

Pitfalls in Internship Selection

Now that the 2009 match date for internships is in the past, the majority of applicants for internships can catch their breath. Others less fortunate must submit their qualifications to the clearinghouse and look for other ways to find a suitable internship training experience to complete their doctoral training. Those who have not matched have options, and most will find suitable training sites. However, they must be careful in their decision making. These future professionals must understand that the consequences of their choices may not arise until they complete licensure and credentialing applications several years after the completion of the internship. Those involved in supervising these future professionals have a tremendous responsibility as well.

When I worked in a large internship site early in my career, I did not know that much about internship training and how it related to standards for licensure and credentialing. I have a different perspective now based upon years of evaluating the internship training programs submitted by applicants for licensure (a total of 16 years in two different states) and for credentialing purposes at the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology where I have been Executive Officer for 19 years. I have seen many times what can happen when a doctoral student feels, understandably, enormous pressure to locate an internship site. Shortcuts are taken. Often the doctoral student is least qualified to anticipate some of the pitfalls, and that is why this article is oriented towards those who provide internship training, those who select training sites for internship, and those who evaluate internship training.

Quality Assurance in Internship Training

Doctoral students need to be aware of the types of review mechanisms for internship training. They know about APA/CPA accredited internships but may be less familiar with APPIC internships and how they differ from APA/CPA accredited sites. The majority of students will know very little about CAPIC listed internships, and their characteristics.

Students are often concerned about the risks of not completing an APA/CPA accredited internship. The importance of having an APA accredited internship is one of the most frequent questions I get from students and from applicants for the National Register HSP credential. I generally start by stating that an APA accredited internship and an APA accredited doctoral program are required for graduates seeking employment in the VA. However, neither is universally required for licensure, credentialing, and other types of employment. Many state boards have adopted the National Register internship criteria into their regulations. Other board may require APA accredited *or* the equivalent and then use the National Register criteria to determine equivalence.

What are the most common internship problems?

1. Supervisor is licensed as a psychologist, but not at the doctoral level.
2. Supervisor has a doctoral degree in psychology, but the degree is not from a regionally accredited institution.
3. Supervisor has a doctoral degree in psychology from a program that is neither APA/CPA accredited nor ASPPB/National Register Designated.
4. Fewer than two psychologists serve as supervisors.

5. Fewer than two interns are training at the site.

Origination of the Criteria for Evaluation of Internship Training

The current internship criteria developed by the National Register grew out of the reviewers' experience in reviewing large number of applicants (12,000+) during the National Register's grandparenting period (1974-1978). Al Wellner, Ph.D., founding Executive Officer of the National Register, was also chair of the APA Committee on Accreditation during 1974-1979. He and Carl Zimet, Ph.D., Chair of the National Register at that time, suggested to APIC (APPIC's name at that time) that APIC adopt the same criteria to strengthen both organizations effort to identify proper internship training. These events help explain why the criteria adopted at that time by APA, APPIC and the National Register were so similar (Ron Kurz, personal communication, 9/21/93). Although modified independently over the years and with greater detail by APA and APPIC, the three sets of criteria remain very similar. The main difference among the three is that the National Register allows for the internship to occur after the completion of the doctoral degree. For the National Register criteria, go to <http://www.nationalregister.org/internship.pdf>. (See recommended web pages at the end of this article for APPIC and APA criteria)

These criteria were adopted by licensure boards to determine standards for an acceptable internship. Over time small but significant differences in licensing requirements for internship evolved, just as they did for doctoral degrees. Having completed an APA approved internship usually clears all hurdles at the state and national level. However, if the internship is not APA accredited, licensing boards and credentialing organizations examine the characteristics of the internship. In that instance differential outcomes may highlight problems in implementation of the training experience. Some of the examples below may be typical outcomes of the evaluation by a state licensing board or national credentialing organization.

The First Dear Applicant Letter

Dear Applicant:

After a careful review of your application, Internship Confirmation Form, Internship Guidelines Compliance Worksheet, and an additional written explanation received from Dr. X, it appears that the internship program you completed does not meet the Guidelines for Defining an Internship or Organized Health Service Training Program in Psychology.

Next are the several reasons that may be given. Let's examine those pitfalls.

Pitfall 1: Supervisor is licensed as a psychologist but not on the basis of a doctoral degree in psychology.

One criterion addresses the qualifications of the internship supervisors. Licensure is required for at least one of the two required supervisors. For the National Register and many licensing boards, it is insufficient if the supervisor's license was based upon a master's degree in psychology. For the two individuals who are face to face supervisors and who certify to the credentialing authority the satisfaction of the internship by the applicant, their degrees should be a doctoral degree in psychology. Many licensing boards also want face-to-face supervision provided by psychologists who meet the doctoral standard. Not having doctoral level supervisors may also pose a problem for psychologists

seeking participation in healthcare plans and may be an issue for those seeking expedited mobility. This does not mean that those supervisors may not be competent in supervision; they could serve as adjunctive but not as primary supervisors.

Pitfall 2: Supervisor is licensed as a Psychologist on the basis of a doctoral degree but not from an institution that is regionally accredited or from a program that is approved by a credible quality assurance mechanism (APA/CPA Accredited Program or ASPPB/National Register Designated Program).

This is a variation of the first pitfall but in this instance the supervisor's doctoral degree may cause the problem. It is not clear the degree to which accrediting bodies, APPIC, or CAPIC look beyond the supervisor's license and actually examine the origin of the doctoral degrees. The criteria often do not address this issue, and state licensing and national credentialing requirements vary. For example, in CA licensure applicants from state approved schools will now be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to determine whether the degree meets the statutory educational requirement for admission to the CA licensing examination. These are programs which are housed in institutions which are not accredited by one of the regional accrediting bodies approved by the US Department of Education. Thus, knowing that a person is a licensed psychologist in CA does not tell us that the licensee has a doctoral degree which would meet standards for licensure in other jurisdictions or for credentialing by national organizations. If that licensed psychologist starts supervising doctoral students, he/she may unwittingly be creating a future licensing roadblock for the student.

Supervisors who completed a doctoral program in a program which is neither accredited nor designated, even though housed in a regionally accredited institution, do not qualify as acceptable supervisors for the National Register (A list of eligible programs is available at www.nationalregister.org/designate.html.)

A suggested approach to solving this problem is to request a CV from the supervisor and verify that degree from a recognized source such as the National Register, which has on file transcripts of more than 25,000 psychologists. The APA Membership Office or the state board may also be able to verify doctoral degree program, institution, and year of graduation.

All this goes to the issue that licensure is insufficient to qualify someone as a supervisor. It is important for interns to carefully qualify their supervisors in advance.

Pitfall 3: Remember the Twos: Two psychologists, two interns and two supervision hours face to face

The Second Dear Applicant letter

The internship criteria specify that there must be two or more psychologists on the staff as supervisors, at least one of whom was actively licensed as a psychologist by the State Board of Examiners in Psychology. According to your supervisor, he was the only psychologist on staff. There was a second psychologist on staff as a supervisor, but she was there for only two weeks of your training. The drug and alcohol licensed counselor who provided supervision does not fulfill the requirement of having two psychologist supervisors. Apparently there were no arrangements made by the internship to bring in a second acceptable supervising psychologist when the second psychologist left.

A Third Dear Applicant letter

The internship criteria specify that there must be a minimum of two interns at the site during the applicant's training period. The requirement of two interns makes it appear that there is the potential for a training environment. From the information we received, it was confirmed that you were the only doctoral level psychology intern on site from 09/01/2005 to 08/31/2006. Although your supervisor indicated that you had meetings with doctoral externs and psychology associates periodically, that does not substantiate that an internship level training environment was maintained by the internship program. In addition, participating in professional training and in-service training with staff or professionals in training for other professions does not demonstrate that you interacted with and affected a collegial relationship with other individuals going through doctoral level training in psychology on a regularly scheduled basis.

Or another version of this situation can be described as follows:

The internship criteria specify that there must be a minimum of two interns at the site during the applicant's training period. The requirement of two interns makes it clear that there is the potential for a training environment. From the information we received, it was confirmed that you were the only doctoral level psychology intern on site from 09/01/2000 to 08/31/2001. Dr. X indicated that the program was unable to physically house and fund no more than one intern, and that although there were other training programs in the area, he said she could not arrange joint activities due to scheduling conflicts. Although Dr. X encouraged you to "seek creative ways of connecting with others" because she "valued and understood the loss of collegial contact" you would experience, it does not substantiate that a training environment was maintained by the internship program. In addition, participating in a conference where you met with other interns, and occasionally corresponding with local interns via email or phone does not demonstrate that you interacted with and affected a collegial relationship with other individuals going through doctoral level training on a regularly scheduled basis. There are several APPIC member and APA accredited psychology internship programs in that city which could have provided opportunities for meaningful interaction, support, and socialization with other interns. Accommodations should have been made in advance to ensure that the training needs of the intern took precedence over service requirements for the counseling center.

The solutions to these internship problems lie in the execution of the criteria. In the first instance, the internship director should have made immediate plans to bring in another qualified supervisor, signed a contract with that person, and notified the interns so that their internship would later qualify. This would be the basis for the letter that would accompany the internship confirmation form to the state board or the credentialing body of the special circumstances for that year. Similarly with the last two examples, it would appear that the experience was really more like that of an employee and that creating a training environment was really not the foremost consideration. Unfortunately, interns may not appreciate these necessities but they are the ones held accountable.

Pitfall 4: Good intentions: bad implementation

The National Register and most state licensure boards ask if the internship was APA approved at the time of the applicant's training. If the answer is no, the next question is if the internship was APPIC listed at the time. Failing to be APPIC listed typically means that the internship must be individually examined to determine if the internship meets the 12 widely accepted criteria.

It is not infrequent that in response to a question about whether the internship meets APPIC standards, the internship supervisor states that “the program was designed to follow APPIC guidelines.” However, by examining the history of the internship in the APPIC Directory over the years, it was determined that the internship did not qualify until many years later for APPIC approval (and may not have even applied until many years later). As a result, at the time this individual was admitted, the internship may not have met criteria.

How is this assessed by the National Register and licensing boards? First, for any internship that is not accredited or APPIC listed, a copy of the internship brochure from that time period is generally requested. Invariably, the internship director sends a copy of the current brochure, if that even exists, stating that no copies of the brochure from 19XX exist. This has happened so frequently that at the National Register we now routinely ask that the internship director complete a form and describe in their own words how the internship met each of the 12 criteria *at the time* the applicant was in training. We have found that to be more helpful than simply relying on a brochure because the content and quality of the brochures vary tremendously.

Internships listed by CAPIC present a special challenge (www.capic.net). Most internships submitted as part of an application for the National Register credential are APA accredited or APPIC listed. Only a few are CAPIC listed. It is the latter group that is less well known especially outside of CA. In addition to the unfamiliarity, most of the CAPIC listed internships are half time and many do not fund interns, thus the intern may have difficulty getting licensed in states if unpaid internships are unacceptable. According to the survey results of students published in the APPIC Newsletter in November 2008, 19% of Ph.D. programs and 45% of Psy.D. programs would allow students to apply for an unfunded internship. Even so, lack of intern funding now makes internships ineligible to qualify for APPIC listing.

While half time internships pose no problem, it is important that the two half time internships be part of an organized sequence of training for the future psychologist. Often the search for qualified internships in today’s competitive environment drives the applicant to find any internship. Thus, for CAPIC internships or for internships that existed prior to APPIC approval, the completion of the internship form is an essential part of the quality assurance review by the National Register. For some individuals the half time internships are essential to their life style and education sequence. Secondly, with the competition for internship training it is important that internships have an opportunity to demonstrate whether they meet standards.

Thus, I was surprised to hear from a doctoral student at one of my recent presentations on credentialing and licensure that her doctoral program supervisor suggested that she should not pursue a CAPIC listed internship. I would not feel comfortable making that statement myself. I think it is a criterion based and empirical issue state by state and organization by organization. It is a different issue if the doctoral program requires an APA approved or APPIC listing internship.

Finally there is another category of internships which occasionally are presented for licensure or credentialing purposes: internships that are created to fill a need for a particular student. These are the most dangerous from the perspective of satisfying the professional goals of the student. Urgency may trump qualified training. Creating an internship out of a work setting is often unsuccessful. In the first place there is the requirement for two interns in training at the same time. That means recruiting another individual for training purposes. Secondly, converting an employee into an intern means that the need for the training environment supersedes service needs. This is not to say that service needs are

not important but balance must be achieved. In this situation a contract is essential to protecting the student and making clear the characteristics of a training site. In most instances it will be necessary for the former employee to be assigned to a different location with new supervisors if the employment setting is serious about creating a training environment. It can be done. It just has to be carefully implemented.

International training sites

In the past five years or so I have seen increasing interest from doctoral students in obtaining experience working in foreign countries. Many of these students would like to complete an internship abroad. Even though internship training in some countries may not be as developed as our criterion-based system in the US and Canada, students should find out in advance if the experience would count for US licensure. One barrier is the qualifications of the supervisors. Is there governmental licensure in that country, and if so, is the license based upon a requirement of having a doctoral degree in psychology? Often the answer to both questions is no. If licensure exists it is typically at the master's level in psychology. Finally, training in some European countries may be available only in psychotherapy training institutes as opposed to health service delivery systems. Unlike the US, some countries have two recognition systems or approaches to psychologists, one of which is as a psychotherapist. For these many other reasons related to structural barriers (work permits) and cultural barriers (language and culture) it is a challenge for US trained students. I am willing to try to advise these students if they are interested. Simply suggest that they email me at judy@nationalregister.org

What could be done by internship directors to solve some of these problems?

1. Certify Internship for all Interns at the time of Completion:
Internship directors should complete and sign the NR Internship Confirmation Form for each intern at the end of the year and then submit a copy to the National Register credentials bank. The National Register will serve as a bank for those forms until they are reviewed formally at the request of the applicant at the time of credentialing. At the same time supervisors should keep a copy and give a copy to the intern. Attach a copy of the brochure for that year to the form that you keep and be certain that the internship brochure is dated. Then at the time the intern applies for a license you will have in your files a contemporaneously completed form which attests to satisfactory completion of an internship. The internship form is available online at www.nationalregister.org/internship.pdf
2. Bank Official Descriptions of Internship:
Keep copies of dated internship brochures and descriptions, especially when the program is not APA accredited or APPIC /CAPIC listed for each year that the internship is in existence. Keep a list of the names in the internship class by year. This contemporaneous information is typically needed when former interns apply for licensure and the National Register HSPP credential. As both applications typically occur several years after the completion of the internship, each year's description or contract with the student is critical to have on file and dated.
3. Determine that Supervisors at the Internship Site Meet Professional Standards:
At the time that the supervisor is chosen to be part of the internship staff, obtain accurate and verified information on education and training and licensure. Then keep dated copies of CVs on file. When former interns apply for NR, licensure, or other credential, the credentials of the supervisors may be questioned. Be certain that doctoral degree institution, program completed and date of degree are provided in response to questions about the credentials of the internship staff. As indicated previously, hiring supervisors who have completed a doctoral program from an institution that is regionally accredited but not APA Accredited or ASPPB/National Register

Designated may not be sufficient to meet standards for the profession. The degree must be from a program that is accredited, designated or determined by a credible authority to be the equivalent. For instance, for credentialing by the National Register, state accreditation of an institution/program is insufficient to qualify a person as an acceptable supervisor, even if the supervisor is licensed as a psychologist. To do so would mean that a standard for supervisors is lower than what is expected for applicants for credentialing by the National Register.

Other Resources

http://www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/qrg_interns.html

http://www.appic.org/about/2_3_1_about_policies_and_procedures_internship.html

About the Author

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For more information on the National Register, see www.nationalregister.org.