National Association of School Psychologists

Considerations for Distance Education in School Psychology

July 2021

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Approximately 263 universities offer a school psychology program in the United States (Gadke et al., 2021), either at the specialist level, doctoral level, or both. This represents an increase of about 60 institutions offering at least one school psychology program over the past 40+ years, and a 10% increase since 2006. At this pace, the number of graduate education programs may not sufficiently meet the demands of the field in light of ongoing shortages (NASP, 2016). As a result, many in the field have begun to examine the potential of distance education to help increase access and availability of school psychology graduate preparation.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Various terms have been used to describe education that occurs at a distance. For the purposes of this document, the concept of learning that delivers instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and/or involves online learning, will be referred to as *distance education*. The Higher Learning Commission's definitions of distance education can be located at https://www.hlcommission.org/General/glossary.html#InstitutionalChange, and they offer the following:

- *Distance-delivered courses* are courses in which at least 75% of the instruction and interaction occurs via electronic communication, correspondence, or equivalent mechanisms, with the faculty and students physically separated from each other.
- *Distance-delivered programs* are certificate or degree programs in which 50% or more of the required courses may be taken as distance-delivered courses.
- *Distance education* can use one or more of the technologies listed below to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor. Distance education can include synchronously (students/instructors participating at the same time) or asynchronously (students/instructors have free access to materials and participate with independent schedules) instruction.

Distance Education technologies may include:

- the Internet;
- one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
- audio conferencing; or

- digital video recordings, cloud storage, and videoconferencing, if used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed above.

The American Psychological Association (2010) defines distance education as a formal education process wherein the majority of a student's instruction occurs independent of the same location of their instructor. The National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP) Program Accreditation Board defined distance education similarly, as an educational process where instruction occurred without the learner and the instructor being physically in the same place at the same time (Harvey, 2015).

The integration of distance education components exists on a continuum at the course and program levels, ranging from traditional courses to fully online content delivery. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) has separated programs into categories as determined by the extent to which they utilize distance learning methodologies in their programming. These classifications are found in the Appendix A.

EXISTING STANDARDS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

While no standards exist specific to distance education for graduate preparation in school psychology or related professions, considerations for higher education distance education are found within guidelines in the Higher Learning Commission. The Quality Matters (2017) course standards and rubric for undergraduate higher education provides eight general standards for course design and delivery, including learning objectives and assessment, instructional material and course activities and interaction, learner support, and access and usability (https://www.qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/rubric-standards/higher-ed-rubric). However, there is continued concern with the lack of common metrics to measure the quality of learning outcomes for distance education courses compared to in-person course delivery (Allen et al., 2016).

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

Although there is little research to date on the use of distance education in the field of school psychology (Hendricker et al., 2017), the majority of current programs use some form of distance education within their courses (Fischer et al., 2020). Some educators have expressed concerns with offering assessment and clinically oriented courses (e.g., counseling) through distance education modalities (Hendricker et al., 2017), and are concerned about the ability to successfully assess professional dispositions and skills. School psychology faculty report barriers of lack of time,

limited resources, insufficient training, and limited technology, all of which inhibit added use of distance education in the field; however, the greatest barrier is the belief that distance education is not appropriate for the training of school psychology practitioners (Fischer et al., 2020). Others noted the benefits of distance education to facilitate the supervision of practicum and internship experiences (Hendricker et al., 2017), and that it may be appropriate for use in knowledge-based courses (Fischer et al., 2020).

Currently, the NASP (2020) graduate preparation standards do not describe any unique criteria for distance education, *nor do they preclude any programs utilizing distance education from applying for or obtaining program approval or accreditation*. The standards focus on programs assessing the knowledge and skills of their candidates as well as obtaining assessment data to ensure candidates achieve adequate competencies in each domain of practice (NASP, 2020), regardless of delivery method. Further, regarding supervision, NASP (2020) explains that face-to-face supervision refers to the physical or electronic presence of all individuals involved in the supervisory relationship and can occur in an individual or group supervision format. Face-to-face supervision can occur over videoconferencing or in person.

Aside from standards within the field, other factors may influence the availability and accessibility of distance education modalities in school psychology. For example, budgets at the institutional, local, state, and federal levels impact both enrollment (i.e., financial aid) and the ability to build, fund, and maintain new programs. Institutions also may place demands on programs, requiring them to adopt new procedures or practices—such as requiring use of multiple adjunct faculty positions or distance education technologies—that may conflict with accreditation policies or requirements. Additionally, with the public health risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, school psychology training programs pivoted their pedagogy to an online format—with many programs offering distance education options out of necessity. With an ongoing need for distance education options, school psychology training programs will need to consider the extent to which it is possible to incorporate that technology into training.

PROGRAM LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

Programs wishing to start a new distance education program (as opposed to transitioning individual courses from in-person to distance delivered) will likely need to initiate the process through the university governance structure. There is no universal way to start an educational program at a university, though one common theme required is the identification of a champion to spearhead the

efforts and become the go-to person to research the field, develop program materials, present ideas, and answer questions. Programs interested in starting a distance school psychology program should reference the NASP technical assistance brief on "Starting a School Psychology Graduate Program" to gather relevant information and support (Prus & Newell, 2020). Additionally, if a university is interested in developing a distance education program or if there is pressure from university administrators to develop a distance education program, there are numerous processes and procedures required in order to ensure high quality:

- Establish a need in the market using data to support the viability (or lack thereof) for a distance education program
- Consider the needs of prospective graduate students residing outside the state of the institution, including whether the program helps them meet their state's credentialing requirements, and issues related to state authorization. The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA; nc-sara.org) was developed to address state authorization, and as of 2021, more than 2,200 institutions in 49 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands voluntarily participate in state authorization reciprocity agreements, though programs should view the NC-SARA website for more information prior to enrolling students in a distance education program.
- Examine options for a ***Learning Management System*** (LMS), which is a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, and delivery of educational courses or training programs (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas). These systems allow for the organization and disbursement of content, asynchronous communication, and assessment
- Utilize instructional designers that have training in the use of educational techniques within an online environment. Simply putting existing materials in an online format without respect to learning theories, especially theories related to online learning, will not produce the desired results (Bonvillian & Singer, 2013; Clark & Mayer, 2011).
- Provide ongoing faculty training and support, including for adjunct faculty.
- Consider how to evaluate online programs. Popular metrics for online evaluation (e.g., Quality Matters) tend to focus on the building and design of the online class rather than the quality of the online instruction (Piña & Bohn, 2014). The inclusion of additional metrics (e.g., faculty login frequency, responding to inquiries) may provide a more holistic evaluation of the instruction within the course (Piña & Bohn, 2014).

- Ensure support for the students. Within the online environment, students may experience challenges related to social interaction, lack of practical experience, and technology (Healy et al., 2014). Both the social interaction and technology needs can be remedied through clear guidance within the Learning Management System or a responsive help desk.
- Make requirements clear to students, including connectivity (e.g., hardline speed requirements) and hardware (e.g., webcam, microphone, printer/scanner) expectations *before* a student is enrolled in a program. In addition, programs can screen prospective students to assess if distance education modalities are a good fit (e.g., the learner is self-motivated, comfortable with technology, etc.).
- Examine avenues to provide access to test kits, protocols, and other materials. Programs may consider developing a partnership with field sites. Some distance education programs have developed a library of test kits that are mailed to students to use under supervision during course work and practicum experience. Attention should be given to ensure that all ethical principles are met when handling assessment materials.
- Ensure that field experiences meet the same rigor and expectations around vetting supervisors and sites, and exposure to a comprehensive range of experiences and opportunities.
- Establish expectations to maintain privacy and confidentiality of information being uploaded or shared about students. Correspondence and discussions should be made within the LMS. Email, and HIPAA/FERPA compliant videoconference services (e.g., Zoom).
- Consider using aids (e.g., turnitin.com, webcam monitors, lockdown browsers) to ensure integrity of assignments and tests of the students enrolled in the program.

CONSIDERATIONS AT THE COURSE LEVEL

In addition to considerations at the program level, there are also considerations at the course level:

- Create a sense of community among the cohort of students. Technological applications offer secure options for discussion. Additionally, distance education programs may consider on-site training and collaboration opportunities within some courses.
- Maintain engagement through use of video lectures, PowerPoint with voice over, video/audio announcements, video introducing modules, video/audio feedback on assignments, online learning module messaging, video conferencing appointments, or traditional e-mail. Other file

sharing platforms like Dropbox or GoogleDocs allow for consistent collaboration and the creation of ePortfolios by program candidates.

- Maintain a manageable student cohort size. Orellano (2009) concluded that a class size of 16 is considered optimal in order to achieve the highest level of interaction among and between students within a distance education course.
- Balance synchronous (i.e., real time, interactive) and asynchronous (i.e., on-demand, discussion boards, threads, recorded presentations) communication and interaction.
- Consider appropriate methods of student evaluation. Demonstration of applied knowledge can be easily assessed from assignments, monitored or unmonitored tests, and interactive discussions. Demonstration of integration, synthesis, and application of knowledge to practical solutions within the field of school psychology can be provided with case study vignette applications, capstone papers and video presentations, video practice of skills, or synchronous feedback opportunities.
- Evaluate professional dispositions by surveying university instructors, field supervisors, and other staff with whom they work.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

School psychology may see an increase in the use of distance education to prepare future professionals due to various influences in higher education (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, budgets, market demand) and the field (e.g., school psychology shortages). While learner outcomes and expectations for distance education should be identical to learner outcomes for the equivalent campus course, the methods and strategies differ for instructional delivery, interaction between instructors and students, assessment of demonstrated knowledge and applied skills, and engagement and sense of community. Effective instruction using distance education requires an established need and infrastructure for distance education, supports for course development (e.g., instructional designers, professional development), technical support, effective communication, and the proper hardware and software (e.g., computer, Internet access, learning management system). Additionally, institutions pursuing distance education must primarily consider the quality of preparation, and programs must be invested in maintaining necessary professional standards. *Program standards do not change to accommodate distance education; rather, distance education must be delivered in a manner that ensures high-quality outcomes to meet professional standards.*

Despite the potential benefits of distance education, numerous cautions and limitations should be acknowledged. Little research to date has focused on the use of distance education in the field of school psychology (Fischer et al., 2020; Hendricker et al., 2017). Additionally, no common metrics exist to measure the quality of learning outcomes for distance education courses compared to face-to-face course delivery. Some educators have also expressed concerns with offering assessment and clinically oriented courses (e.g., counseling) through distance education modalities (Hendricker et al., 2017), and are concerned about the ability to successfully assess professional dispositions and skills. Many faculty members have also not received appropriate training in delivering instruction through distance education or adequate time and resources to develop content (Fischer et al., 2020).

This document outlines some considerations before programs or institutions begin offering distance education. Notably, ***this document, and the NASP Board of Directors, does not endorse or refute the use of distance education in graduate preparation***. Further, nothing in this report, or any existing NASP standard precludes graduate preparation programs utilizing distance education methodologies from applying for NASP program approval or accreditation.

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Originally published in 2017. This document was updated July 2021. Contributors: Brad Bloomfield and Aaron Fischer.

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APPENDIX A. GUIDE FOR DEFINITIONS DESCRIBING COURSE AND PROGRAM LEVELS

The following definitions, adapted from Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut (2016) and CAEP/NCATE (CAEP, 2015) may be considered to provide common terms.

Types of Graduate Courses

Individual graduate courses utilize distance learning methods to varying degrees along this continuum:

- **Traditional Course:** No online technology is used. All course content is delivered through verbal interaction and with written materials.
- **Web-Facilitated Course:** Less than 30% of course content is delivered with distance learning methods; course is mostly face-to-face. A course management system or course webpage may be utilized. The number of class meetings is reduced only slightly if at all.
- **Blended Course:** 30–79% of course content is delivered with distance learning methods, with fewer face-to-face meetings than the preceding types of courses.
- **Online Course:** 80% or more of content is delivered with distance learning methods. Typically there are no face-to-face meetings.

These definitions are adapted from Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut (2016). Allen and Seaman (2014) and are utilized in the annual Sloan Consortium survey of 2,800 institutions' distance learning practices.

Types of Graduate Programs

School psychology graduate programs—as opposed to courses—can be categorized by the extent to

which they utilize distance learning methodology as follows:

- **Campus Program:** Campus-based degree program in which face-to-face instruction and supervision predominate. Such a program typically provides traditional and Web-facilitated courses but few, if any, blended or online courses. More than 90% of program content is delivered—and learning is accomplished through—live, face-to-face, instructor–student interaction.
- **Hybrid Program:** Degree program that combines some distance learning with campus-based, face-to-face instruction and supervision. A hybrid program delivers 50–90% of program content, exclusive of internship, by live, face-to-face, instructor–student interaction.
- **Online Program:** Degree program in which less than half of the required program content, exclusive of internship, is provided by live, face-to-face, instructor–student interaction.

These definitions are adapted from those used by CAEP/NCATE (NCATE, 2008).