has not taken the time to write a fair and accurate letter. Such brief letters reflect poorly not only on the applicant, but also on the reference writer. An applicant can help his or her own cause by establishing relationships early in his or her academic career with one or two people who could then write more personalized recommendations later on.

After the Application is Complete: The Waiting Game

After the application deadline has come and gone and the applicant is certain that he or she has presented the most honest (yet positive) image of himself or herself as possible, all that remains is waiting to hear from the internship site about whether or not a telephone or in-person interview will be granted. This may seem like a period of inactivity, but how applicants cope with their anxiety during this time may affect the selection process. Although it is reasonable to call an internship site to ascertain whether all of the application materials have arrived, repeated calls to the site may create an unfavorable impression. Candidates who make repeated calls may appear overly anxious and can be a source of irritation to the staff. For example, it is highly unlikely that the site will have reviewed the applications and made decisions about who to interview 1 or 2 days after the application deadline.

Thoroughly reading the internship literature provided by each agency to learn about the steps in the application process is a more constructive way for applicants to alleviate anxiety. The literature usually provides information about when applicants can expect to be contacted and whether the interview will be in person or by phone. When applicants call an internship site, they should keep in mind that the selection of interns is just one of the many responsibilities the agency staff is dealing with. Applicants should be specific about the reason for the call and should give the agency time to respond to their phone call. Like the candidates, the internship sites are interested in making a good impression; most calls will be returned promptly.

The Applicant’s Academic Program: There’s No Place Like Home

Academic programs should identify a person, be it a training director for all students or each student’s advisor, to help graduate students navigate through the internship process. This means going beyond providing students with the most recent copy of the Association of Psychology Internship Centers Directory, 1994–1995 (Krieshok & Cantrell, 1994). It means assisting students with decision making regarding where to apply for internship, how many sites to apply to and how to develop a vita; it also means providing feedback to students about their personal statements in the weeks and months before they send out applications. Faculty members should help students cultivate training experiences and establish professional relationships early on in the training program that could eventually lead to quality recommendations. Having such a system in place would be an excellent precursor to the application process. When applicants from a particular academic program consistently present themselves well in the written materials, it reflects on the preparation and guidance they have undoubtedly gotten from their home institution.

The internship application process can be an anxiety-provoking and time-consuming process. It requires applicants to consolidate several years of education and experience into a few written pages. However, it is well worth the effort exerted when it results in an internship year that is professionally and personally fulfilling.

References


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