Training in School Psychology:
Navigating the Internship
Application Process

Several organizations provide guidelines for doctoral internships in school psychology, including the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the Council of Directors of School Psychology Programs (CDSPP). Independently, these organizations all work to ensure that students receive quality internship training. With a similar goal in mind, this fact sheet provides information that may help future interns clarify their choice of potential internships and navigate the internship process. Additionally, strategies are discussed to help doctoral students obtain a desired internship. Particular attention is paid to APA-accredited internships and the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Center (APPIC) process.

FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

A lot of consideration goes into the decision of where to complete an internship, the type of setting in which to complete it (e.g., school, clinic, consortium, hospital), and the likelihood that it will help achieve one’s long-term career goals (school-based practice, private practice, research, academia, or other clinical settings). However, an additional consideration for doctoral students relates to whether to attend an APA-accredited or non-APA internship site. This can be a challenging decision that requires considerable thought and planning. As a general guide, Table 1 compares various site requirements and characteristics across APA-accredited and non-APA-accredited internship types.

TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF REQUIREMENTS AND CHARACTERISTICS FOR APA AND NON-APA APPROVED DOCTORAL INTERNSHIP SITES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-APA Internship Site</th>
<th>APA Internship Site</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Required Hours</td>
<td>&gt; 1,500 hours&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>&gt; 2,000 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>Credentialed school psychologist</td>
<td>Licensed psychologist&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site placement</td>
<td>School setting</td>
<td>School and nonschool settings&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid/Nonpaid</td>
<td>Paid and nonpaid placements</td>
<td>Paid placements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future employment</td>
<td>School, research, and/or academic settings&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>School, research, academic, and/or clinical settings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 NASP and CDSPP require 1,500 doctoral internship hours.
2 Supervision from a licensed psychologist (i.e., credentialed for independent practice outside of schools) may be required for eligibility to also become licensed as a psychologist.
3 A minimum of 600 hours must be completed in a school-based setting to meet eligibility requirements for the NCSP credential.
4 Requirements vary per position. In academia, applicants for faculty positions training doctoral-level students may be required to be licensed or license-eligible as a psychologist.

Regardless of internship type and setting, doctoral school psychology students must seek training opportunities in school or educational settings because of NASP’s school-based internship requirement (i.e., at least 600 hours must be completed in an educational placement). However,
doctoral students who meet this requirement through completing a specialist-level internship (or equivalent experience) may complete the rest of their internship hours in a nonschool setting if it is approved by their graduate program (NASP, 2000; NASP, 2010). This practice allows for diversity in internship training experiences as long as a potential internship site or placement is consistent with the doctoral program’s requirements, values, and goals, which vary across institutions.

**SO YOU WANT TO GO APPIC?**

The APPIC Internship Matching Program places students into psychology internship positions at training sites throughout the United States and Canada. In 1968, APPIC was founded to bring order to the internship selection process by publishing a directory of programs and advancing fair and equitable intern selection procedures. Along with National Matching Services Incorporated, an independent company that actually matches interns to sites, APPIC aims to maximize the number of interns who receive desirable internships as well as the number of internship programs that receive highly ranked interns.

For those seeking APA-accredited internships, the easiest way to locate an internship is through APPIC’s online internship database, which also includes important statistics on individual internship programs (e.g., the number of applications submitted to each site each year, expected internship slots available, types of programs from which interns come). The APPIC internship process remains complicated and can be confusing even with recent improvements in the standardization of application procedures. All APA-accredited internships meet the membership requirements of APPIC, yet not all APPIC internships are APA-accredited. Currently, the APPIC database lists over 650 internship sites, yet less than 500 are APA-accredited. Although both APPIC and APA aim to improve psychology intern training, it is important to consider that state licensing boards tend to follow APA—and not necessarily APPIC—standards and training procedures in their decisions toward awarding licensure for practice outside of schools. Thus, students should check to see if internship programs are APA-accredited when accessing the APPIC internship database. As an additional caveat, many APA-accredited internships only accept applications from students who attend APA-accredited graduate training programs. Therefore, it also is important for students from non-APA-accredited training programs to make sure that their prospective internship sites will accept their application.

Currently, the APPIC internship database lists more than 200 internship sites that accept applications from school psychology students. However, only 11 programs provide training opportunities that are primarily school-based (10 of these programs are APA-accredited). Table 2 lists these programs and the number of school psychology students each site accepted for the 2010–2011 internship year.

**TABLE 2. APPIC INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY AND THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS ACCEPTED BY SITE FOR THE 2010-2011 YEAR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internship Programs</th>
<th>Number of Interns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona Psychology Training Consortium*</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cypress Fairbanks Independent School District</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas Independent School District</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE INTERNSHIP APPLICATION PROCESS

Applying for internships is a laborious process that requires a great deal of time, commitment, and patience. The application process consists of researching programs, soliciting letters of recommendation, developing or updating one’s curriculum vita, aggregating practicum hours, writing essays, and interviewing at prospective programs. Although previous recommendations suggest that students should apply to 10–14 programs (Megargee, 1992), the mean, median, and mode for total internship applications submitted per applicant for the 2010 match was 15 programs (APPIC, 2010a). Therefore, students should consider applying to approximately 15 programs to remain competitive with current trends in the application process.

Considering the importance of adhering to specific objectives and due dates, applicants should begin exploring potential internship sites about a year before application deadlines to allow sufficient time to generate and refine application materials. To help with the latter, specific suggestions are provided below to help students navigate this potentially stressful and time-consuming process.

THE ESSAY COMPONENT

All applicants to APPIC internships must submit four essays:

- A brief personal statement
- An essay discussing how one’s theoretical orientation influences his or her case conceptualization and intervention efforts
- An essay discussing one’s experience working with diverse populations and how multicultural issues influence one’s practice
- An essay describing one’s research interests and experiences

Writing internship essays can be tricky, especially for school psychology students who apply to internships that accept or prefer students from clinical and counseling psychology programs. Faculty in these programs may be familiar with cognitive assessments and delivering psychotherapy but unfamiliar with novel practices in school psychology (e.g., curriculum-based assessment, response to intervention [RTI], positive behavior intervention supports). Thus, school psychology students should broadly emphasize their unique strengths and experiences across multiple practice modalities and domains in psychology. For example, a student who specializes in coordinating RTI services also could highlight his or her familiarity with the delivery of school-based mental health services using a similar paradigm (Doll & Cummings, 2008; Sulkowski, Wingfield, Jones, & Coulter, 2011).

| Fort Worth Independent School District | 3 |
| Houston Independent School District | 3 |
| Illinois School Psychology Internship Consortium | 18 |
| Lewisville Independent School District | 3 |
| Louisiana School Psychology Internship Consortium | 10 |
| Nebraska Internship Consortium in Professional Psychology | 18 |
| Tennessee Internship Consortium in Psychology | 4 |
| Virginia Beach City Public Schools | 4 |

*indicates non-APA-accredited internship program
Further, students may benefit from describing how their background in education and psychology can match various objectives and prerogatives of the internship program. For example, an applicant can discuss his or her familiarity with the provision of psychological services in educational and clinical settings as well as how he or she could help bridge the gap that often exists in service delivery across these settings (Sulkowski, Jordan, & Nguyen, 2009).

Internship essays must be under 500 words. Therefore, students must articulate how their previous training and experiences will likely contribute to their successes as interns within a single-spaced page. This is not always an easy task. Although brief, these essays often form a strong impression on training directors and should not be taken lightly. Therefore, students should have faculty members and knowledgeable friends review and comment on their essays prior to their submission.

**THE INTERNSHIP INTERVIEW PROCESS**

The interview process will inevitably be filled with highs and lows. Some interviews will go well and others could seem forced, uncomfortable, and tedious. However, regardless of one's impression of an interview, getting there is the first step. Every year, several applicants fail to attend interviews due to inclement weather, delayed flights, poor planning, and even interview burnout. Therefore, although interviewees often schedule interviews back to back to save time and money, it is important to consider how unexpected events (e.g., airport delays, lost baggage, family crisis) can complicate travel plans and contribute to missed interviews. Furthering this point, allowing sufficient time between each interview also can help with mentally unwinding, reflecting, and overcoming illness.

**PREPARATION FOR THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Preparation for internship interviews involves familiarizing oneself with all aspects of prospective sites by reviewing information pertinent to a particular site and/or interviewer. It also includes drafting a list of questions that can be quickly referenced if an interview reaches a lull or when the interviewer expects an interviewee to ask questions. Such a list can help a student look organized, conscientious, and interested in an internship program. Additionally, it is important to avoid asking questions that can be answered through referencing the site’s webpage. Here are a few interview questions worth considering:

- What percentage of an intern’s time is devoted to assessment, consultation, and direct intervention?
- Who provides supervision and when is it provided?
- How does supervision differ across the different settings/centers?
- What is office space like? Computer access? Access to test materials?
- What research opportunities are available?
- Are postdoctoral opportunities available for the following year?
- How much do interns travel on a weekly basis and are they reimbursed for mileage?
- Please describe the atmosphere of the department.
- What are former interns doing now?
- What qualities do supervisors desire in interns?
- What are the internship program’s greatest strengths?
- In what ways does the internship have room for improvement?
POTENTIAL QUESTIONS TO ASK CURRENT INTERNS

- What do you enjoy about your internship?
- What are a few things that you would change about the internship?
- What is the most frustrating part of the internship?
- How will your internship help you reach your goals?
- What are your plans for next year (e.g., postdoc, faculty position)?
- Would you recommend this internship to a friend?
- How have you grown over the course of the internship?
- Do you feel adequately supported through supervision and by the staff?
- What do you like and dislike about this community?
- Please describe a typical day as an intern.

Applicants should be prepared to answer a variety of factual and personal questions during an interview. To help prepare, it may be helpful to brainstorm and write down answers to commonly asked questions, or set up practice interviews with other prospective interns in your program well in advance of the interview. Solid preparation can help increase the likelihood of providing thoughtful and complete responses that will make an applicant stand out. Below is a list of commonly asked interview questions.

- Please describe how you managed an ethical dilemma.
- Describe a situation in which you disagreed with a supervisor. What did you do?
- Describe a case that went really well. What contributed to the success?
- Describe a case that did not go well. Why did the case go badly? Note: This question provides an opportunity to discuss what you learned and how you grew from being challenged.
- Discuss your experience working with diverse populations.
- Is there a specific population or type of client with whom you have difficulty working?
- Why did you apply here?
- What can you add to the program?
- What are your strengths?
- How do you cope with stress or anxiety?
- What do you plan to do after the completing the internship?
- What do you desire in a supervisor?
- As a school psychology student, why did you apply to an internship that has clinical rotations?

TAKING A FEW MOMENTS

It always is important to ask an interviewer for further clarification or for a few moments to reflect on an unexpected or particularly challenging question. Responding in haste can convey one’s anxiety and lack of forethought. Using statements and questions such as the following can help pace an interview and allow for needed time to compose a thoughtful answer. Notice that the last two questions can also be used in an attempt to shift the interview topic toward a familiar area.

- That is a really good/interesting question. Can I have a few moments to think of what I would do in that situation?
- It sounds like you’re interested in how I handled … is this correct?
- Your question reminds me of … Would you like for me to discuss my experience with...?
OTHER SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Begin with a timeline, start the application process early, and complete tasks each week. Do not wait until the last minute! It can also be helpful to join the official APPIC Listserv and regularly check for updates to internship programs such as new estimates on the number of expected positions/tracks for various programs. It also is important to provide at least 1 month’s notice before requesting a written letter from a faculty member or supervisor. Other suggestions include:

- Ask potential letter writers if they are willing to write a good recommendation. Tepid or neutral letters can do more harm than good, especially if other applicants’ letters are personalized and positive.
- It may be worth sending one’s curriculum vitae, internship essays, select publications, and a detailed list of practicum experiences to letter writers so they can personalize letters.
- Provide letter writers with plenty of information and materials so they do not omit pertinent information. Include information on specific sites from the APPIC database and program webpages. Also, discuss how you would be a good fit for the internship with letter writers so they can echo these points.
- Discuss the relevant skills needed at each type of internship program (e.g., internship consortium, independent school district) so that letter writers can make necessary modifications to each letter to describe your strengths in each setting.

Table 3 displays a checklist of specific duties one must complete before applying to internship programs. In general, this process should begin about a year before applying for internships.

**TABLE 3. CHECKLIST OF DUTIES AND TENTATIVE DEADLINES FOR APPLICATION TASKS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Monthly Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigate Internship Sites</td>
<td>At least 1 year prior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify Potential Sites</td>
<td>August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin Organizing Application Materials</td>
<td>August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finalize an Aggregate of Total Practicum Hours</td>
<td>September (ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask Faculty Members for Recommendation Letters</td>
<td>September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register for the APPIC match online</td>
<td>September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write Internship Essays</td>
<td>September–October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write Separate Cover Letters for Each Site</td>
<td>September–October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Update Curriculum Vita</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register for APPIC Applicant Portal</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finalize and Submit Applications</td>
<td>November</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MATCH DAY—THE WAIT IS OVER. OR IS IT?**

The interim between internship interviews and match day can seem like an eternity. However, this moratorium can provide an opportunity to prepare oneself for any number of possibilities (e.g., matching locally, matching and having to move, not matching). Then, finally, the wait is over for many in February. All of the triumphs and travails of the APPIC internship process culminate with the opening of one tersely worded e-mail that arrives in the early morning. On this day, interns find out whether they matched to a site or if they need to explore other internship possibilities. Match
results also are released on the National Matching Services website shortly after the initial match e-mails are sent out.

For those who do not initially match, there is now hope to match in a second round. Debuting in the 2010–2011 year, interns who do not initially match can go through a second APPIC match process (Phase II). Similar to the traditional match process, Phase II involves submitting applications to internship programs, participating in interviews, ranking internship programs, and receiving match results on a second match day; however, the process is expedited. Phase II lasts approximately 1 month and it is designed to fill vacant positions that remain from the initial match.

SUMMARY AND IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

**Licensing boards.** Each state and provincial licensing board has its own rules for determining the types of internships that are acceptable for licensure within their jurisdiction. Currently, only Mississippi requires an APA-accredited internship in order to be licensed as a psychologist. Depending on a state’s licensing board, students who do not complete an APA-accredited internship may be required to submit additional materials (e.g., personal evaluations, work samples, letters from supervisors) to prove their internship training experience is consistent with the APA’s internship training standards and/or the standards of a particular licensing board.

**Future employment.** Some psychology positions require interns to complete an APA-accredited internship program. For example, one must complete an APA-accredited internship to be hired as psychologist in the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) hospitals and clinics. Additionally, some postdoctoral and a few academic positions prefer applicants who have completed APA-accredited internships. In this vein, some hospitals, medical centers, and postdoctoral opportunities in health psychology or neuropsychology favor interns who have completed APA-accredited predoctoral internships.

CONCLUSION

The decision of whether to pursue an APPIC- or APA-accredited internship program must be made on an individual basis in light of one’s professional goals. These internships are appealing to school psychology students interested in practicing in medical, clinical, and academic settings. However, they may not fit the training goals of other doctoral-level school psychology students. Therefore, in addition to exploring one’s own goals, it is important to consult regularly with supervisors, colleagues, and friends to help obtain a balanced perspective on the type of internship site that will likely maximize one’s professional growth and happiness during the internship year and beyond.

REFERENCES


This fact sheet was prepared by Michael Sulkowski, PhD, while he was a student at the University of South Florida and completing his APA-accredited internship at the Louisiana School Psychology Internship Consortium in New Orleans. He prepared this fact sheet in conjunction with Anna Perla, NCSP, of the NASP Student Development Workgroup.

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