Technical Assistance Brief

Strategies to Avoid Program Closure and Promote the Vitality of Your School Psychology Program

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COMMUNICATING THE VALUE OF A SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAM

Universities have a critical role in serving the needs of their surrounding communities. School psychology graduate programs help universities meet such needs, in large part due to consistent interactions and supportive services provided to schools within their communities, and thus are an asset that should be highlighted. School psychologists provide a wide range of services that promote mental and behavioral health, systems-level prevention and intervention, crisis response and recovery, consultation and collaboration with families and the community, research and program evaluation, and student learning. Unfortunately, the United States continues to experience a critical shortage of school psychologists. Access to quality school psychology graduate preparation is essential for addressing this shortage and ensuring that young people have access to the mental and behavioral health resources that will enable them to be successful in school and in life.

School psychologists serve the increasingly critical mental health and educational needs of children, youth, and families. Research suggests that one in five children have a mental health or learning disorder, and 80% of chronic mental disorders begin in childhood (Child Mind Institute, 2016). However, there is evidence indicating that as high as 80% of the children and adolescents needing mental health supports do not receive such services, with the need being even greater among some minority and low-income populations (Kataoka & Wells, 2002). Perhaps more importantly, 70% to 80% of young people accessing mental health interventions receive them in schools (Farmer et al., 2003; Juszczak, Melinkovich, & Kaplan 2003; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000), highlighting the critical importance of preparing school-employed mental health professionals.

Although school psychologists can help address critical needs, there is an increasing shortage of these professionals. The shortage varies somewhat by region and locality. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) estimates that there is one school psychologist for approximately every 1,400 students in the United States (Walcott & Hyson, 2018). This falls significantly short of the recommended 1:500–700 students needed to provide a comprehensive range of services (NASP, 2010a). However, this translates to an excellent job market for graduates of school psychology programs, with an estimated 99% of graduates finding a job within a year of graduation (Gadke, Valley-Gray, & Rossen, 2018). Thus, universities can be assured that the graduates of school psychology programs are likely to be employed quickly and fully upon graduation.

Universities will also likely benefit from the contributions of school psychology faculty, many of whom have expertise in measurement, assessment, student learning and development, and other areas relevant to the issues faced by today's institutions of higher education. Given the broad and diverse skill sets of school psychology faculty, they can often contribute to efforts in both the psychology and education departments at the institutional level. All of these factors make a school psychology program a wise choice for any university's portfolio of offerings.

THREATS TO PROGRAM VITALITY AND POSSIBLE ACTIONS TO TAKE

Despite the advantages that school psychology programs bring to universities, today's higher education economic climate means that any university program may be at risk for closure. A variety of causes may force a school psychology program to close; however, anecdotal reports from faculty in closed programs suggest that there may be little or no forewarning that cuts are imminent. Thus, it is advisable for a program to periodically self-assess its standing within the university and take action proactively to capitalize on strengths and address weaknesses.

Threat: Inadequate Number of Applicants/Students

Although data from the NASP National Program Database suggest that the number of applicants to school psychology programs overall has increased somewhat in recent years, some programs may be at risk because they attract an inadequate number of applicants. Other programs may be admitting students at greater risk of not graduating. Finally, some programs may only offer admission to a small number of program applicants, enrolling only two or three new students per year. Lower enrollments can mean less revenue for programs potentially reduce the overall viability of the program.

Possible Actions

Bear (2011) suggested that efforts to recruit quality candidates can make programs more visible and successful. For example, programs should maintain clear and informative websites that highlight strengths and introduce students to the benefits of a career in school psychology. Investing in traditional promotional materials (e.g., brochures, advertisements in local and national newsletters) and maintaining active social media presence can also help to increase visibility. Additionally, programs can leverage technology to host virtual open houses in which prospective applicants can meet program faculty and students.

Face-to-face contact can be key to promoting a program. Taking part in high school and college job fairs or career day events (e.g., during School Psychology Awareness Week) can stimulate interest and provide opportunities for potential applicants to meet faculty. In fact, NASP provides a free, adaptable PowerPoint with speaker notes to help facilitate presentations to prospective school psychology students

(see https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/a-career-that-makes-a-difference). Current students and successful alumni can also be effective ambassadors for programs, so be sure to include them in recruitment efforts. Finally, programs that are not accredited should give serious consideration to seeking such external recognition. Anecdotal evidence suggests that attaining accreditation results in an increase in the number of applicants, and research indicates that NASP accredited/approved programs attract higher performing applicants and produce graduates who score higher on the Praxis exam (Rossen, Hayes, Prus, & Bowman, 2016). In addition, access to American Psychological Association (APA) accredited internships is now limited to students from APA accredited programs.

If program enrollment remains low despite increased recruitment, consider collaborating with other programs/departments to identify overlapping coursework and combine class enrollments. Programs can then partner to staff these courses.

Threat: Inadequate Financial Support for Students

Although the overall number of applicants to school psychology programs has increased, the costs of graduate school are often a barrier to enrollment, especially for candidates from historically underrepresented groups. These costs are not limited to tuition and fees, but also include lost or deferred income as candidates are often unable to maintain full-time employment while enrolled in the school psychology program. Finances and debt are significant stressors for psychology graduate students (El-Ghoroury, Galpar, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012). Although data from the NASP National Program Database suggest that many students in both specialist-level and doctoral-level school psychology programs receive some form of financial support (Gadke, Valley-Gray, & Rossen, 2019), other data suggest that this support typically comes from federal loans (Doran, Kraha, Marks, Ameen, & El-Ghoroury, 2016). Potential candidates may not be willing to incur this debt, especially if they also have loans from their undergraduate education.

Possible Actions

To reduce the financial burden of graduate school, programs should consider strategies to increase the availability of nonloan financial support. Programs should work closely with their financial aid office and consistently nominate school psychology graduate students for university internal funding opportunities. Faculty can also maintain a database of both large and small scholarship programs targeted toward graduate students in psychology. For example, NASP has the Minority Scholarship Fund, and APA Division 16 offers both the Diversity Scholarship and the Paul E. Henkin Travel Grant. The American Psychological Foundation offers several scholarships and fellowships to support graduate students at all levels of training. Additionally, faculty can mentor students to prepare competitive applications for graduate fellowships offered through foundations or other organizations.

Another strategy for making a school psychology program more affordable is to make it possible to complete the program while working. To allow students more flexibility in maintaining employment, programs can consider establishing "executive style" or hybrid programs in which students attend classes every other weekend while maintaining their full-time employment. Online programs also tend to be more viable for working adults.

Programs with limited financial resources can help students seek graduate teaching or research assistantships in other university departments, or approach external educational, social service, or mental health agencies and organizations about funding assistantships through contracts with the university. Additionally, to provide a pipeline of school districts experiencing school psychology shortages, programs can collaborate

on "grow your own" programs in which the school district partially or fully subsidizes the tuition for employees who would like to become school psychologists, with the agreement that they stay in that district for a period of time. Finally, programs can assist students by advocating for or seeking paid internships.

Threat: Difficulty Recruiting Faculty Whose Credentials Meet NASP Standards

Just as there is a shortage of school psychologists, anecdotal data suggests that there is a shortage of school psychology faculty. The shortage likely varies by geographic area, type of institution, and other factors. Nonetheless, recruiting and retaining faculty who meet NASP and APA standards may be a challenge for many programs.

Possible Actions

Although NASP *Standards for the Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists* (2010b) call for programs to have at least three faculty, two of whom possess doctorates with specialization in school psychology, the NASP Criteria for Program Review and Approval Rubric (NASP Program Approval Board, 2010) conveys more flexibility. A program that has at least two faculty, with one possessing a doctorate with specialization in school psychology and another having relevant experience may be judged as marginally meeting the standard. Additionally, because the NASP standards refer to "full-time equivalents," it is possible for a program to employ local school psychology practitioners as adjunct program faculty in order to meet NASP standards and help address candidate needs.

When recruiting faculty, programs are encouraged to emphasize institutional and program strengths that may be attractive to prospective applicants. They are also encouraged to consider altering position titles and requirements to make positions in academia more feasible for experienced or retired practitioners. A "clinical" position that does not require the amount of scholarship expected of the usual tenure track position is more likely to be attractive to those who have spent most or all of their careers as practitioners. In a pinch, programs that are short of the faculty needed to meet NASP or APA standards are encouraged to consult with the chair of the NASP Program Accreditation Board or the APA Commission on Accreditation on ways to meet relevant national standards and candidate needs.

Threat: Program Generates an Inadequate Amount of Revenue or Results in a Loss for the Institution

Higher education institutions are increasingly concerned with the costs of delivering programs and with sources of support for such programs. College and university funding models that emphasis student credit hour production and tuition revenue put graduate programs, and especially programs with lower enrollments or a high percentage of students with tuition remission or waivers at a disadvantage. This also puts such programs at greater risk for closure.

Possible Actions

An important first step to assuring adequate revenue for your program is to understand the costs of your program and the type of funding model being used by your department/college/university. Whether your university is private or public, it is helpful to know the key decision makers and the data used to inform funding. It is possible that institutional policies or state funding guidelines may suggest some minimum number of students needed for the program to be viable. That number may be driven by the amount of tuition revenue needed to maintain faculty and other resources. If students pay full tuition, then increasing the number of students will obviously generate more revenue but may also increase the costs for

supporting such students. Another strategy for increasing tuition revenue without increasing the total size of the program is to reduce the number of students in remission (i.e., those receiving tuition waivers). It is important that faculty determine the target number of students (supported and unsupported) needed for your program based on institutional policies, state funding guidelines, needed tuition revenue, and available faculty and other resources.

One way to generate revenue while also bringing recognition to your program is to host continuing professional development opportunities for local or regional practitioners and affiliated professions. This may also assist in developing new partnerships. In underserved or rural areas, consider providing professional development using distance education.

Faculty should also consider writing grants to reduce costs associated with activities that will benefit the program and department. Collaborate with state and local education agencies, other departments, and stakeholder groups to develop competitive proposals. Work with your university office of sponsored projects/grants to determine appropriate funders and to develop a plan for successful grant seeking. Grants may be helpful when designing and deploying evidence-based recruitment, retention, and teaching strategies for graduate students, and when providing professional development for faculty to support innovations. Grants might also be sought for addressing the workforce shortage, increasing the diversity of students or faculty, or providing outreach for underserved populations or professional development for inservice educators on critical topics.

Faculty should always plan for sustainability of support and resources for the particular initiative when writing a grant. Start-up or development grants will be easier to sustain than grants dependent on new hires. Reviewing grant applications for state and federal funders is one of the best ways to learn to write grants. Additionally, grants nearly always require evaluations. This may also be a way to network and to become involved with grants. Successful grant writing can result in additional recognition for the program and help develop important relationships.

Threat: Little or No Support for the Program From Outside the Department or University

As a profession, school psychology is deeply rooted in both education and psychology. This duality may cause confusion for administrators seeking to understand how school psychology programs fit within their broader mission. Administrators in schools/colleges of education may not understand how school psychology fits with other educator preparation programs, while administrators in departments of psychology see school psychology as out of place because of the focus on learning and the school context. This lack of understanding of school psychology's fit within the academic unit may result in the program receiving little support from the department or the university.

Possible Actions

Programs should have a clear program mission statement, program objectives, and strategic plan (Miller & Bear, 2011) and, to the greatest extent possible, should align these with the department and university mission, vision, and goals. Additionally, increasing the program's visibility and showing its relevance to the needs of both internal and external stakeholders may also lead to more institutional support. To promote this external support and recognition, programs should consider:

- Creating a program webpage (linked to the program's official webpage) with resources and information for educators and parents. The analytics from the program's resource webpage can provide data to demonstrate the program's reach to the community.

- Developing a program newsletter and using social media to promote student, faculty, and alumni achievements and to share the newsletter.
- Establishing a program advisory board comprised of key program stakeholders (e.g., alumni, field supervisors, school district administrators) to show program support and to generate ideas to improve the program and solicit more support from the institution.
- Providing support or cosponsoring on-campus activities that provide visibility to the program.
- Creating an environment in which field supervisors feel a connection with, and can help promote, the program.
- Collaborating with the state school psychology association and possibly local school district administrators to lobby university administrators regarding the need for school psychologists.
- Being active in local and state government committee work that impacts children and families. Share with campus leaders any written positive communications between your program and the committee/group.
- Establishing and promoting annual events/traditions. Invite campus and community leaders to speak or be recognized.

In conclusion, school psychology faculty should use a combination of strategies to promote the value of their programs, regularly identify and track potential threats to the health of the program, and proactively address potential risk factors to maintain viability. Ideally, the number of school psychology programs will increase rather than decrease in the future, allowing an increased production of professionals prepared to address the educational and mental health needs of pre-K–12 students.

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