The Internship Match: Understanding the Problem–Seeking Solutions

Emil R. Rodolfa, PhD, Editor
University of California, Davis

Debora J. Bell, PhD, Associate Editor
University of Missouri–Columbia

Kathleen J. Bieschke, PhD, Associate Editor
Pennsylvania State University

Claytie Davis, III, PhD, Associate Editor
University of California Berkeley

Roger L. Peterson, PhD, Associate Editor
Antioch University New England

When 25% (842) of the 3,430 students participating in the 2007 APPIC Match were not placed, the Editorial Team of Training and Education in Professional Psychology (TEPP) expressed considerable concern about the significant barrier that exists for a sizable number of students seeking internships. The numbers of unplaced applicants has increased significantly during the last few APPIC Matches (Keilin et al., this issue). Unfortunately, the TEPP Board does not anticipate that this anxiety-provoking trend will reverse or end. We believe that the profession of psychology should be more than concerned. We believe that they should take action.

In an effort to provide a framework for discussion, the TEPP Board decided to offer those involved in this problematic situation an opportunity to (a) describe their view of the problem, (b) discuss the effect of the problem on students and the profession, and (c) provide suggestions to improve our internship system to deal with this crisis point in the sequence of psychology education. The TEPP Board invited the leadership from the following associations: Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC), American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS), Council of Counseling Psychology Training Programs (CCPTP), Council of University Departments of Clinical Psychology (CUDCP), and National Council of Schools and Programs in Psychology (NCSPPP) to provide a statement of their view of the problem and potential solutions. In addition, Dr. Greg Keilin, the APPIC Match Coordinator since its inception, was invited to provide an overview of the APPIC Match data and Drs. Ron Rozensky and Cynthia Belar were asked to provide an overview article based on the American Psychological Association’s Center for Workforce Analysis. The TEPP Editorial Board would like to thank these authors for contributing to this special issue and hopes that this issue of TEPP contributes to the national dialogue and the eventual solution of the internship logjam.

After extensive discussion, the TEPP Editorial Board decided to provide their view of this supply and demand problem and some possible solutions. This editorial statement was a collaborative effort by the members of this board, who expressed a wide range of opinion about both the problem and the solutions. We hope that our view transcends our individual specialties and will serve as a model of communication that needs to occur in our profession to assist in the development of a consensus view of this match problem and its creative solutions.

The Match Problem

The simple view of this problem is that there are X number of intern applicants and Y number of internship slots. X does not equal and is greater than Y. In addition, each year the difference between X and Y grows larger. This match problem, however, is much more complex than a simple number imbalance and the
solutions will require creative ideas that move beyond numbers and blame. Solutions will require a collaborative effort of members of the associations involved in professional education and professional practice. Now is the time to actively work together to solve the match problem. Some of the components of the problem are listed below.

**Workforce**

What is the need for psychologists? What work can psychologists perform? Are academic programs turning out too many psychologists or not enough psychologists? Over a number of years, there has been ongoing debate about whether the field is saturated versus the nation's need for additional psychologists. Hopefully, the profession will gain a better understanding of the issues it has been struggling with for many years.

**Idiosyncratic Problem View**

The members of our profession have different views of the match problem, based on their specific vantage points. If this myopic view of the problem continues, it will be almost impossible to develop a collaborative plan to solve it. To develop a strong foundation from which to address the problem, decision makers in this profession must agree on at least a core set of issues that comprise this Match problem. Once that is accomplished, the profession can work from a united perspective to solve the major issues that are common across training associations. The various training associations can then supplement this core with more idiosyncratic solutions.

**Not Enough Internship Slots for Qualified Applicants**

The bottom line is that there are not enough internship placements for our current needs. The long-term effect of this problem is excessive competition in a field that values cooperation. Well-qualified students who complete their first 3 or 4 years of training successfully and are certified by their faculty should be able to take the next step and complete an internship rather than encountering such an onerous wall at this point in their training.

**Solving the Match Problem**

How can we go about solving a problem that we have trouble defining? The TEPP Board hopes that this special issue will provide guidance to the field. We believe that there are some possible solutions to consider; our ideas are certainly not the only ones, and perhaps not even the best. In addition, we present them only briefly here, without endorsement and without discussing all of the intricacies of implementation or evaluating their pros and cons; they are merely examples of possible solutions the profession might consider. The following articles present others. This sort of brainstorming will be an important part of the profession's success in identifying and ultimately implementing workable solutions.

**Understand the Workforce**

APA should be commended for its development of the Workforce Taskforce. The data gathered should be used to help Psychology estimate the number of providers needed and in turn, the number of students trained. If the data provide a clear view that more psychologists will benefit our nation, perhaps the data can be used to lobby federal decision makers as they contemplate funding programs that will benefit psychology education like the Graduate Psychology Education bill.

**Let Supply and Demand Act Naturally**

In our capitalistic society, market forces will drive this supply and demand problem to a natural conclusion. If the supply of students continues to exceed the demand for interns, the market may take care of the number of students seeking psychology doctoral training. As undergraduate students obtain information about the time and costs involved in training and prospects for internship and postgraduation employment, fewer students will enter our training programs, academic programs will close, and there will be balance and harmony in the path to internship. However, this process will be painful and the number of unmatched applicants will certainly rise before it falls. The TEPP Board hopes that this special issue will help the profession take control of its educational sequence before it succumbs to the mercy of market forces.
Truth in Advertising by Programs and by APA

It is vital and ethical for the profession to acknowledge this significant problem in the training of our students. Thus, it is important for potential (undergraduate) students to have the information they need to make reasonable decisions about their future. APA, in their listing of Graduate Programs in Psychology, should describe this current problem and provide information about where individual programs provide match rates as well as how to access the APPIC Website reporting match rates by doctoral program. It would be useful to provide guidance to psychology advisors and other interested consumers to ensure that they are able to accurately read and interpret the data provided by APPIC, APA, or members of the training councils. Undergraduate psychology advisors MUST use the data when they counsel students who are considering professional doctoral psychology education. Regardless of accreditation status, programs need to report their match rates, time to degree, and costs to students. We applaud APPICs decision to report match rates by program.

Voluntary Reduction in the Number of Students Admitted

If it becomes clear that psychologists are becoming trained in excessive numbers, then academic programs should develop a plan to reduce the number of students being trained. As noted above, a natural reduction may occur as potential students become better informed about the current costs and risks of graduate study in professional psychology. However, a message to “enter at your own risk” by itself is not particularly comforting to potential students, nor responsible by the profession. A bold but responsible step might be for individual programs to admit only the number of students that can reasonably be expected to secure internships and degree-relevant postgraduation employment, based on the programs past history. Voluntarily reducing the number of students, however, is complex and much easier said than done. The academic programs in psychology are financed through different sources: student fees, tuition, grants, and federal and state funds. Voluntarily reducing the number of students may cause a reduction in program revenue, may necessitate programs to reduce the number of faculty and staff and may require the program faculty and administrators to change the structure and process of their training. Our board realizes that suggesting a voluntary reduction may appear naïve as some academic programs may be less concerned with the internship shortage and these programs may define programmatic success as increasing rather than decreasing their number of students. In addition, some program administrators may believe they have a right to compete for students, who should be influenced by market forces rather than a collaborative attempt to solve this problem. Clearly, there are many complexities and differences regarding this and probably most of these potential solutions.

Adequate Preparation for Current Students

Faculty must help students prepare effectively for the internship match. Communication between internships and doctoral programs should be enhanced. Perhaps APPIC could offer a program at each training associations’ annual conference or at the APA Convention on the Match specifically for faculty and focused on the match research. It will be helpful for faculty to have a sound understanding of the APPIC Match to help their students demystify the internship application process.

Academic Program Policies

Doctoral programs could consider eliminating the requirement that students attend an APA accredited internships. APA accreditation, however, provides interns with assurance that the internship program has been reviewed and met a minimal standard described in the Guidelines and Principles. If students no longer had to attend accredited internships, there would be additional sites that could offer training, but the quality of that training would be questionable and not reviewed.

Committee on Accreditation

The CoA could carefully review the process of accreditation. Many training directors believe
that the process is excessive, cumbersome and the standards are arbitrary or too stringent. In addition, there is growing support for half-time internships. Perhaps a discussion could occur to assess if the APA Guidelines and Principles or the process of accreditation contains professional barriers to accreditation that can be eliminated.

**Develop Internship Slots**

All qualified students should have access to an internship as the capstone of their training. However, how can the profession develop these training positions? One key is funding. The APA Board of Professional Affairs recently discussed the possibility of an APA fellowship to fund interns who can choose which program they will attend. APA could also fund exceptional programs to increase their number of internship slots. APA should enhance its work with third party payers to provide reimbursements for intern services. Interns are providing a valuable supervised service and should be better compensated for their work. APA has taken a leadership role in the limited legislation that has been passed by the federal government to fund the Graduate Psychology Education Program. Psychology and psychologists should increasingly advocate for better recognition of our profession and seek additional federal and state governmental funding for psychology training and practice.

**Captive Internship Sites**

Academic programs could develop captive internship slots/sites (i.e., programs that only accept students from a specific academic program). This action would allow students to reduce the cost of internship application and create more stability in their lives, as they would not have to move for one year of internship training.

**Consensus Understanding of the Problem**

In the late 1990s, APPIC and APA organized a conference to examine the sequence of training. Although the initial goal of this conference was to reduce the recently acknowledged internship imbalance, the conference coordinators decided to examine the entire sequence of training. With hindsight, that may have been an unfortunate decision. The profession would have benefited from a focused discussion of the internship “supply and demand” problem when it was initially developing. This discussion should now take place. Relevant members of the profession are encouraged to use this TEPP special issue as the basis to develop a clear understanding of the problem and then organize a coordinated and collaborative plan to respond.

**Summary**

This internship “supply and demand” problem has existed for at least 10 years and is increasing in severity. The profession must come to an agreement about the components of the problem and then address each one. There are no easy solutions but the TEPP editorial staff believes that there are many creative, thoughtful, collaborative solutions proposed in this special issue. We hope that this special issue will help the profession understand the varied views of this problem. We believe that the profession must come to a consensus about the problem and develop creative, pragmatic steps to provide a streamlined, effective sequence of training and education in professional psychology.