Practicum Training Hours: Fact and Fantasy

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Over the past five years, practicum experience has received increased attention as an important element in the sequence of training. Questions have arisen about the number of hours being counted and the activities occurring in practicum. This study examined the number of practicum hours accrued by comparing the actual number of direct service hours and total hours to an estimated length of time to complete those hours. Based on self-reports, it was estimated that graduate students spend between 2 and 7 years to accrue their practicum hours with 37.5 to 69.6% of that time in direct service. Implications for the profession, faculty, and students are provided.

Keywords: training, supervision, practicum

Practicum training is an essential component of the preparation and training for psychologists. The question for many graduate students, faculty, and psychologists is how much practicum training is enough? This question takes on added urgency as a result of the American Psychological Association Council of Representatives’ (APA CoR) recent policy statement concerning minimal educational requirements for professional practice (2006). This new policy, which acknowledged enhanced practicum experience now current in our field, endorsed replacing the predoctoral internship-postdoctoral sequence with a practicum-predoctoral internship sequence.

Discussion of practicum and training more generally has focused on two aspects: quality and quantity (APA Commission on Education and Training Leading to Licensure in Psychology, 2000). Aspects of the quality of practicum training (e.g., competencies, supervisory experiences, multicultural training, etc.) have been addressed in various articles (Alden et al., 2000; Beutler & Kendall, 1995; Bickman, 1999; Dyck & O’Donovan, 2003; Gross, 2005; Kaslow, Pate, & Thorn, 2005; Kaslow, 2004; Hecker, Fink, Levasseur, & Parker, 1995). Although quality of training is vital, our primary intent is to examine the quantity of practicum hours, which is an important element in the debate of practicum experience. Inevitably, there will be considerable individual differences in the training path to competence; however, it may be beneficial to have a standard (i.e., range of hours) that can guide faculty and students as they move through this training sequence. As such, this study examines the current acquisition of practicum hours as students apply for predoctoral internship by exploring the number...
of direct clinical service hours (assessment and intervention services) and total practicum hours accrued.

The Road to Licensure: The Potential Inclusion of Practicum Hours

In 2000, the American Psychological Association developed the Commission on Education and Training Leading to Licensure to examine the sequence of training and to decide if postdoctoral supervised experience is still needed as one element of this process. Representatives from approximately 35 associations met and the vast majority voted to eliminate the requirement for postdoctoral training as an element of the APA Model Licensing Act (APA Commission on Education and Training Leading to Licensure in Psychology, 2000). The Commission made this recommendation to the APA Council, which postponed taking action to eliminate the postdoctoral supervised experience requirement.

The APA Council requested follow-up in 5 years. In 2005, APA brought together representatives from various directorates and boards of the APA and a few other professional associations to review the existing information developed subsequent to the 2000 Commission meeting. This group again recommended that APA Council eliminate the postdoctoral year as a requirement for licensure and to count all supervised hours accrued either pre or post doctoral. In February 2006, the APA Council voted to change the APA Model Licensing Act and to work toward revising state laws to eliminate the requirement of postdoctoral supervised experience and include supervised practicum hours accrued during predoctoral training (APA, 2006).

A Brief Review of Practicum Hours

One of the reasons the APA took this action is that the number of reported practicum hours has greatly increased over the past 10 years. For instance, in 1994 the average number of reported total practicum hours was approximately 1,500, whereas, in 2006 the average number of reported total practicum hours is approximately 2,000 (Alden et al., 2000; APPIC, 2006). Internship and academic training directors’ expectations for the number of practicum hours has also changed. In 1995, Hecker and colleagues found that academic training directors and internship training directors expected on average 902 and 712 total practicum hours, respectively. In 2005, Ko and Rodolfa reported that academic and internship training directors expected a higher number of hours on average, 1094 and 1,255, respectively. Although the design and the samples are different in these studies, the trend is toward more hours.

Do these increasing hours matter? Alden and colleagues (2000) documented that the number of reported practicum hours increased over a 5-year time period in the mid-1990s; however, they did not find a relationship between the number of reported practicum hours and whether the applicant received an invitation to a predoctoral internship interview. Moreover, Dixon and Thorn (2000) found no relationship between the reported number of practicum hours and placement in a predoctoral internship. Seemingly, these studies reiterate that the quantity of practicum training alone is not sufficient as a standard for the profession (Beutler & Kendall, 1995). Further, these studies highlight two main issues when it comes to the reporting of practicum hours: a) are the reported numbers accurate, and b) if they are accurate, then what is gained by increased practicum experience? The former question is particularly important to the profession, since there are no standards for regulating, reporting, and monitoring practicum hours.

Regardless of the outcome from the quantity of hours, they are still an essential component in the sequence of licensure. Further, Ko and Rodolfa (2005) found that most training directors (academic, internship, and postdoctoral) believe that there should be a minimum standard for practicum hours. However, there was a considerable range in views of what should be the standard number of hours (500–2,500 hours). Additionally, there has been considerable debate regarding having a cap of practicum hours (Kaslow et al., 2005; Dixon & Thorn, 2000).

Time Frame for Practicum Hours

The length of time to degree completion is an important factor in a student’s ability to accrue practicum hours. Norcross and colleagues
(2005) reported that students completing PsyD programs take a year less than students completing clinical PhD programs (5 years vs. 6 years, respectively). Students who complete a 5- to 6-year doctoral program are able to accrue approximately 3–4 years of practicum experiences, as graduate students in their last year complete the predoctoral internship. Although there are no data on how many practicum placements students are completing prior to internship, after a limited review of doctoral program websites, it appears that many graduate students do not complete a practicum during their first year because program content is focused on foundational educational experiences. This point is significant when considering the number of practicum hours that is reasonable to expect during doctoral training.

If the number of hours of practicum training were delineated, would doctoral students have the needed time available to accrue those hours and develop the necessary competencies needed for a predoctoral internship? Clearly, there is a need for more research in this area to inform any policy development and examine any potential upcoming changes.

Methods: Exploring Practicum Hours

Participants and Procedure

All Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) member internship programs report the number of practicum hours listed on their interns’ APPIC Application for Predoctoral Internship (AAPI) in the APPIC On-Line Directory (APPIC, 2005b). Data for this project were gathered from these reports. These data included the average practicum hours for each program reported on the AAPI for assessment and intervention and the grand total number of practicum hours. Data for this project were grouped by internship site, not by graduate program or type of practicum experience, which is a notable limitation of these data. Thus, the implications that are drawn from the data reflect on practicum training in general.

Analyses: Duration of Training Year

We examined how many hours students are reporting on the AAPI as compared to the typical practicum placements and length of time for graduation. We used the Norcross and colleagues (2005) findings for the length of time to graduate and calculated the amount of time in a practicum placement. Typically, most practicum placements are either 9 months (academic year) or 12 months in duration. We also recognize that most practicum placements are part-time, although some practicum training consists of full-time positions for a year or summer. Accordingly, we evaluated length of time to complete practicum hours by 9- and 12-month placements. Further, this study takes the following assumptions about duration of practicum training into account:

- Holidays/personal time off. There are approximately 10 days of government holidays. However, it is typical for students to take extra time around certain holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving, December holidays, and New Year’s) and it is also likely that practicum students will not be working for each holiday. In addition to holidays, students also take personal time off (vacation, sick leave, professional development, class work, finals, etc.). Accordingly, in calculating the total amount of training time for 9-month practicum experience we estimated 10 days off and for a 12-month practicum experience we estimated 20 days off for holidays and/or personal time.

- Training time. Practicum students typically do not enter a training site with a full caseload. In practice, it is likely it will take time to build a full caseload, and in any case beginning with a full caseload is not in the spirit of ethical training or sequential development. Thus, we accounted for the time it takes for initial orientation, observation, and training of practicum students. Based on the training sequence at our site, 10 to 20 days with a limited number of clinical contact hours was included in the data analysis for assessment and intervention hours, but not for grand total of practicum hours.

Calculating Direct Service Hours

The average AAPI hours with a high and low range by type of site were compared based on anticipated practicum hours according to available research (e.g., 6 hours of direct assessment and intervention experiences per week; Gross, 2005), common practicum practices (e.g., 9- and 12-month placements), APPIC standards for predoctoral internships (e.g., minimum of
25% direct service time), and the average percent of reported direct service time for the current sample. We recognize that Gross’s estimate may be low; however, it is consistent with the APPIC standards for predoctoral internships, and the reported hours may be inflated due to a perceived pressure to report more hours to be competitive (Boggs & Douce, 2000). As such, we used this number as one estimate and average percent of direct service for the current sample as another estimate. The lack of a clear standard for direct service time to use is, in of itself, a potential problem.

**Outcomes**

As displayed in Table 1, we analyzed the time needed to complete a typical practicum experience. Based on the assumptions described above, a 9-month practicum is 35 to 38 weeks long, reflecting the 10 to 20 days reduction for holidays/personal time and time spent in training. During that time a typical practicum student would accrue 700 to 760 total practicum hours (35 to 38 weeks × 20 hours a week) and 186 to 324 direct service hours varying as a function of the percent time involved in direct service (i.e., 30% or 45%) and time spent training or establishing a caseload (i.e., 2 to 4 weeks). The training programs reported that their interns had a mean of 1,000 direct service hours. As such, to achieve this reported mean number of direct service hours it would require an average 3.1 to 5.4 years of practicum experiences.

Also displayed in Table 1, the time needed to complete a 12-month practicum is 47 to 50 weeks (52 weeks minus 2 to 5 weeks off for personal time/holidays). During that time frame, a typical practicum student would accrue 940 to 1,000 total practicum hours (20 hours a week for 47 to 50 weeks) and 258 to 432 direct service hours (30% to 45% of 43 to 48 weeks, adjusted for orientation and training). It would take 2.3 to 3.9 12 month-practicum experiences to accrue the average 1,000 hours of direct service reported by the training programs.

Table 2 displays the reported average number of direct service practicum hours and the length

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considerations</th>
<th>9-Month practicum</th>
<th>12-Month practicum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of weeks</td>
<td>52 - 12 weeks = 40 weeks</td>
<td>52 - 0 = 52 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holidays and personal time</td>
<td>40 - 2 to 5 weeks for holiday/personal time = 35 to 38 weeks</td>
<td>47 to 50 weeks - 2 to 4 weeks for training = 45 to 48 or 43 to 46 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct service time</td>
<td>35 to 38 weeks - 2 to 4 weeks for training = 33 to 36 or 31 to 34 weeks</td>
<td>47 to 50 weeks - 2 to 4 weeks for training = 45 to 48 or 43 to 46 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total practicum hours</td>
<td>35 to 38 weeks × 20 hours/week = 700 to 760 hours/practicum</td>
<td>47 to 50 weeks × 20 hours/week = 940 to 1,000 hours/practicum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct service hours 30% of clinical time*</td>
<td>30% × (31 to 36 weeks × 20 hours/week) = 186 to 216 direct service hours</td>
<td>30% × (43 to 48 weeks × 20 hours/week) = 258 to 288 direct service hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct service hours 45% of clinical time*b</td>
<td>45% × (31 to 36 weeks × 20 hours/week) = 279 to 324 direct service hours</td>
<td>45% × (43 to 48 weeks × 20 hours/week) = 387 to 432 direct service hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 direct service hours</td>
<td>At best, it would take 3.1 practicum placements at 45% direct clinical service for 36 weeks to achieve 1,000 direct service hours. At worst, it would take 5.4 practicum placements at 30% direct clinical service for 31 weeks to achieve 1,000 direct service hours</td>
<td>At best, it would take 2.3 practicum placements at 45% direct clinical service for 48 weeks to achieve 1,000 direct service hours. At worst, it would take 3.9 practicum placements at 30% direct clinical service for 43 weeks to achieve 1,000 direct service hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Thirty percent is based on Gross (2005) and is higher than the APPIC minimum standard for predoctoral internship (25%).

*bForty-five percent is based on the average percent direct service as compared to total practicum time in this study.

Note. APPI intervention and assessment hours (i.e., direct clinical service): Total mean intervention and assessment 999.36 with an average range of 798 - 1,392. APPI = Application for Predoctoral Internship.
### Table 2
Practicum Hours and Length of Time to Accrue Them by Internship Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Average number of hours for intervention and assessment (range)</th>
<th>Average number of weeks to accrue intervention and assessment hours based on 30% direct service&lt;sup&gt;a,c&lt;/sup&gt; (range)</th>
<th>Average number of weeks to accrue intervention and assessment hours based on the percentage of direct service for that site&lt;sup&gt;b,c&lt;/sup&gt; (range)</th>
<th>Average grand total of practicum hours (range)</th>
<th>Average number of weeks to accrue grand total of practicum hours&lt;sup&gt;a,c&lt;/sup&gt; (range)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VAMC</td>
<td>997 (662 – 1,421)</td>
<td>166 (110 – 237)</td>
<td>119 (79 – 169)</td>
<td>2,372 (1,688 – 3,265)</td>
<td>119 (84 – 163)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consortium</td>
<td>908 (469 – 1,496)</td>
<td>151 (78 – 249)</td>
<td>99 (51 – 162)</td>
<td>1,976 (1,243 – 3,017)</td>
<td>99 (62 – 151)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison/corrections</td>
<td>951 (527 – 1,577)</td>
<td>159 (88 – 263)</td>
<td>111 (61 – 183)</td>
<td>2,214 (1,457 – 4,806)</td>
<td>111 (73 – 240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology department</td>
<td>947 (685 – 1,377)</td>
<td>158 (114 – 230)</td>
<td>122 (89 – 179)</td>
<td>2,450 (1,820 – 3,306)</td>
<td>123 (91 – 165)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State public hospital</td>
<td>898 (578 – 1,284)</td>
<td>150 (96 – 214)</td>
<td>103 (66 – 148)</td>
<td>2,065 (1,440 – 2,870)</td>
<td>103 (72 – 144)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMHC</td>
<td>798 (516 – 1,223)</td>
<td>133 (86 – 204)</td>
<td>100 (65 – 153)</td>
<td>1,997 (1,425 – 2,750)</td>
<td>100 (71 – 138)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical school</td>
<td>962 (501 – 1,800)</td>
<td>160 (84 – 300)</td>
<td>115 (60 – 214)</td>
<td>2,292 (1,423 – 3,593)</td>
<td>115 (71 – 180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCC</td>
<td>875 (590 – 1,277)</td>
<td>146 (98 – 213)</td>
<td>108 (73 – 158)</td>
<td>2,153 (1,571 – 2,905)</td>
<td>108 (79 – 145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/adolescent psychiatric</td>
<td>985 (598 – 1,556)</td>
<td>164 (100 – 259)</td>
<td>115 (70 – 181)</td>
<td>2,300 (1,587 – 3,286)</td>
<td>115 (79 – 164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private general hospital</td>
<td>1,220 (719 – 2,173)</td>
<td>203 (120 – 362)</td>
<td>127 (75 – 226)</td>
<td>2,534 (1,678 – 4,262)</td>
<td>127 (84 – 213)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private psychiatric hospital</td>
<td>890 (644 – 1,408)</td>
<td>148 (107 – 235)</td>
<td>98 (71 – 155)</td>
<td>1,952 (1,300 – 2,945)</td>
<td>98 (65 – 147)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed forces MC</td>
<td>1,328 (572 – 2,036)</td>
<td>221 (95 – 339)</td>
<td>124 (53 – 190)</td>
<td>2,476 (1,448 – 4,117)</td>
<td>124 (74 – 206)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private outpatient clinic</td>
<td>1,392 (952 – 1,682)</td>
<td>232 (159 – 280)</td>
<td>100 (68 – 120)</td>
<td>1,994 (1,505 – 2,647)</td>
<td>100 (75 – 132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School district</td>
<td>840 (409 – 1,613)</td>
<td>140 (68 – 269)</td>
<td>112 (55 – 215)</td>
<td>2,243 (1,393 – 3,438)</td>
<td>112 (70 – 172)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> This number is based on 30% direct service time (based on 20 hour/week) or 6 hours/week. All numbers are rounded.  
<sup>b</sup> This number is based on the percentage of direct service (based on 20 hour/week) that is reported in Table 3.  
<sup>c</sup> These numbers reflect the number of weeks.

Note. This table does not reflect the type of practicum sites completed. Ns: VA – 71; Consortium – 51; Corrections – 24; Psychology department – 5; State public hospital – 56; CMHC – 76; Medical school – 56; UCC – 113; Child/Adolescent – 50; Private general hospital – 23; Private outpatient – 14; Private psychiatric hospital – 10; Armed forces – 8; School district – 6. VAMC = Veterans Affairs Medical Center; CMHC = community mental health center; UCC = university counseling center; MC = medical center.
of time needed to accrue the practicum hours by type of internship setting. For instance, in the APPIC Directory, VAMC internship training directors reported that their interns had an average of 997 intervention and assessment practicum hours (range: low of 662 hours and high of 1,421 hours). Based on the reported percent time spent in direct service hours (41.9%), it would have taken 119 weeks (range 79 – 169) to accrue the average number of intervention hours as compared to 166 weeks (range 100 – 237) based on 30% percent direct service.

Table 2 also displays the reported average number of total practicum hours and the length of time needed to accrue those hours by type of internship site. For example, Counseling Center interns reported that they accrued an average of 2,153 (range 1,571 to 2,905) practicum hours. Our analysis of the length of time to accrue those hours indicates that it would take 108 weeks (range 79 to 145 weeks) based on 20 hours per week at the practicum site.

It should be noted that there is a difference in the length of time needed to accrue the intervention and assessment hours and the total practicum hours based on the 30% estimate. The results reported represent a range of intervention and assessment hours since there is consensus on amount of practicum hours obtained (Gross, 2005). The estimate of weeks based on the percent time in direct service is similar to the average time to complete the grand total hours for practicum because the calculation involves the same parameters. We feel that the 30% estimate is probably a good conservative estimate whereas the percent in direct service is most likely a more liberal estimate. Although unlikely, another interpretation is that graduate students are spending more than 20 hours per week at practicum sites.

In an attempt to bring the length of time to accrue assessment and intervention hours and the length of time to accrue total practicum hours into congruence, we divided the total assessment and intervention hours by the number of weeks to accrue the total practicum hours and determined an estimated percent of time practicum students spent in direct clinical activities. For instance as displayed in Table 3, interns at private outpatient clinics were estimated to spend 69.6% of their practicum time in direct service activities while interns at school districts

Table 3
Percent of Time Needed to Accrue Average Assessment and Intervention Practicum Hours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Average number of intervention and assessment hours</th>
<th>Average grand total of practicum hours</th>
<th>Percent of time spent in direct service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VAMC</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>2,372</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consortium</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>1,976</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison/corrections</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>2,214</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology department</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>2,450</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State public hospital</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>2,065</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMHC</td>
<td>798</td>
<td>1,997</td>
<td>39.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>962</td>
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<td>1,220</td>
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<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
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<td>Private psychiatric hospital</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>1,952</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed forces MC</td>
<td>1,328</td>
<td>2,476</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private outpatient clinic</td>
<td>1,392</td>
<td>1,994</td>
<td>69.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School district</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>2,243</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. VAMC = Veterans Affairs Medical Center; CMHC = community mental health center; UCC = university counseling center; MC = medical center. Ns: VA – 71; Consortium – 51; Corrections – 24; Psychology Department – 5; State Public Hospital – 56; CMHC – 76; Medical School – 56; UCC – 113; Child/Adolescent – 50; Private General Hospital – 23; Private Outpatient – 14; Private Psychiatric Hospital – 10; Armed Forces – 8; School District – 6.
were estimated to spend only 37.5% of their time completing intervention and assessment activities during their practicum sites.

Discussion

How Long Does It Take Students to Accrue Practicum Hours?

Based on the low and high averages for assessment and intervention time, graduate students were estimated to spend 1.8 to 10.1 years at practicum placements for 9-month practicum placements (based on the 30% estimate at 36 weeks) and 1.4 to 7.5 years at 12-month practicum placements (based on the 30% estimate at 48 weeks). Using the 45% direct service time, which is similar to the total practicum time, the number of years were estimated to range from 1.5 to 6.3 years for 9-month placements and 1.1 to 4.7 years for 12-month placements.

Moreover, using the average number of weeks for assessment and intervention, at best, it would take 3.1 practicum placements at 45% direct clinical service for 36 weeks to achieve 1,000 direct service hours. At worst, it would take 5.4 practicum placements at 30% direct clinical service for 31 weeks to achieve 1,000 direct service hours for a 9-month practicum placement. For a 12-month practicum, at best, it would take 3.9 practicum placements at 30% direct clinical service for 43 weeks to achieve 1,000 direct service hours.

How do these numbers compare with Norcross and colleagues (2005) description that graduate students typically graduate in 5 to 6 years? Considering that the last program year for many students is internship and during the first year most students do not complete a practicum placement, students have 3 to 4 years to gain practicum experience. Thus, the average number of assessment and intervention hours accrued at 12-month placements appears consistent with the average length of time spent in graduate school. How many 12-month practicum placements are available? Unfortunately, there are no national data on length and type of practicum placements. However, we did a cursory examination of practicum/academic departments’ websites and found that more often than not students were expected to complete 9-month practicum experiences. Assuming that our numbers are accurate, how are some students accruing the number of practicum hours that they report? For instance, some students report hours that appear to take 5, 6, 7, or more years to accrue. This calls into question the reporting, regulation, and monitoring of these hours for students, practicum sites coordinators, and academic training directors.

There is a perceived benefit of having more practicum hours (Boggs & Douce, 2000). However, there is little support for the need to have more practicum hours (Alden et al., 2000; Dixon & Thorn, 2000). However, the pressure to be competitive may be because of increasing anxiety resulting from the supply and demand imbalance. APPIC (2006) data described a growing imbalance between the number of students seeking an internship position and the number of internship slots available. With the limited number of slots (2,779) and the increased number of applicants (3,210; APPIC, 2006) students may feel that they need to accrue more practicum experiences to make themselves more marketable to internship training directors. In the 2006 internship match, almost 23% of the applicants did not match. In addition, if you count the number of students who withdrew (269) from the match because they did not receive an interview or a number of other reasons, almost 1,000 students did not (or would not) match. Clearly, there is good reason for students to be anxious about acquiring an internship. Thus, students, seeking to find an internship position may overreport their practicum experience.

Another explanation may be that the number of practicum hours is increasing because the number of academic course requirements is decreasing. The likelihood that there have been substantial changes to the course requirements to explain the practicum hours increase is unlikely because of the extensive coursework requirements by the Committee on Accreditation Guidelines and Principles for doctoral programs in psychology (APA CoA, 2005).

A third explanation may be that students may include activities that are not doctoral practicum experiences but may be accrued during work experience or even possibly undergraduate experiences. This begs the question of how well understood is the definition of a practicum hour.
As Ko and Rodolfa (2005) reported, faculty indicated a significant misunderstanding or confusion about what is included in the practicum hours. Students may also have similar difficulty understanding what should be reported as a practicum hour on the AAPI.

Last, students might have paid practicum experiences. Thus, the increase in practicum experience might be a byproduct of financial factors. The ability to have paid practicum experiences would be ideal for many students who would like to meet financial and educational needs simultaneously. Although this explanation is viable, it is only a hypothesis and more research is needed to fully understand the practicum picture.

What Percent of Time Should Be Assessment and Intervention During Practicum?

The percent of assessment and intervention time during practicum ranged from 37.5 to 69.6, a 32.1% difference. Additionally, even the low end of the range was higher than the estimate based on Gross (2005). This strikingly significant range of assessment and intervention time begs the question what should be the balance between assessment and intervention and training? Currently, there are no established standards for practicum sites. Although the profession attempts to incorporate practicum training into the process for licensure, more standards and monitoring will need to be in place. For example, the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC, 2005a) requires a minimum of 25% direct service during internship and the American Psychological Association’s Committee on Accreditation (APA CoA, 2005) requires a minimum of 4 hours of supervision/training per week for full time interns (2 individual supervisory hours and 2 group training experiences). Although the Association of the Departments of Psychology Training Clinics (ADPTC, 2005) has membership guidelines for their association, there are no national standards to provide guidance regarding the balance between service and training for practicum experiences.

Should a similar direct service (25%) and training (10%) standard be in place for practicum students? Or should the assessment and intervention standard be less since practicum students do not have the competencies of interns, particularly beginning practicum students. Practicum standards will benefit academic programs and practicum sites by providing a framework for the work contracts for sites and students. In particular, we suggest that the standards and contracts are developmentally appropriate based on the competencies of the trainee and the resources of the practicum site.

Implications

What do our data mean? What are the implications for faculty, practicum training staff, students, and the profession? How can these findings help inform training policies and assist in the structure of high quality practicum training?

For the profession. Now that the APA Council (APA, 2006) has voted to support the use of practicum hours in the licensure process, it is hoped that the APA will take a leadership role in standardizing the practicum experience. APA has discussed hosting a conference on the practicum experience bringing together the major training associations to define and clarify what constitutes a practicum experience. Standards that provide the framework for practicum experiences need to be defined, delineated, and formalized. Having one student complete almost 70% of their practicum hours as direct service, while a second student completes only 37% of their experience as direct service is clearly problematic. Although we do not claim to know the optimal balance, we suggest that the direct service be proportionate to the level of development of the trainee and reflect the best interest of the client and trainee. Should we use the internship guidelines as a place to start to create practicum standards? APA Council has now encouraged state associations to help states make a significant change in their licensing laws. They should help states make this change by creating standards.

In lieu of APA creating this standard or perhaps regardless of the actions APA takes, some state licensing boards may take steps to create their own standards to assess the competency of applicants for licensure. Unfortunately, if there is no guidance to the states, each state will create laws and regulations without any consistency as they have done with other aspects of the licensure process. Some states may require more and other states may require less direct
service or total practicum experience. There is certainly no consistency between states or provinces in their supervised professional experience regulations, but without this new standard for practicum training, the profession may well move to a new level of inconsistency. It would behoove the profession to develop standards with clear definitions that states can use in their licensing rules and regulations before the 50 states develop 50 different standards. Any standard that is created should not only provide guidance about the number of hours, but should also include information about the competencies needed for professional practice. The document developed by the ADPTC (2004) is an excellent starting point summarizing the competencies of practice (Lewis, Hatcher, & Pate, 2005).

We suggest that practicum students complete somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 hours of total practicum experience. This appears to be consistent with state licensure requirements, current literature (Ko & Rodolfa, 2005), and slightly under the total practicum hours accumulated in the current study.

For academic and practicum training faculty. Faculty should have a clear understanding of their students’ practicum experiences. It would benefit each academic program if faculty had clear and consistent guidelines for their practicum students and for their training sites. Faculty should meet with each practicum program’s training director to describe the needs of their students and the standards of our profession and come to some agreement about what the faculty expects and what opportunities exist to meet practicum competencies that the training program will provide. As Gross (2005) noted, a significant problem in a practicum student’s training experience is the incongruity between a site’s and a faculty’s goals for a student.

We also recognize the difficulty that faculty face between monitoring hours, trusting students, and ensuring that their students will be competitive for internship. However, since data, so far, show no connection between number of hours and receiving an interview or placement (Alden et al., 2000; Dixon & Thorn, 2000), faculty should focus their attention more on the competencies of their students. Faculty should also set clear guidelines describing how much experience should be accrued. Based on our results, there was a notable range of hours accrued and a striking range in the years of experience needed to accrue those hours. When students have guidance about the number of practicum hours they should complete, they may not seek the excessive number of hours that are currently being reported.

For students. Students should discuss with their faculty advisors the practicum experiences that will best prepare them for internship and for future practice. Students should understand what they hope to gain from their practicum experiences and have both their faculty and their practicum site coordinators help them actualize their goals. Students should use the assistance of their advisors to help them understand the balance between training and practice during practicum. Those practicum students who may be providing an excessive number of direct service hours should talk with both their academic and practicum faculty to discuss the delicate balance between training and practice. Many students do not consider licensing when they enter a program and such a notion will also mean a cultural shift in academic programs. Students should be informed about the licensing requirements as state requirements might shift in the future. Further, students will need to be more proactive about monitoring their own training experience in order to properly prepare them for licensure.

Conclusion

Practicum training is increasingly important to our profession. The results of this study have highlighted a number of discrepancies in the accrual of practicum hours and the amount of time students spend performing direct service activities during their practicum experience. We hope these results will contribute to discussions by representatives from relevant training associations to define and delineate the practicum experience. Doing so will enhance the sequence of professional training in psychology.

References


Received March 31, 2006
Revision received November 27, 2006
Accepted November 30, 2006