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Student Forum

The Internship Application Process: Advice You Might Not Have Heard

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So you've been approved by your faculty to apply for internship? Congratulations . . . and, some would say, condolences. But internship is supposed to be the crowning achievement of one's doctoral training—a milestone of which to be proud and an experience to be treasured. Why the condolences? Unfortunately, the sense of achievement that comes with internship approval is often tempered by trepidation about the internship match imbalance—the realization that positions are in short supply. As Directors of Clinical Training (DCTs), we too fret about the imbalance. We want our students to match, yet realize that some very deserving candidates may not. To forestall that possibility, we do whatever we can to prepare our students for the increasingly competitive application and match environment. Like most DCTs, we meet with applicants each year to offer guidance and suggestions for navigating the process. In this article we offer some of that advice. Our goal is not to provide a comprehensive guide to the process; individual mentors and other publications are excellent sources for that (e.g., Williams-Nickelson, Prinstein, & Keilin, 2008). Rather, we draw on our years of experience as DCTs (and former internship applicants) to offer a few pointers that you may not have heard, but which we hope are helpful to applicants.

Bask in Your Success, Briefly

Being approved to apply for internship is the result of a long, arduous process that began when you first decided to pursue a doctoral degree in psychology. You have worked hard to get to this point. In certifying you as internship-ready, your faculty is saying that you are prepared to undertake the capstone experience in your training. This type of recognition can be all too rare along the path to a Ph.D. Allow yourself to feel good about your accomplishments to date. Then get to work.

Start Early, Just Not Too Early

On the one hand, it is helpful to be somewhat thoughtful about preparation for internship throughout your training experience. Even from the first year, it is wise to be mindful of the AAPI application and how to track hours, the application process, and preparing yourself to both compete for an internship and benefit from the experience. However, when it comes to getting down to initiating the application process, it can be a mistake to start too early. Most internships don't update their materials online until mid-summer, and the application policies and AAPI online also typically implement revisions during the summer. August 1 is a good time to begin more vigorous and intentional efforts to initiate the formal application process. Starting too early often results in simply prolonging the anxiety that often accompanies application angst without adding any substantial benefit in return.

Think of the Match as a 1- or 2-year Process

Unfortunately, the days of being able to count on matching the first time around have passed. Since 2002, the discrepancy between the demand for internships and available slots has steadily increased, and there is no sign of this trend abating. This means that every year an increasing percentage of applicants are not matching. In the most recent match, 21% of students who applied did not secure a position (APPIC Match Statistics, n.d.). Although match rates for university-based Ph.D. programs are far better, the unfortunate reality is that many deserving applicants are unsuccessful in matching each year. For that reason it is wise to think of the match as potentially a 2-year process. To help you adopt a 2-year mindset, consider from the outset what your backup plan will be if you don't match. From both a personal and professional standpoint, what would be the most productive and beneficial use of the additional year? Although not matching is always a blow—and we are not minimizing that—to the degree that you have mapped out a "plan B" you will be better prepared to deal with the "what now?" dilemma of not matching. Each of us has seen deserving students who failed to match in their initial attempt make the best of the situation by working hard during the subsequent year; these students are usually rewarded with matches to outstanding internships in the second attempt. Not matching is disappointing and inconvenient to be sure, but resilient students can make the best of it.

Remember the Wisdom of the Serenity Prayer

A popular strategy among members of Alcoholics Anonymous is the Serenity Prayer: *God grant me the ability to manage the things I can control, the patience to accept what I cannot control, and the wisdom to know the difference*. Unfortunately, applicants cannot control every aspect of the internship match experience and failing to acknowledge and accept that fact will lead to much unnecessary stress (which might be worth it if it ensured match success, but it doesn't). There are many things that applicants can do to maximize chances of match success. Choose wisely when selecting where to apply, write the best essays you can, and prepare thoroughly for each interview. But recognize what you cannot control. You cannot alter your past training (only present it in the best possible light) and have no control over who else applies to your top sites. You have little input into the content of recommendation letters. You have no say in flight schedules or whether a blizzard will hit New England the day you're supposed to interview in Boston. Most important, remember that internship sites have their own agendas and priorities that you may not be privy to and cannot control. In other words, recognize the factors that you can and cannot influence. Maximize that which you can control; as for the rest, give yourself a break.

You Don't Need Every Internship Slot, You Just Need One

In fact, you don't even want every internship slot. There are lots of opportunities that would be completely wrong for you, your training needs, and your future plans. It is perfectly okay if and when you run across internships that aren't right for you. From time to time, a student will say, "I've heard that some sites want applicants to have lots of projective testing experience, and I don't have any. What do I do?" Our

answer might be, "Don't apply to those places; they aren't a good fit for you." There will be sites that have requirements or expectations of applicants that don't fit for you. This is almost always a sign that the internship likely fits poorly with your training model (which you obviously favor since you sought out the program and devoted years of your life to) and probably would be a dissatisfying internship placement for you. Fortunately, the match imbalance for scientist-practitioner or clinical science programs is apparently lesser than for other training models, and it is quite likely that you can find many internship opportunities that are a great fit for you.

Your Vita Matters at Least as Much as Your AAPI Hours

Having a strong vita is almost always an asset to your application, and applicants would be well served to be as committed to accumulating a strong vita as accumulating practicum hours. Even if you are not planning to apply to internship sites with research opportunities, a strong vita presents a good impression. Applicants with both a strong vita and adequate, quality practica experiences are likely to be perceived as bright, motivated, energetic, and ambitious. A student who comes from a program with substantial opportunities to be involved in scholarship but who has a light vita may be perceived in the opposite way—as someone who may have less abilities or who otherwise fails to take advantage of opportunities—which is not the first impression one wants to make with an internship application. It is a mistake to think that time devoted to research and scholarship is somehow a detriment to internship competitiveness. The simple truth is that it is not.

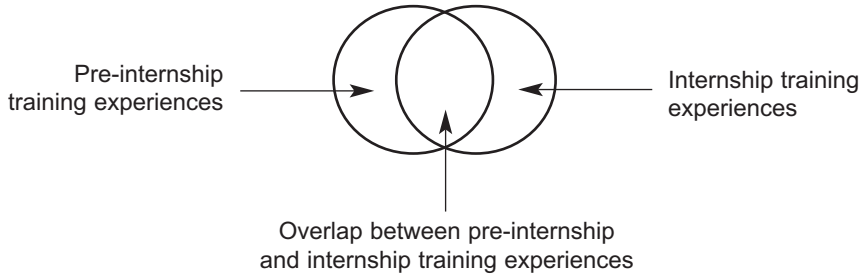
Don't Obsess About Practicum Hours

Make no mistake about it: practicum hours are an essential aspect of graduate training and qualifications for internship. Students must acquire more than a modicum of practicum experience in order to be ready for the next level of training acquired on internship. However, our observation is that students sometimes put too much emphasis on amassing as many practicum hours as possible in an effort to improve their competitiveness for internship. Data from internship training directors (TDs) show practicum hours are no higher than fifth on the list of criteria upon which applicants are evaluated. In the most recent survey (APPIC Member Surveys, n.d.), number of practicum hours was rated as very important by only 29% of TDs, compared to 81% for interviews, 45% for letters of recommendation, 41% for multicultural sensitivity, and 40% for essay responses. We consistently hear from TDs that once you've achieved the minimum threshold of hours, other factors become more important.

It's understandable that the accumulation of practicum hours has taken on such importance. After all, practicum hours are one of the criteria over which applicants have most control. However, students learn at different rates. One person may master a particular test in 10 hours whereas another may require 20 (e.g., Loe, Kadlubek, & Marks, 2007). In other words, input (number of accumulated clock hours) is at best a shaky proxy for outcomes. Therefore, we suggest that demonstrating competency in the core areas of practice is every bit as important as the sheer numbers of practicum or assessment hours. Competencies related to intervention and assessment can be stressed in essays, letters of recommendation, and during interviews.

You Aren't Competing for a Job — It Is Okay to Be Lacking in Certain Experiences

Evaluating your qualifications for internship can be counterintuitive. Many applicants, understandably, approach it as similar to applying for a job—the best applicants are those whose experiences and training match the demands of the position. *This is the wrong approach to the internship application process*. Quality internships take their role in providing a capstone clinical training experience very seriously. As a result, they value students who have a variety of high-quality practica experiences with good supervision, but have no expectation that you have already done what it is you hope to do on internship. In fact, we have observed situations where applicants overtrained themselves out of internship opportunities because the internships report back to the DCT that "she has already done all of the experiences she is interested in doing here." Many internships value the opportunity to provide students training in *unique* clinical settings to provide the final polish on a well-rounded and broadly trained professional. Internships tell us they are looking for applicants who are well prepared to benefit from the internship experience whose interests match well with the internship's unique training opportunities.



At the Same Time, Sell Yourself and Your Experiences

Although internships are interested in meeting applicants' needs for training, your needs are only half the match. Internships are also interested in what you bring to the table. We have read many essays over the years that do an excellent job of explaining how an internship site meets a student's training needs ("Your site offers the forensic training I desire"), but say nothing about what the applicant has to offer. Remember that "fit" is a two-way street. In addition to showing how a site meets your training goals, you should also emphasize your prior training and qualifications (though see previous point about "training out" of a site). If a site offers opportunities in severe mental illness, and you have training in that area, note that as evidence of fit. Doing so will highlight that you can hit the ground running without needing overly intensive supervision, while simultaneously deepening your experience in a particular area. An ideal match between applicant and site might look something like the diagram to the left, which shows unique training experiences obtained in both the doctoral program and internship, yet some degree of overlap as well.

Finally, you should also emphasize other qualities that make you appealing to internships, such as a similar theoretical orientation, shared research interests, and collegiality. The most appropriate place to include this information is in the cover letter. Think of that as your letter of recommendation for yourself. Like any letter of

recommendation, you want it to be as strong and specific as possible.

Make the Most of the Interview Process

Traveling to interviews is expensive and time consuming. But it is a necessary part of the process. Why not make the most of it? You will meet many professionals in your field, some luminaries whose work you have admired. Interviews are an opportunity to explore common interests and network with these individuals. You may well cross paths with them again. Likewise, when you encounter other applicants on the interview trail, be friendly and view them as future colleagues rather than just the competition. Finally, your interviews will undoubtedly take you to places you've never been. Although schedules are often tight, take advantage of small opportunities to experience new locales. Whether it's a café near your hotel or just enjoying the view from the plane, soak in the experience.

Learn to Make Your Dissertation Sound Interesting

Throughout the internship interview process, you will be asked to talk about your dissertation many times. Most people who ask will likely have little to no experience or knowledge with the specialty area of your dissertation. Practice describing your dissertation to this audience. You should be able to provide a 60-second "elevator pitch" style description of your dissertation that any psychologist or psychology trainee could understand, find interesting, and perhaps connect with. Start with a description of the broad clinical problem or human experience that you are interested in, followed by a short, jargon-free description of your study. If the asker wants more details, she will ask. Consider these two examples of responses to the prompt "Tell me about your dissertation":

Example 1: "My dissertation is a four-cell randomized design with binge-drinkers. I am comparing BASICs feedback alone to moderation skills training and we have a control group and a combined group to test for additive effects of the two interventions. We are using the DDQ, BYAACQ and PBS scales as our main dependent variables. I am hoping to recruit 60 participants per cell so that we can do some cool Poisson distribution statistics."

Example 2: "I'm interested in how to help people change risky health behaviors who might not necessarily be interested in changing those behaviors. With my dissertation I am examining this interest with college students who use alcohol in a risky way. I am comparing two different approaches: a motivational approach using personalized drinking feedback and a skills-training approach focused on teaching students skills to moderate their intake. The study itself is a randomized trial comparing those two approaches to both a waitlist control group and a group that gets both approaches."

The first example is full of technical details and jargon that may only interest or be understood by someone very familiar with that same literature. It also fails to demonstrate that the applicant has a "big picture" view of what the study might contribute to our broader understanding of people. The second example is interesting, understandable to a broader audience, and demonstrates a more mature view of the nature of the work.

The Questions You Ask Reveal as Much as the Answers You Provide

Applicants understandably spend a great deal of time trying to anticipate questions and formulate answers to questions that will be asked of them during interviews. Unfortunately, comparatively less time is spent developing insightful, informed questions to ask of supervisors. Many interviewers will turn over their time to you to ask questions. To prepare for this, arm yourself with questions that shows your knowledge of the training site and, if possible, the interviewer, rather than generic questions that show little knowledge of the site or rotation. The below examples illustrate the difference between each type of question.

Example 1: "Can you tell me a little about this rotation, like what kinds of clinical experiences I would get here?" [and a follow-up question] "Are you doing any research related to PTSD?"

Example 2: "I know that this rotation includes assessment of combat-related PTSD, which is very exciting because of my prior experiences working with trauma survivors. Can you tell me a little about how those assessments are conducted, such as which instruments are used?" [and a follow-up question] "I've read some of your research on Cognitive Processing Therapy with homeless veterans. Is that still ongoing, and are there opportunities for interns to become involved?"

The questions in Example 2 are clearly superior. They show that the applicant has done his or her homework and already knows something about the nature of the rotation and the supervisor's work.

Show Your Essays to Anyone Who Will Read Them

The AAPI essays are a critically important part of your application portfolio. The essays, especially the autobiographical essay, require you to think and write deeply and personally about yourself and your approach to psychology, and thus create a sense of vulnerability in many students. As a result of this anxiety, students are often tempted to avoid writing the essays as long as possible or avoid showing them to anyone else for fear of embarrassment or criticism. Both strategies are serious mistakes and will almost certainly result in your application not being as strong as it could be.

We recommend that you start working on the drafts of the essays early and return to them frequently. Tinker, try different approaches or ideas, brainstorm, and edit and rewrite. Once you have them in a coherent draft form, share them with *many* different people (peers, mentors, supervisors, etc.) and request feedback. The feedback will often be rewarding but sometimes will be surprising or even difficult to receive. In every instance it is valuable and you should consider all feedback carefully in preparing a final draft. Do not make the mistake of putting off starting the draft so long that there is little time left for feedback. It is likely that you will receive conflicting feedback. Different individuals may find the same essay both "too impersonal and boring" and "too personal and informal." You can drive yourself crazy trying to craft an essay that would please every possible reader. Our advice is that, ultimately, you should write the essays with which you are most comfortable.

Take Care of Yourself

The internship application process is serious business and demands substantial energy and time. For many graduate students, these two commodities are in short supply already. While you may indeed be burning the candle at both ends throughout this process, we would encourage you to try to reserve some time to preserve your health (both mental and physical). Exercise, eat well, and find time to connect with those close to you. Have a little fun once in a while. Once the interview season begins (usually mid-December through January), take extra precautions to guard your health. You will be traveling a great deal and can't really afford to be sick. Stay hydrated, eat a healthy diet, avoid overdoing alcohol or caffeine, and wash your hands frequently while traveling.

Do Send Thank-You Notes

APPIC has occasionally discouraged applicants from sending thank-you notes following interviews, noting that they will not affect an applicant's success in the match. Although one would hope that something so trivial as this would not make or break an application, there are some good reasons to send them anyway. Thank-you notes allow you to communicate your enthusiasm for a site after having time to reflect on your visit there. You can offer your (positive) appraisal of the site and emphasize aspects of the training with which you were impressed. It also can't hurt for internship training directors to see your name in a positive light one more time. Finally, it is simply professional courtesy to send a note of gratitude after being hosted by another professional.

Final Thoughts

We view it as a bit of a tragedy that the internship application process has become a dreaded, angst-filled experience for many students. Despite the understandable anxiety related to the possibility of not matching, we remind you that there can be much to enjoy about the experience as well. While preparing the applications, you will get a chance to reflect upon your own values and goals, sometimes revisiting that sense of purpose that may have been forced to the background during the dog days of dissertation manuscripts and core courses. During interviews, students frequently report back to us what a rewarding experience it is to be able to reflect upon one's professional growth and sophistication that hadn't been fully appreciated or acknowledged while the growth was occurring. Indeed, the interview process for many students is a first taste of a really *professional* experience, foreshadowing postdoc or job interviews that are soon to come. The transition from graduate student to professional that once seemed unthinkably distant is suddenly quite near. Our hope is that, with your best efforts, the support of your peers and faculty, and perhaps some of this advice, you will achieve the reward you certainly deserve—news of a match to an internship of your choice on match day.

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