



Factors Associated With Graduate Students' Decisions to Enter School Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Workforce shortages in school psychology have been a persistent problem since the field's inception. To inform targeted recruitment efforts, the present study aimed to identify factors that contributed to current graduate students' decisions to pursue a career in the field. Participants were 356 student members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) who completed a survey comprised of demographic items and three scales. The scales measured (a) the importance of various informational resources for learning about school psychology, (b) factors influencing their decision to pursue a degree in school psychology, and (c) factors contributing to their excitement about the field. Results indicated that participants typically learned about school psychology through more informal encounters (e.g., conversations with faculty and Internet searches) rather than through structured or formal learning experiences (e.g., coursework, presentations, and internships). Students were most excited about the broad prospect of working with children and families in schools. Fewer than half of respondents enrolled directly after completing an undergraduate degree. Implications and recommendations for developing optimally effective recruitment strategies are discussed.

Shortages in school psychology pose a significant threat to the profession. An insufficient supply of school psychologists can (a) reduce the availability, range, and quality of services to students and families; (b) lead to a marginalized role focused on special education compliance; and (c) force the hiring of unqualified personnel to perform those services in the absence of an appropriately credentialed school psychologist.

Keywords: school psychology, recruitment, shortages, workforce

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Concerns regarding shortages date back to the Thayer Conference in 1954, and projections suggest that shortages in school psychology will continue through 2025 (Castillo, Curtis, & Tan, 2014). In fact, “it appears there has never been a time when the supply of school psychologists was sufficient to meet demand” (Fagan, 2004, p. 419).

The National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP; 2010) *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services*, also referred to as the NASP Practice Model, represents the association's official policy regarding the delivery of comprehensive school psychological services. The NASP Practice Model recommends a ratio of at least one school psychologist for every 500 to 700 students, depending on need, to ensure a comprehensive range of services and quality student outcomes. Despite this recommendation, it is estimated that there is one school psychologist for every 1,383 students in the United States (Walcott, Hyson, & Loe, 2017).

Effectively responding to shortages requires a multipronged approach that focuses on both *recruitment* and *retention* of a qualified and diverse workforce. Additionally, a strategic response requires recognition of the scope and complexity of the problem. For example, the field has experienced shortages of school psychology practitioners, graduate preparation programs, internship sites, qualified faculty, and program applicants (Castillo, Curtis, & Tan, 2014). These problems are further compounded by an alarming lack of cultural diversity among professionals, fewer than 14% of whom are from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds (Walcott, Charvat, McNamara, & Hyson, 2016). In response to these concerns, NASP has identified the improvement of shortages in school psychology as one of its five strategic goals in driving the efforts of the association.

The historical persistence of school psychology shortages indicates an ongoing need for evidence-based, comprehensive, and strategic approaches to help remedy this critical issue. Previous studies highlight the need to increase undergraduate exposure to and awareness of school psychology (see Bocanegra, Gubi, Fan, & Hansmann, 2015), focus on the benefits of a career in school psychology (Bocanegra, Gubi, & Cappaert, 2016), and direct more targeted efforts to recruit underrepresented candidates (e.g., minorities, males; see NASP, 2009). Other data suggest the need to highlight opportunities to work directly with children or in schools when recruiting future school psychologists (see Graves & Wright, 2009). In addition, geography (Stinnett, Bui, & Capaccioli, 2013) and program accreditation (McIlvried, Wall, Kohout, Keys, & Goreczny, 2010) may play significant roles in program selection. To assist NASP in targeting recruitment and future research efforts, this study aimed to identify common factors that influenced current graduate students' decisions to pursue a career in school psychology. More specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the current demographics of school psychology's graduate students?
2. What factors influenced school psychology graduate students' decisions to pursue a career in school psychology?

METHODS

This study was approved by the NASP Research Committee and the first author's university Institutional Review Board (IRB). All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Sample

A total of 356 NASP student members in school psychology graduate programs completed an online survey. This constitutes a 32% response rate, which is considered adequate for online research (Fan & Yan, 2010; Greenlaw & Brown-Welty, 2009). Table 1 provides a summary of participant demographics.

On average, participants reported having spent 3.1 years in a school psychology graduate program, with 34.1% currently enrolled in a doctoral program. The mean age for survey participants was 27 years, and 10.4% self-identified as male, 89.3% as female, and .3% as other (i.e., gender fluid). The majority of participants identified as White (84.3%), followed by African American (4.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3.6%), Multiracial (2.0%), Native American (0.6%), and other (4.7%). In regard to ethnicity, 9.2% of participants self-identified as Hispanic.

Measures

Survey questions were created based on (a) findings from previous research regarding undergraduate students' knowledge and perceptions of school psychology (see Bocanegra, Newell, & Gubi, 2016) and (b) input from numerous stakeholders within school psychology and NASP leadership. In addition to completing demographic items, participants were asked to identify their source of first exposure to school psychology among a range of response options (e.g., faculty advisor, undergraduate course, newsletter, or other). They also completed a series of questions that assessed the (a) importance of various resources for exploring school psychology (e.g., graduate program websites), (b) factors influencing their decision to pursue a career in school psychology (e.g., scope and nature of the work, job prospects, and salary), and (c) factors contributing to their excitement about school psychology (e.g., opportunity to work with children and families). For these questions, participants rated items on a 7-point scale with response options ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Demographic	n	Percent	Mean	SD
Age	321	N/A	27.0	5.77
Years Enrolled in Graduate Program	356	N/A	3.1	1.54
Race				
White/Caucasian	294	84.3%		
Black/African American	17	4.7%		
Asian/Pacific Islander	13	3.6%		
Native American/Alaskan Native	2	0.6%		
Other	17	4.7%		
Multiracial	7	2.0%		
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	33	9.2%		
Gender				
Male	37	10.4%		
Female	317	89.3%		
Other	1	0.3%		
Fluent in Language Other Than English	80	22.5%		

Procedures and Data Analysis

A total of 1,125 NASP student members were randomly selected by state to participate, which represented approximately 25% of NASP's student membership. Targeted student members received e-mails explaining the study and inviting their participation. As an incentive, participants were entered in a lottery for four \$25 gift cards.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to identify possible outliers and survey noncompleters. Each participant completed all of the demographic items, and the majority of participants ($n = 334$; 93.8%) completed the survey in its entirety. Subsequently, descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were calculated to summarize participants' demographic information and sources of first exposure to school psychology. For each of the aforementioned rating scales, mean response values and standard deviations were computed for individual items.

RESULTS

Table 2 displays participants' primary occupational roles during the year before entering their school psychology program. Notably, 33.6% of participants reported being employed in a related field, while 8.9% reported employment in an unrelated field. Furthermore, only 45.5% reported entering school psychology immediately after completing an undergraduate program.

Table 2. Graduate Students' Occupational Roles the Year Before They Entered Their Current School Psychology Program

Occupational Role	Number of Times Cited	Percent
Undergraduate Student	163	45.5%
Employed in a Related Field	119	33.6%
Employed in an Unrelated Field	32	8.9%
Graduate Student in a Different Field	15	4.2%
Graduate Student in Different School Psychology Program	7	2.0%
Practicing School Psychologist	6	1.7%
Unemployed	1	0.3%
Other	11	3.1%

Table 3 displays sources of first exposure to school psychology. Generally, students more frequently encountered school psychology through direct contact with individuals (i.e., faculty, practitioners, significant others, and acquaintances) rather than through formal coursework, readings, and professional presentations. Professors and faculty advisers were the most common source of first exposure to school psychology among participants (19.5%). Additionally, many participants reported first encountering the field through Internet searches (18.7%) and family or friends (15.5%), and nearly 11% of participants discovered school psychology through working with a school psychologist. Only about 9% of students first encountered the field in their undergraduate coursework, and even fewer reported exposure to a school psychology graduate program on campus (3.2%). Relatively few students were exposed to school psychology via high school coursework (0.9%) and magazines or periodicals (0.3%). Approximately 6% of participants reported exposure to the field through other sources (e.g., school/guidance counselor, coworker, etc.). This suggests that advisors play a predominant role in students learning about school psychology, while actual coursework and school psychology related presentations play a much minor role.

Table 3. Sources of Graduate Students' First Exposure to School Psychology

Source	Number of Times Cited	Percent
Professor or Faculty Advisor	68	19.5%
Internet Search	65	18.7%
Family or Friend	54	15.5%
Working with a School Psychologist	38	10.9%
Undergraduate Course	31	8.9%
Knowing a Friend, Acquaintance, or Family Member Who Works as a School Psychologist	20	5.7%
Seminar or Presentation on School Psychology	19	5.5%
Knowing a School Psychologist (During Elementary or Secondary School)	17	4.9%
School Psychology Graduate Program on Campus	11	3.2%
High School Course	3	0.9%
Magazine or Periodical	1	0.3%
Other	23	6.6%

Table 4 displays participants' ratings of their continued learning about school psychology. Generally, participants agreed that the NASP website and individual graduate program websites were important resources in their exploration of the field. Participants also indicated that discussions with various professionals, including faculty, school psychologists, and related professionals, were useful for learning about school psychology. Although participants reported using graduate program websites to learn about the field, they were less likely to have had direct contact with a school psychology program on campus.

Table 5 displays participants' mean Likert scale ratings (and standard deviations) regarding the various factors (e.g., anticipated job roles and financial considerations) that influenced their decision to pursue school psychology. Generally, participants were most influenced by the prospect of working with youth, the scope and nature of job roles, and the promise of favorable employment prospects. Participants also agreed that the opportunity to do something new and exciting, the range of career options, and the opportunity to pursue an advanced degree influenced their decision to pursue school psychology. In addition to factors related to job roles, considerations pertaining to salary and benefits influenced participants' career choices. Although participants were excited about the school psychologist's wide range of job roles, they neither agreed nor disagreed that interest in research influenced their decision to pursue school psychology.

Although only 58% of participants reported that school psychology was their first choice for a career, their mean rating (on a scale of 1–10) for excitement about entering the field, once they were accepted, was high (i.e., 9.16 out of 10). Regarding the factors that contributed most to this excitement, participants were enthusiastic about working with children and families, working directly with youth, and providing services in schools (see Table 6). On average, participants somewhat agreed that freedom and independence at work contributed to their excitement about school psychology, as did the prospect of providing a variety of psychoeducational services, including consultation, systems-level intervention, and individual student assessment. Comparatively, participants were somewhat less excited about engaging in program evaluation and research. This relatively lesser degree of interest in research may be attributable to the fact that only 34% of participants were enrolled in doctoral programs, which tend to place greater emphasis on research training.

Table 4. Graduate Students' Ratings of the Degree of Importance of Informational Resources for Learning About School Psychology

Source	Mean	SD	n
Graduate Program Website	5.6	1.4	324
NASP Website	5.4	1.6	324
Discussions With Professors/Faculty Advisors	5.2	1.8	324
Discussions With a School Psychologist	5.1	2.0	324
Discussions With a Related Professional (e.g., Social Worker)	5.0	1.7	324
Seminar With Faculty	4.0	2.0	324
Undergraduate Course	3.6	2.0	324
Attendance at Presentation on School Psychology	3.2	1.9	321
Contact With School Psychology Program on Campus	3.2	2.1	319

Rating scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Somewhat Disagree; 4 = Neutral; 5 = Somewhat Agree; 6 = Agree; 7 = Strongly Agree

Table 5. Graduate Students' Ratings of Factors Influencing Their Decision to Pursue a Career in School Psychology

Factor	Mean	SD	n
Being Able to Work With Youth	6.6	0.6	336
Scope and Nature of the Work	6.5	0.6	337
Job Prospects	6.2	0.9	336
Doing Something New or Exciting	5.8	1.1	336
Range of Career Options	5.7	1.4	336
Opportunity to Pursue an Advanced Degree	5.4	1.4	336
Salary	5.3	1.3	335
Benefits	5.3	1.3	336
Recommendations or Encouragement From Other	5.0	1.5	336
Interest in Research	4.1	1.9	336

Rating scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Somewhat Disagree; 4 = Neutral; 5 = Somewhat Agree; 6 = Agree; 7 = Strongly Agree

Table 6. Graduate Students' Ratings of Factors Contributing to Their Excitement About School Psychology

Factor	Mean	SD	n
Working With Children and Families	6.5	0.7	336
Working Directly With Youth	6.5	0.7	335
Working in Schools	6.2	1.0	336
Freedom and Independence at Work	5.4	1.4	336
Conducting Consultation With Teachers and Parents	5.4	1.3	334
Implementing Systems-Level Interventions	5.3	1.4	334
Conducting Individual Student Assessments	5.3	1.4	335
Conducting Program Evaluations	4.7	1.4	335
Engaging in Research	4.4	1.7	335

Rating scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Somewhat Disagree; 4 = Neutral; 5 = Somewhat Agree; 6 = Agree; 7 = Strongly Agree

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have a number of implications for enhancing the recruitment of prospective school psychologists into the field. For example, demographic data suggest that there has been a gradual yet noticeable increase in the field's racial and ethnic diversity. Whereas only 7.4% of NASP members identified as racial and/or ethnic minorities in the 2004–2005 membership survey (Curtis et al., 2008), about 13% did so in the 2014–2015 survey (Walcott et al., 2016), and nearly 16% of graduate students in the present sample identified as minorities. These data suggest that the cohort of school psychologists entering the field over the next few years will be somewhat more diverse than in previous years. Given NASP's continued focus on minority recruitment, these incremental increases in diversity are likely to continue.

Despite a somewhat promising trend in the diversity found within school psychology, approximately 49% of public school students identify as racial/ethnic minorities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Data from the NASP membership survey and the current study suggest that minority representation among school psychologists will lag behind that of public school students for the foreseeable future. Additionally, the trend of overrepresentation of females in the field, as compared to males, shows no sign of abating.

Previous research has indicated that exposure to school psychology is a significant predictor of undergraduate students' decisions to pursue a school psychology graduate degree (Bocanegra et al., 2015). In the present study, graduate students most frequently reported that their first exposure to the field was through either direct personal contact (i.e., advisor, professor, family, friend, or a school psychologist) or an Internet search. Relatively fewer participants reported first learning of school psychology through more formal recruitment activities (e.g., presentations, high school or undergraduate coursework). This is unsurprising, given that school psychology is significantly underrepresented in psychology curricula and introductory textbooks as compared with clinical and counseling psychology (Haselhuhn & Clopton, 2008; Norcross et al., 2016). The generally poor representation of the field in formal education and recruitment channels may explain the present finding that only 58% of participants identified school psychology as their first choice for a career.

Results of the present study indicate that enhancing Internet resources and online materials that describe school psychology accurately and positively is critically relevant to bolstering recruitment. Findings also suggest the importance of portraying school psychology as an exciting field through recruitment materials and activities. Among undergraduates in particular, perceiving school psychology as an exciting profession has emerged as one of the best predictors of displaying strong intentions for pursuing a career in the field (Bocanegra, Newell, & Gubi, 2016). In this study, the broad prospects of working with children and families and providing services in school settings were reportedly more exciting than descriptions of specific job roles (e.g., assessment, intervention, consultation).

Furthermore, students reported the least excitement at the prospect of conducting research, which ultimately may exacerbate the shortage of school psychology faculty. School psychology is one of the few applied psychology fields in which individuals can practice at both the nondoctoral and doctoral levels. In fact, the majority of school psychologists (75%) hold a specialist-level degree (Walcott et al., 2016). Since doctoral programs traditionally are more research-intensive than specialist programs, students in the two types of degree programs may have different levels of interest in research. Unlike in other applied psychology fields that typically require a doctoral degree for practice (e.g., clinical psychology), instructors

of school psychology may be catering to two different groups of prospective students with vastly different professional interests.

Lastly, and of note, fewer than half (46%) of participants entered school psychology programs directly after completing an undergraduate degree. Currently, research has largely focused on the recruitment of undergraduate psychology students. The present findings strongly suggest that recruitment researchers should move beyond their predominant focus on undergraduate psychology students and begin to examine recruitment from related fields. Individuals who are considering respecialization in school psychology after working in a related field may encounter a number of barriers to accessing high-quality graduate education, including scheduling conflicts, interference with family commitments, difficulties forfeiting income to return to school, and limited ability to relocate (NASP, 2016). To meet the needs of these students, program faculty may need to devise innovative strategies for increasing the accessibility of graduate education while also maintaining its rigor and integrity, such as providing courses during evenings, weekends, and through distance education technologies. Moreover, program faculty may benefit from targeting recruitment efforts at individuals in highly saturated fields, such as clinical psychology (NASP, 2016).

One significant limitation of this study concerns its reliance on retrospective data (i.e., school psychology graduate students' recall of the factors that originally influenced their decision to pursue school psychology). Retrospective data may be impacted by (a) distortions of original memory over time (i.e., new experiences reshaping original memory), (b) memory reconstruction errors (e.g., attempting to fill in missing memories), and (c) forgetting (Groves et al., 2009). An additional limitation of this study is that only NASP student members were included in the participant sample. Thus, participant data do not necessarily reflect the demographics or perspectives of all school psychology graduate students. Nevertheless, the results from this study are important for identifying the demographic compositions of NASP's current student membership, as well as providing insight into the possible impact of various recruitment resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations may improve recruitment efforts in school psychology.

1. Graduate program websites serve as an important informational tool for prospective students' learning about the field, and they should provide or link to resources describing the field rather than solely the logistics of program admissions and curricula. Programs can link to NASP's *About School Psychology* page (www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology) and other relevant websites (e.g., state school psychology associations).
2. Materials or conversations describing school psychology should focus language more broadly on the exciting opportunities to work with children and families in schools, as well as on the profession's promising job prospects. Discussing specific roles or services, or salary and benefits, may be less effective in stimulating interest in the field.
3. Personal contact, especially with professors and advisors, remains a critical point of exposure. School psychology faculty should consider reaching out to undergraduate psychology and education faculty at their respective institutions to (a) discuss and promote school psychology, (b) offer to talk with prospective students who may express interest, and (c) request that school psychology be addressed in undergraduate curricula.

4. Many prospective students are not current undergraduate students and may work in other related professions in psychology and education (e.g., school social workers and teachers). School psychologists should be aware of colleagues and acquaintances in related professions who may be a good fit for school psychology and connect them with the appropriate resources. Additionally, program faculty can take measures to increase the accessibility of graduate programming (as appropriate), such as capitalizing on technological innovations (e.g., online learning) and offering flexible scheduling options, such as summer and evening courses (NASP, 2016).
5. Although further research is needed to determine effectiveness, practitioners, faculty members, and current graduate students should increase the visibility of school psychology through formal recruitment efforts. These may include (a) offering undergraduate coursework on school psychology at local undergraduate institutions, (b) delivering presentations on school psychology in related undergraduate courses and organization meetings (e.g., Psi Chi), (c) writing an article or blog about school psychology in local outlets, or (d) mentoring potential graduate school applicants.
6. When discussing the field with prospective students, school psychologists should consider discussing different career and degree options within school psychology, including practice-oriented, specialist-level degrees and more research-oriented doctoral degrees.

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Please cite this document as:

Bocanegra, J., Rossen, E., & Grapin, S. L. (2017). *Factors associated with graduate students' decisions to enter school psychology* [Research report]. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.