How to Advocate for ... A Career Path in Academia During Internship

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Miranda Zahn started her tenure-track faculty position in the 2022–2023 school year immediately after her predoctoral internship at the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) within the University of Maryland Medical Center. Dr. Zahn secured her internship through the APPIC Internship Match. In the match process, she focused on internship opportunities that would expand her clinical skills in school-based mental health services and outpatient mental health, allow her an opportunity to provide clinical supervision with guidance and meta-supervision, and dedicated significant time to research. A focus on these training experiences made the NCSMH a perfect fit for her internship and set her up for her current roles as a school psychology trainer and researcher who focuses on comprehensive school mental health systems.

Can you share your experiences regarding how your internship has helped you gain clarity about your desired career path and long-term goals? What aspects of your internship contributed to this clarity?

I had a goal of a faculty career, so I largely applied for internship sites within the APPIC match that included components of research and public speaking in addition to direct clinical intervention. Through these experiences, I was able to hone my clinical skills while maintaining my involvement in research activities. This balance proved right for me and helped me confirm that the faculty role was right for me.

Could you discuss any skills or competencies you honed during your internship that you believe are crucial for your chosen career path? How did you advocate for experiences that would equip you with these skills?

As a trainer, it is so important that I have done clinical work and can draw from my own professional experiences. Additionally, my internship had components like providing supervision for extern and master's level trainees in addition to clinical and research duties. These were options in my internship “rotations,” and I tried to take advantage of all the things that aligned with my future plans.

Have you actively sought mentorship or guidance from senior professionals within your internship organization? How did you approach potentials mentors,
and what advice can you offer to graduate students on effective mentorship advocacy during an internship?

I was clear about my career goals at the outset of internship and tapped into mentorship from multiple people in and out of my organization by being intentional about the pieces of internship I had control over. For example, I chose a research project with internship faculty I didn’t work with clinically so that I could get to know a broader network of mentors.

How have you leveraged your internship experience to enhance your job search efforts? Are there any strategies or resources you found particularly helpful in identifying and pursuing job opportunities?

For a faculty role, the letter of recommendation I got from my internship supervisor was invaluable! Additionally, I was able to use some extra individual supervision time to discuss my options, was mindful about saving up my professional leave and vacation time to attend interviews, and leveraged my professional network to understand which organization and roles might best suit my skills and goals.

Networking is a key aspect of career advancement. Can you share your experience with networking during your internship? How did you advocate for building your professional network, and what tips can you offer to graduate students on effective networking during internship?

I was able to use professional leave and professional development funds offered by my internship organization to attend NASP, which allowed for networking. Internally, I was fortunate that my primary internship mentors were very connected in my area of interest and had insight that they were willing to share about different universities and opportunities including information that I would not have been able to gather from job postings or program websites alone, including things like potential collaborators through different organizations or across geographic locations.