Developing Undergraduate School Psychology Courses and Field Experiences

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BACKGROUND

School psychology programs have recently shown increased interest in offering an undergraduate course, or courses, in school psychology (Schilling, Grapin, & Hyson, 2016). Offering a course may accomplish a number of important goals, including: (a) exposing undergraduate students to the profession of school psychology and to topics most directly related to the field, (b) expanding a department’s undergraduate curriculum, which may generate increased tuition dollars, and (c) helping recruit future school psychologists. The latter is particularly important in addressing critical shortages anticipated in the profession.

The purpose of this technical assistance brief is to help guide programs in developing an undergraduate course in school psychology. Recommendations are provided that center on four major issues: (a) garnering administrative and faculty support, (b) designing the course, (c) coordinating field experiences, and (d) anticipating and avoiding potential obstacles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Garnering Administrative and Faculty Support

Because school psychology courses traditionally are taught at the graduate level, programs may need to educate colleagues and administrators about the value of offering an undergraduate course. Understanding how undergraduate curricula are structured, reviewed, and revised is critical for launching a successful course. The following provides recommendations for navigating this process.

- **Determine course placement in the curriculum.** In most cases, the course would fit into the curriculum in psychology or education and most likely be an elective. Early discussions with undergraduate faculty could facilitate a smoother integration of the course into their course sequences.
and schedules. Survey courses may yield larger enrollments, but an advantage to offering the course as an advanced elective is that it is likely to attract students who are nearing degree completion and potentially considering graduate school attendance.

- **Become knowledgeable about the institution’s curriculum revision process.** Proposed curriculum revisions may be reviewed at the departmental, college/school, and university levels. Programs should become familiar with the approval process in order to identify key stakeholders, develop a tentative timeline for course rollout, and anticipate and avoid potential obstacles to course approval.

- **Educate colleagues about the benefits of offering an undergraduate school psychology course.** As noted earlier, benefits include introducing undergraduates to school psychology, expanding the undergraduate curriculum (and the potential for increased revenue for the department), and recruiting future school psychologists.

- **Develop a course proposal.** The proposal should specify the purpose, scope, prerequisites, anticipated enrollment, and format of the course. In developing the proposal, the program should anticipate that reviewers at various organizational levels (e.g., department, college, and university levels) may have different priorities and concerns (e.g., maintaining course enrollment, enriching the curriculum, avoiding overlap with existing courses).

- **Assess undergraduate students’ interest in a school psychology course.** This can be accomplished through informal surveys and interviews. The resulting data can be used to project course enrollment and demonstrate need for the course to administration.

**Designing the Course**

Developing a successful course involves providing students with opportunities to survey the roles and employment contexts of school psychologists while also ensuring that content is accessible to the undergraduate population. The following describes considerations for building an engaging course that meets the needs of undergraduate learners.

- **Identify potential instructors.** Instructors may include full-time school psychology faculty in departments of psychology and education, practitioners who serve as adjunct or part-time instructors, and graduate teaching assistants. Practitioners may offer unique insight into the local practice of school psychology, whereas university faculty may provide greater insight about research and careers in academia.

- **Identify the course format.** Courses may be offered in variety of formats, including traditional face-to-face, online, field-based (e.g., service learning), or hybrid formats. Whereas traditional face-to-face and online courses may allow for larger enrollments, field-based and service learning courses may optimize student engagement.

- **Develop course content and structure.** The sequence of the course may be similar to that of the typical graduate-level introductory course in school psychology; however, its content must be more accessible to undergraduates. Depending on the nature of course prerequisites, students may have limited knowledge of developmental psychology, research methods, and other foundational areas. Thus, basic concepts in those areas may need to be covered.

- **Identify accessible readings.** Prominent school psychology publications may be too advanced for many undergraduate students, especially before their senior year. Instructors should identify readings that are written in concise, accessible formats and that assume minimal prior knowledge. As such, articles from the following sources should be considered: state association newsletters, national...
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After association newsletters (e.g., Communiqué, Phi Delta Kappan, and The School Psychologist), and student publications (e.g., From Science to Practice to Policy).

Coordinating Field Experiences

Procedures for coordinating undergraduate field experiences generally are comparable to procedures for coordinating graduate practica and internships. For example, instructors should establish formal relationships with site supervisors, provide regular university supervision, and ensure that field placement requirements of the university and local schools are met (e.g., secure background checks and student liability insurance). Recommendations more specific to coordinating undergraduate field experiences follow.

- **Convey to site supervisors the benefits of supervising undergraduates.** Unlike graduate student practica and internships, undergraduate field experiences are not guided by formal preparation standards. Although they cannot provide psychological services, undergraduates have considerable flexibility in their activities and are free to assist with a wide range of day-to-day tasks.

- **Coordinate appropriate orientation activities.** Undergraduate students may have even less awareness and knowledge of legal and ethical regulations in school psychology than entry-level graduate students. Prior to beginning their field placements, undergraduates should complete training in child abuse reporting, the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, and NASP's Principles for Professional Ethics.

- **Develop appropriate documentation tools.** Because undergraduates are not permitted to provide psychological services, site contracts and activity logs should emphasize observational and service learning activities rather than advanced graduate preparation activities, as described next.

- **Identify appropriate site-based activities.** Undergraduate field experiences should emphasize observational, service learning, and volunteer activities that do not involve the direct provision of psychological services. These activities may include:
  - observing classrooms, Child Study Team meetings, and assessment and intervention services (as appropriate);
  - interviewing other special services personnel (e.g., school social workers);
  - serving as mentors or buddies for at-risk K–12 students;
  - examining intervention materials and curricula;
  - providing assistance to teachers in classrooms;
  - providing academic assistance or tutoring services; and
  - participating in professional development activities with the site supervisor.

Anticipating and Avoiding Obstacles

Although similar in some respects to graduate coursework and practica, undergraduate coursework may present unique challenges for educators. These challenges include addressing potential overlap with introductory graduate courses and avoiding ethical concerns that may arise in field placements. The following describes strategies for circumventing these obstacles.

- **Avoiding overlap with introductory graduate courses.** This may be problematic when students complete both undergraduate and graduate introductory coursework at the same institution. Undergraduate instructors can make their course content and activities unique by: (a) discussing
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considerations for career planning and applying to graduate programs; (b) organizing graduate student panels; (c) incorporating basic, hands-on activities that expose students to school psychology practice (e.g., teaching a basic intervention strategy, such as incremental rehearsal); and (d) offering related service learning opportunities.

- **Maintaining enrollment numbers.** Given that many undergraduates are unfamiliar with the field, ongoing efforts to ensure course enrollment may be necessary. To increase awareness of the course, instructors might:
  - make announcements or present on school psychology in prerequisite courses,
  - announce the course periodically on student e-mail lists,
  - minimize prerequisite coursework (as appropriate),
  - advocate for the course to fulfill general education and major requirements,
  - notify student advisors about the course, and
  - use online and distance learning technology to reach nontraditional students or students at satellite campuses.

- **Addressing ethical concerns unique to undergraduates.** For ethical reasons, when coordinating field experiences certain precautions should be considered. They include: (a) avoiding having supervisees examine secure records and test materials that should be viewed only by graduate students and credentialed professionals; (b) ensuring that both supervisors and supervisees understand the differences between graduate and undergraduate student roles; (c) avoiding the placement of students in high schools they recently attended or other sites in which they are likely to encounter neighbors, friends, or siblings of friends.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Programs can access sample syllabi and other undergraduate course resources through the Graduate Educators’ Community at www.nasponline.com. Additionally, the following publications may be helpful for course development.


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