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Training School Psychology Graduate Students to Address Regional Shortages: A Distance Learning Model

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Abstract. Addressing the shortages of school psychologists in underserved regions of the country is critical to the profession and the communities served by its members. This article describes a school psychology satellite training program using a hybrid approach combining distance learning technologies and face-to-face classroom meetings. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of sixteen graduate students in a rural, Appalachian region of Ohio as members of the first two cohorts enrolled in the school psychology satellite program.

School psychologists are in short supply, particularly in traditionally underserved school districts struggling to meet the needs of their student population. Nationally, the shortage of professionally trained school psychologists can be attributed primarily to demographic trends indicating that practicing school psychologists are reaching the age of retirement (Curtis, Chesno Grier, & Hunley, 2004; Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Lewis, Truscott, & Volker, 2008; Walker-Abshier, Curtis, & Chesno-Grier, 2003) and the expanded role of the school psychologist to include a wider range of prevention and early intervention services (Reschly & Ysseldyke, 2002). The need for highly trained school psychologists to lead the profession toward ever more effective practices has been noted by many in the field (Lichtenstein, 2005; Reschly & Grimes, 2002). The lack of high trained school psychologists is often dire in rural regions that lack a local graduate training program.

At present, six states (Alaska, Hawaii, Missouri, New Hampshire, Vermont, Wyoming) do not have a training program approved by their credentialing professional organization, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2007). Even within states with multiple NASP-approved training programs,

geographical constraints and economic factors might limit access to high quality training programs. Leaders in the profession have called into question the capacity of available training programs to produce adequate numbers of highly trained school psychologists to meet current and future shortages (Fagan & Wise, 2007).

Research on Training School Psychologists for Practice in Rural Schools

The topic of “rural” school psychology received considerable attention in the mid-1980s (Benson, Bischoff, & Boland, 1983; Brassard & Barnes, 1987; Ehly & Reimers, 1986; Fagan, 1981; Huebner, 1989; Hughes, 1986; Hughes & Clark, 1981; Kramer & Peters, 1986; Solly & Hohenshil, 1986). In 1985, a miniseries in *School Psychology Review* was dedicated to school psychological practice in rural schools (Cummings, McLeskey, & Huebner, 1985; Fagan & Hughes, 1985; Helge, 1985; Huebner, 1985; Kramer & Peters, 1985; Latham & Burnham, 1985). Generally, these published works contrasted the professional practices of school psychologists in urban, suburban, and rural settings and concluded that the general characteristics of rural settings (i.e., employment conditions, professional preparation, practitioner’s roles: generalist vs. specialist) change the practice of school psychology in meaningful ways and consequently require different approaches to graduate education, practicum/internship experiences, and continuing education. According to Reschly and Connolly (1990), the inconsistent results (i.e., both favoring and disfavoring rural school psychology practice) across these various studies can be attributed to small samples or low participation rates (Benson et al., 1983; Huebner, 1985; Hughes, 1986; Hughes & Clark, 1981; Kramer & Peters, 1986) or focusing exclusively on practitioners in one setting, rather than comparing professional practice issues across urban, suburban, and rural settings (Helge, 1981; Jerrell, 1984). Taken together, these studies tended to emphasize the practice of school psychology in rural settings as distinct; however, the conclusions varied as to whether these alleged differences in rural practice represented opportunities for a more satisfying career (Huebner, 1989) or barriers to job satisfaction and the delivery of high quality services (Helge, 1985; Hughes, 1986).

The focus on the distinctiveness of “rural school psychology” was obliterated with Reschly and Connolly’s (1990) findings from a national representative survey of 502 school psychologists in rural, suburban, and urban settings. In this largest-scale survey to date on the topic, Reschly and Connolly (1990) concluded that there were relatively few differences between school psychologists in rural and urban/suburban settings in professional preparation, experience, employment conditions, job satisfaction, and their perceptions on key professional issues. Differences between practitioners based on setting were noted in the area of continuing education needs.

School psychologists in urban settings identified additional training needs related to serving diverse student populations (e.g., bilingual students, nonbiased assessment). School psychologists in rural settings reported a need for greater knowledge and skills with academic and behavior problem remediation in the general education classroom, perhaps reflecting a more “generalist role” (as opposed to a “specialist role”) for school psychologists in rural school districts (Reschly & Connolly, 1990).

Though the provision of school psychological services in rural school districts might not be distinctly different as to warrant the title “rural school psychology,” implications for training school psychologists to practice in rural settings necessitate further consideration. School psychology training programs need to be responsive to the special characteristics of rural communities (e.g., lack of mobility into and out of Appalachian communities) and unique settings in which the future school psychologist will practice. Rural communities can differ greatly from one another (rural New England versus rural Texas; Jacob-Timm, 1995). Each rural community is shaped by its unique geography, its economic base, and its ethnic and religious composition (Hobbs, 1992). Thus, the training needs for school psychologists in rural settings deserves renewed attention, particularly in light of two national trends: (a) the expanded role of the school psychologists, and (b) the proliferation of on-line and distance-learning technology at the university level.

Alternative School Psychology Training Programs

The ‘Giving Rural Areas Access to School Psychologist’ (GRAASP) program was designed to address the long-term school psychology shortage across Colorado using distance learning technology (Lahman, D’Amato, Stecker, & McGrain, 2006). Classes were offered on weekends at three remote sites in graduate students’ communities and the program used a two-way interactive video system and Internet-based activities for the delivery of course content. Results of qualitative interviews indicated that students were pleased with the education they received and that the program accomplished its goal of providing school psychologists to rural areas (Lahman et al., 2006). Students did, however, indicate some frustration with the distance learning equipment. Video and audio did not work reliably and it was difficult to share materials across long distances. Although students conveyed gaining peer support through LISTSERVS, they also desired a greater sense of connection and community. These students recommended incorporating some face-to-face time so that instructors and students would have a better opportunity to get to know one another.

The School Psychology Satellite Program (SPSP) was developed to address the need for professionally trained school psychologists in a rural Appalachian

region of Ohio. The SPSP was a replication of a NASP-approved training program from the same state with slight alterations in the sequencing of the courses. The majority of the classes were taught face-to-face by the faculty from the NASP-approved program at a host university located in the region. Distance-learning technology was used to supplement content delivery for some of the classes that met face-to-face and five courses were conducted exclusively on-line. A spreadsheet detailing the course offerings, sequence, and method of delivery is available from the primary author. Understanding graduate students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the SPSP is critical to guiding future efforts to design high-quality school psychology programs in rural regions using a satellite format.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of graduate students in the SPSP relative to their expectations in regards to six factors associated with the successful completion of graduate school. The perceptions of the current graduate students were sought to identify the strengths and challenges of operating a satellite-training program in school psychology in an underserved, rural region of the country.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were recruited among the 16 current graduate students enrolled in the SPSP. (Although the satellite program was designed to matriculate 24 graduate students, recruitment goals were never achieved. Only 16 graduate students were enrolled in the program at the time of the study). Fourteen of the graduate student participants were female. Fifteen were White and one graduate student was African American. The age of the graduate students ranged from 23 - 45, with an average age of 31 years old. Ten of the graduate students were currently or previously employed in the field of education, two were in the mental health/family services field, and three worked in an unrelated field. One graduate student had not been previously employed before entering the graduate program. On average, the participants had seven years of professional experience (ranging 0 – 23 years) prior to entering the SPSP.

Informed written consent was obtained from all the participants at the time they were recruited. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could choose not to participate without penalty, and that no personally identifiable information would be included in reporting the data. The participants

were not offered an incentive for their participation in the study. Twelve graduate students participated in this study for a response rate of 75.0%.

Design and Procedures

This study employed a qualitative research design to describe the strengths and limitations of the SPSP as perceived by the graduate students in the program. Qualitative research is optimal for obtaining insights into regular or problematic experiences of selected individuals and groups and to understand the meaning attached to these experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Within the field of school psychology, it has been noted that qualitative research enables the researcher to focus on cultural and contextual factors that enhance or impede the efficacy and social/ecological validity of programs (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005).

In this study, each graduate student was sent an e-mail message that included an electronic version of the questionnaire as an attachment. The graduate students were asked to complete the questionnaire and e-mail it to a research assistant who had no involvement in the SPSP. The completed questionnaires were printed with any identifying information (e.g., return e-mail address) removed. The questionnaire responses were then compiled for analysis by two of the Principal Investigators who conducted independent analyses of the data.

Measures and Analysis

A questionnaire comprised of nine open-ended questions was developed for the purposes of this study based on research regarding the factors associated with successful completion of graduate school (Ehrenberg, Jakubson, Groen, So, & Price, 2007). These factors included: (a) course requirements; (b) summer expectations (i.e., coursework); (c) exam requirements; (d) program culture (e.g., faculty took interest in graduate student work, a sense of solidarity among the graduate students); (e) clarity of the rules and program expectations (e.g., informed in writing about course requirements, policies for incompleteness, definitions of satisfactory progress, deadlines for completing course requirements and exams, quality of academic advising), and (f) financial support (e.g., fellowship, stipend, financial aid). For each of these factors, graduate students were asked to describe how their expectations differed from their actual experience. In addition, the graduate students were asked how they first heard about the SPSP, what they perceived to be the strengths of the SPSP, and what they perceived to be the weaknesses of the SPSP.

Constant comparison analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data set inductively (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The process was completed independently by two of the Principal Investigators. The codes established were based on the six factors associated with successful completion of graduate school and whether the respondents' statements fit into one of two dichotomous categories: (a) met expectations/strength of the program or (b) did not meet expectation/limitation of the program. The assignment of codes and the identification of themes were compared and contrasted by the two reviewers to identify the major themes, resulting in the coding of 84 statements, with inter-rater agreement obtained for 100% of the statements.

Results

Program Rules, Requirements, and Expectations

The graduate students' responses to questionnaire items regarding the course requirements, summer expectations, exam requirements, and program rules and expectations were consistent with the anecdotal experiences of school psychology graduate students in a typical, campus-bound program. Ten graduate students (83.3%) reported that the course requirements were consistent with their expectations and/or that they valued the degree to which the requirements involved practical experiences in applied school settings. Four graduate students (33.3%) reported that they did not anticipate the task demands of their practicum and the amount of time they were required to devote to the school setting. Five of the graduate students (41.7%) reported that the summer coursework was consistent with their expectations and six (50.0%) reported that the summer coursework was more demanding than they anticipated. In the words of one respondent, "One aspect of the program that attracted me to it was how the program seemed to be designed for those who work in schools. Therefore, I expected summer to require a heavier workload than during the school year. However, I was not expecting the amount of work that was required during the first year's summer sessions. Three very demanding classes were taken simultaneously and we all wondered if we would make it through." The exam requirements were largely consistent with the expectations of the graduate students, with only two students (16.7%) responding that there were more exams than they had anticipated.

The major theme emerging in the graduate students' responses in regard to the program rules and expectations was that the program, which replicated the campus-bound NASP-approved program with slight alterations in the sequencing of the courses, did have established rules and expectations. According to one respondent, "We have clear and concise requirements for all of the program content. The faculty

places a high expectation on our quality of work and timeliness for completing assignments.” Two graduate students (16.7%) expressed disappointment with what they perceived to be inconsistencies with the admission process and standards.

Program Culture, Connections, and Financial Support

Major themes emerging from the graduate students’ responses to questions about the program culture, financial support, and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program highlighted various opportunities and challenges for training school psychologists in rural settings. A consistent theme among the graduate students was that they identified themselves as a very cohesive and supportive group. According to one graduate student, “I feel the best part is the closeness of our cohort – it is like we have developed into a family. We support one another when someone needs help ... I know years from now my fellow classmates will be a constant resource for me to fall back on when I am faced with difficult situations and need outside help.” A reality of training and practicing in a rural setting, however, is that even personal matters have a way of becoming public within a sparsely populated community (Clopton & Knesting, 2006). According to one graduate student, “The limiting factor [of the program culture of the SPSP is] due to the small community. One often had to watch what was said. Everyone knows some things were repeated outside of the classroom.” Seven of the graduate students (58.3%) remarked that the supportive nature of the SPSP faculty met or exceeded their expectations. Yet for other graduate students, the physical distance of the satellite program from the university campus created obstacles to training that included “sub-par” adjunct faculty instructors, no opportunity for office hours to discuss personal concerns, a lack of timely e-mail communications, and a general feeling of disconnectedness with the campus-bound program. In the words of one graduate student, “Improvements need to be made in assisting the students’ feeling of belonging to the sponsoring university.” Seven of the graduate students (58.3%) responded that the financial support available in the SPSP was less than they anticipated for a graduate program. Given the limited number of graduate assistantships available on the university campus, graduate assistantships could not be offered to graduate students in the satellite program.

Discussion

In recognition of the serious and multifaceted needs of students in rural, oftentimes underserved schools, Hughes and Fagan (1985) declared over 20 years ago that professional school psychology “bears an ethical and moral responsibility to increase availability of quality special education and mental health services to the

children of rural America” (p. 400). Since their statement first appeared in print, the needs of rural children and their families have remained a persistent concern, the role of the school psychologist has expanded to include a broader knowledge base and a greater repertoire of skills, and the nation has seen a proliferation of distance-learning technologies in university settings and beyond. It is time to explore the alternatives for providing a high-quality school psychology training program to address the shortage of practitioners in rural school settings.

In this study, we describe the experiences of graduate students in one such alternative training program, a satellite-training program targeting an underserved, rural Appalachian region of the country. Graduate students in the SPSP provided generally positive feedback regarding the course requirements, summer expectations, exam requirements, and the clarity of the program rules and expectations. The majority of graduate students indicated that the course requirements were consistent with their expectations and that they appreciated the degree to which courses included practical experiences in school settings. However, one-fourth of the respondents were not anticipating the time or task demands of their practicum and school-based experiences. Although this certainly may be the experience of any graduate student in an applied field, it is particularly important the students in a satellite program be aware of the time and task commitments they will face prior to beginning the program. Many of the students are juggling job and family responsibilities in addition to their coursework. Unanticipated demands have the potential to add strain to their personal life and stymie their efforts to successfully complete the program.

Results of the study indicated that graduate students had different expectations regarding the summer coursework required in the SPSP program. Again, the time and task demands should be made as clear and explicit as possible prior to beginning the course sequence. In the SPSP program, there was a somewhat uneven distribution of work across summer terms, which may have added to students’ lack of clarity regarding summer expectations. Exam requirements varied from class to class, depending on the course content, and these exam requirements were largely consistent with graduate students’ expectations.

Overall, students indicated that the rules and program expectations were clear. This is perhaps not surprising given that the SPSP was a replication of an established, NASP-approved program with only slight alterations in the sequencing of the courses. During their orientation to the SPSP, each graduate student received a Program Handbook. The majority of the SPSP courses were taught by instructors who also taught the same courses in the university-bound program.

A small percentage of students referred to perceived inconsistencies in the admission process and standards. Inconsistencies were due to the aggressive effort

on the part of the SPSP faculty to attain the desired enrollment count for this newly established program. The planning and implementation of an effective recruiting effort deserves careful consideration when developing a satellite program targeting underserved, rural region.

The most consistently positive perceptions pertained to the program culture and specifically the relationships fostered among the graduate students in the SPSP. Graduate students reportedly viewed their peers as personal supports and future professional resources. Although the graduate students had similarly positive perceptions of the core faculty members' knowledge and supportiveness, less favorable feedback was received regarding the adjunct faculty members who served the SPSP. Having the high quality human resources needed to operate a satellite program is clearly one of the greatest challenges to training graduate students in rural regions. Distance-learning technology may provide the best opportunity for developing quality instruction when local instructors are scarce.

Despite the many positive perceptions shared by the graduate student regarding the program culture of the SPSP, serious challenges related to program culture were also brought to light in this study. A common theme voiced by the graduate student respondents was that they felt a sense of disconnectedness from the university-bound program. In recognition of this sense of disconnectedness, the graduate students in the SPSP along with graduate students in the university-bound program took the initiative to develop a joint student organization to plan service projects, school psychology awareness activities, fundraisers, and social events. Other creative options may exist to lessen the sense of disconnectedness of graduate students in a satellite and these options deserve consideration. For example, regularly scheduled telephone meetings with an advisor could help ensure the graduate students' questions and concerns are being addressed, which may in turn strengthen the students' connection to the sponsoring university in lieu of face-to-face meetings held during "office hours" on campus.

An expectation for greater financial support was clearly expressed by the graduate students in the study. As previously discussed, graduate assistantships were not available for students in the satellite program. The financial aid office from the sponsoring university was able to provide students with assistance in securing loans and the graduate students expressed varying levels of satisfaction with these services. Financial support for graduate students is a critical challenge for satellite programs targeting underserved, rural populations that deserves careful consideration. Possible avenues for external funding should be explored. These might include state-sponsored funding through "hard to staff schools" funds or funding through advocacy groups championing historically underserved populations (e.g., Native American communities, Appalachian communities). School districts

may arrange to sponsor graduate students during their training with the expectation that they would be retained as practicing school psychologists in the district upon completing the program.

Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Training

Seven graduate students (43.8%) provided comments in regards to the impact the SPSP had on the local rural community in which very few opportunities for advanced graduate study were available. As exemplified by the words of one graduate student, a major strength of the SPSP was that it allowed “working individuals the opportunity to receive a first rate education without having to quit jobs and relocate families to the [university] campus ... It also fosters growth in professionalism in the community where the satellite program is taking place.” The potential to have a positive impact on the professional community in a rural setting, however, also highlights the challenge of establishing a network of practicing school psychologists to serve as practicum and internship supervisors who are current in their own professional development, a concern identified by two graduate students (12.5%).

Although a sufficient number of students need to be enrolled in order to enable the graduate program to be economically viable, graduate students in the study reported concerns that they would be competing with one another for a limited number of jobs within a small community. Selecting the optimal number of students for a school psychology satellite program is critical to ensuring the program is meeting the local needs while remaining economically viable for the sponsoring university without creating a glut in the number of school psychologists entering the job market.

Distance Learning Technology in Training

The use of distance learning technology has been showed to be a viable means of providing professional training to school psychologists in rural regions (Lahman et al., 2006). Thoughtful planning must consider whether graduate students in distance learning courses will have equal access to the technology (i.e., high speed internet services) required for a primarily on-line graduate program. Further, some content in the school psychology curriculum may be best delivered face-to-face.

Technology can also be used to support supervision of practicum students and interns. University-based field supervisors can maintain ongoing contact with students and their supervisors via e-mail and videoconferencing without making frequent trips to the field site for face-to-face meetings. This can alleviate time and travel issues on the part of the university faculty.

Limitations of Study

Several limitations to this study should be acknowledged. First, the questionnaire was administered to students in one satellite program in one state. Although this is a convenience sample and not necessarily representative of all graduate students in satellite training programs, it is likely that the strengths and weaknesses identified by the students can inform trainers from other universities seeking to develop a satellite program.

Additionally, data were collected via an anonymous questionnaire. Although this allowed for confidentiality of responses, it did not permit the researchers to “flesh out” or ask follow up questions to any of the responses. Further, the questionnaire was administered while students were still in the program; thus it did not allow for students to reflect upon their entire graduate school experience (e.g., internship). However, a benefit of conducting the study at this point was that it did not rely upon students’ retrospective examination of their feelings or attitudes about the program. Future research should explore the perspectives of these, or similarly trained students, regarding their graduate training as they progress in their careers as interns and practicing school psychologists. Additionally, it would be valuable to discern empirically the degree to which students in a satellite training program differ from their school psychology peers enrolled in a traditional training program while they were in the programs and later in their careers.

The qualitative methodology may be viewed as a limitation, as it limits generalizability of the findings. However, the methods do allow for a more in-depth examination of the experiences of individual students in this particular program. This was a study of student satisfaction; other important measures, such as quality of work and acquisition of specific skills, were beyond the scope of this study. Despite the limitations of this small-scale study, it is believed that the results provide valuable information for the provision of graduate training programs targeting underserved, rural settings.

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