

CLINICALLY INTENSIVE PRESERVICE PREPARATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF BLENDED TRAINING*

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Abstract

The need for school psychologists across the county has reached critical levels. In addition, faculty positions for those training school psychologists are going unfilled. With such an identified need, training programs play a key role in closing the gap. In order to address this need in Indiana, the authors, with support for the Indiana Department of Education, developed the Indiana Training Alternative for School Psychology (ITASP) program. The program allows current educators to continue their employment in an educational setting while pursuing their Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) degree in school psychology. This article represents a reflection of the successes and challenges the authors met after implementation of the program for a two-year period.

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2 Sumario en español

La necesidad para psicólogos de escuela a través del condado ha alcanzado niveles críticos. Además, la facultad posiciona para esos psicólogos de la escuela de la instrucción van unfulfilled. Con tal necesidad identificada, entrenando programas son clave a cerrar la brecha. Para dirigir esta necesidad en Indiana, los autores, con apoyo para el Departamento de Indiana de la Educación, desarrollaron la Alternativa de la Instrucción de Indiana para la Psicología de la Escuela (ITASP) programa. El programa permite a educadores actuales continuar su empleo en una colocación educativa al seguir su Especialista Educativo (Ed.S.) grado en la psicología de la escuela. Este artículo representa una reflejo de los éxitos y desafía a los autores encontrados después de implementación del programa por un período de dos-año.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

3 Introduction

Mehaffy (2010) identifies “three forces” that will forever significantly alter higher education: decline in funding, rise in expectations, and rapid development in technology. Although his work speaks to undergraduate education specifically, educators at all levels can relate to the reality of change over the next century. Indiana currently employs 400 school psychologists with a shortage identified in numerous parts of the state. In order to address the shortage, the faculty at Indiana State University began offering an Educational Specialist level degree program to attract current educators who wished to obtain this degree while maintaining their employment. Given the state of education and funding offered by Mehaffy, more and more states may consider adopting this training model and approach. This article offers a guide for how the faculty achieved its goal of offering a blended learning model and addresses the successes and challenges faced along the way.

4 The Field of School Psychology-Growth and Shortage

Over 49 million students were enrolled in public institutions during the academic year of 2007-2008 (Noel & Sable, 2009). During the same academic year, over 6.6 million students received special education services with 39% receiving services for a specific learning disability (Aud et al., 2010). School psychologists, with their specific training in education and psychology, are best positioned to meet the needs of children, families, and schools.

The field of school psychology applies the science of psychology to children and youth within the larger systems of schools and families. Given the growing awareness of the relationship between student achievement and psychological well-being, combined with the staggering figures related to prevalence and cost associated with emotional and behavioral difficulties among children and youth, there is an increasing call for prevention and promising practices in the school setting at the national level (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009). In addition, the field is in the midst of a significant paradigm shift that places school psychology practitioners in the role as a problem solver as opposed to the traditional, special education refer-test-place role (Merrell, Ervin, & Gimpel, 2006). Working within a problem solving framework, school psychologists work closely with teachers to identify student needs, develop and implement prevention and intervention practices, and evaluate the effectiveness of such programs on individual students as well as groups of students at the class, building, and district level. School psychologists are essential to a school's efforts to meet the complex academic and mental health needs of its students.

Despite the identified need for well-trained practitioners in the schools, a drastic shortage of school psychology practitioners remains with an even greater need projected over the next ten year. Nationally, there are approximately 38,000 credentialed school psychologists (Charvat, 2005) and the profession is projected to experience 10-15% growth in the next decade (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). While the need for school psychologists is growing, the profession is also experiencing critical shortages. In 2004, Curtis, Grier, and Hunley projected a nationwide shortage of 15,000 school psychologists by the year 2017 with such

trends continuing well beyond 2020. Additionally, Curtis et al. reported that 66.6% of the credentialed school psychologists in 2004 would retire by the year 2020. These shortages and retirement projections impact school psychologists trained at both the specialist (Masters and Education Specialist degrees) and the doctoral level with the impact being greatest in rural geographic areas (Lahman, D'Amato, Stecker, & McGrain, 2006). In recent years, the shortage of school psychology faculty has been addressed in the literature (Clopton & Haselhuhn, 2009, Kratochwill, Shernoff, & Sanetti, 2004) along with some attention to the shortage of school psychology practitioners, particularly in rural areas (Lahman, D'Amato, Stecker, & McGrain, 2006).

Along with the shortage of school psychology practitioners the field is undergoing progressive change. Merrell, Ervin, and Gimpel (2006) address the change as one from “what is” to “what should be”. The authors note a significant change from a traditional practice role (refer-test-place) to one of expansion including the problem-solving model. This shift represents an exciting change for the field, but yet, change is not without challenges. As the role changes, so will the training needs of those entering the field.

Graduate preparation in school psychology occurs at both the specialist and doctoral levels. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) provides training standards at the specialist level, which is considered the entry level preparation for school-based settings, and requires a minimum of 60 graduate semester hours and a full-time, 1200 hour internship. Field experiences are heavily integrated into all courses to ensure that graduate candidates are developing the necessary skills and competencies and are having a positive impact on K-12 student outcomes. Preparation at the doctoral level is also approved by NASP but additionally is guided and accredited by the American Psychological Association. Preparation at the doctoral level allows for attainment of a general psychology license and is necessary for employment in settings such as hospitals, agencies, private practice, and university academia.

Larger systems-level issues, such as the current fiscal challenges and accountability demands in public education and the rapidly changing demographics of the population, also shape the future of school psychology. First, with an increasing focus on accountability, program evaluation, and data-based decision making in schools, school psychologists are serving in new roles which creates a need for continuing and/or advanced education opportunities. Second, funding for psychological services and appropriately licensed personnel has also become limited. In recent years, school psychologists working in all settings have had to be more attentive regarding ways to secure external funding for school psychological services. For example, obtaining the necessary training and credentials so that employers (e.g., schools, hospitals, agencies) are best positioned for seeking re-imbursement (e.g., Medicaid) for such services. Third, growing diversity is clearly seen in the public school arena; yet, approximately 92% of school psychologists are Caucasian (Curtis, Hunley, & Chesno Grier, 2004). This creates a critical need to recruit and prepare graduate students from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

5 The Beginning Stages

The Indiana Department of Education recognized the need for school psychologists in the state and committed resources to assist in the development of this innovative program. Our university already offered an Ed.S. program in school psychology with a traditional training format. The plan was to offer an additional program with a blended learning format that would meet the needs of non-traditional students. The faculty, in an effort to provide a progressive, yet, comprehensive program recognized the importance of a thoughtful and deliberate approach during the planning stages. Nearly one academic year was devoted to the planning and development of the Indiana Training Alternative for School Psychology (ITASP) program. Many steps led to the development of the program.

6 Student Identification

One of the first steps was to identify the students for whom this program wished to target. It was important to the program faculty that current educators be targeted so they could continue their employment in an educational setting. To that end, the program faculty closely examined the current Ed.S. program to

identify the parts of the program that could remain the same as well as recognize the aspects of the program that would need modification. It was critical to the faculty that the integrity of our current program be maintained; yet make the needed modifications to attract current educators. The goal of offering the program to current educators was a thoughtful and deliberate one. First and foremost, the program faculty wanted students to be successful in earning their degrees without barriers. Current educators, with support from their administrators, would have a high probability for success if given the time to perform school psychology related activities during their work day, have access to test kits and software, and have an on-site supervisor available to them. Second, current educators would enrich the training experience given their years in the field and the already existing knowledge base regarding schools and the systemic nature of school structures.

7 Stakeholder Investment

The program faculty with the assistance of data gathered from the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) identified areas within the state with the greatest shortage of school psychologists. Further, through a listserv for Special Education Directors and Principals, the program faculty provided information regarding the program to ascertain the interest in different areas of the state. Ultimately, four areas of the state were identified as having the greatest need as well as the most investment in the ITASP program.

For these four areas of the state, the program faculty held ‘open house’ meetings for potential students and administrators to learn more about the program and answer questions. The program materials were made available and a list of each participant at each site was generated. Contact information was used later for follow-up contact.

8 Forward Thinking and Program Materials

During the planning year, much time was spent devoted to the development of program materials specific to ITASP. The program faculty developed several documents as a way to be transparent regarding the commitment on behalf of the potential student, as well as all other individuals involved in the student’s progression through the program.

First, the program faculty recognized the importance of support at all levels in order for students to be successful. In this regard, the program faculty developed a compact that clearly offered the expectations of each participant (i.e., program faculty, student, the District/School Administrator, the District/Cooperative Special Educator Administrator, the ITASP Regional Coordinator and the site supervisor) involved. Second, the program faculty wished for students to have a clear understanding of their expectations during the program and thus, the program faculty created a student handbook as well as a practicum handbook. The student handbook outlined all important matters related to progression through the program while the practicum handbook detailed the specific school-related activities that were expected with each practicum course and how those expectations aligned with course content delivered in class. Further, the practicum handbook offered an estimate of the amount of time that would be needed to complete each task as well as the individuals involved with each task (i.e., site supervisor, regional coordinator, or faculty member).

9 Online Delivery and Blended Learning

Given the identified target audience for the ITASP program, several factors related to course delivery were considered. First, it was important to integrate the use of technology and online course delivery to allow students across a wide geographic area to enroll in the program. Second, courses needed to be offered at times convenient for students holding full time employment. However, program faculty maintained a commitment to traditional, face-to-face (f2f) instruction for certain course content (e.g., assessment and testing procedures). Thus, the ITASP curriculum was developed to include an orchestrated mixture of f2f and virtual interactions among a cohort of students that was led by one or more instructors. This integration is often referred to as “blended learning” (Dede, 2006; Means et al., 2009), a term that emphasizes the importance of the intentional planning and integration of courses, field experience, and supervision. Zhao,

Lei, Yan, Lai, and Tan (2008) and Means et al. (2009) report advantages for blended learning when compared to purely online learning. However, it is important to note that research on online learning is in need of more rigorous study in order to determine the most effective and efficient delivery (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009).

10 Program Format

The existing Ed.S. program required two full years of coursework, which included summer courses and culminated with a full-time internship in the third year. Students typically enter the program from a bachelors degree program in either psychology or education and have little to no experience in a school setting. Further, the traditional Ed.S program was a cohort model and the program faculty embraced such a model for the collegiality that occurs and made a deliberate effort to adopt a cohort model for the ITASP program. The challenge the faculty faced was to offer a blended learning model and with the same integrity as the traditional on-campus program. To accomplish this, variables the program faculty had to consider included: (1) sequence of courses, (2) faculty coverage for courses, (3) working within a university academic calendar vs. that of a school setting, (4) maintaining faculty-student contact over the course of the semester, (5) the unique role of field-based experiences, and (6) course enrollments. While overlap among the variables exists, each one will be discussed separately.

In terms of course sequence, for non-traditional students to simply follow the traditional sequence of courses proved to be an issue from the outset. The faculty began by first considering the start and end dates as well as specific holidays honored by the university and school settings. First and foremost, the program faculty wanted the students to be successful and perhaps that was best done by students progressing in a gradual fashion at first. Students in the the traditional Ed.S. program start their coursework during the beginning of an academic year or August in the case of Indiana State University. However, the program faculty chose for the ITASP students to begin their coursework in the summer. This decision was made for several reasons including that students could have an intense experience with the faculty as they began the program and for them to begin the program with deliberate courses that would set the foundation for success. Making a slight change to the sequence of courses brought other issues to the forefront such as faculty coverage and start and end dates. An example might best illustrate the issues at hand. The second summer session at said university is still underway when the ITASP students would need to begin their own school year. Course delivery and course assignments needed to be modified for students to receive the necessary content and meet the obligations for the course.

The program faculty hoped to enroll a significant number of students in the program, which would require additional sections of course offerings and ultimately more faculty to cover the courses offered to both groups of Ed.S. students. With the funding resources made available by the IDOE, highly-qualified adjunct faculty was hired to assist with course delivery. Again, this brought important issues to the forefront. As a heavily applied program, a deliberate effort was made to hire faculty that could serve as strong mentors and leaders for our students in both Ed.S. programs.

As the program faculty projected the sequence of courses and weekend class meetings for most courses, attention to academic calendars of all parties involved was needed. Prospective students were advised that most classes required f2f course delivery and interaction and efforts would be made to accommodate their calendars; yet, some courses may meet at times not most convenient to them.

During the planning phase, it seemed evident that an additional layer of assistance was needed for non-traditional students to be successful in this program. The program faculty, with the resources from IDOE, hired individuals to serve as ITASP Regional Coordinators. This person's responsibilities would include hosting f2f interaction with students in their region and assist program faculty with maintaining contact with local administrators and site supervisors.

Perhaps, the potential of the field-based experiences served to be one of the most exciting parts of the program as the program came to fruition. Current educators with their access and knowledge of school culture could immediately begin completing school psychology-related activities in the schools. However, this aspect of the program also required planning and thoughtfulness. Students with such knowledge of

schools is a benefit; yet, the knowledge could also work as a barrier in terms of training the students to perform school psychology related activities that might be significantly different from their current role. Also, it might be difficult for some within the school setting to see their colleague in this different role.

Last, students entering the traditional Ed.S. program most likely have not completed graduate level coursework and thus, would complete each course in the program in the proposed sequential fashion. However, many of the students in the ITASP program had completed graduate degrees in related fields (i.e., special education, social work) and would transfer in courses. Through an administrative lens, this created a situation requiring some degree of flexibility. In other words, not all courses would have the same enrollment as one would anticipate from a traditional cohort format program.

11 Successes

The ITASP program had many successes over the past two years. Amongst its successes is its popularity. While being a young program, a consistent interest in the program remains. While the first year was the largest admission class, the program has consistently enrolled at least four students in the program every year. There has also been a consistent retention of students ranging from an initial low of 50% to a high of 80% this past year. It is also important to note that all of these students pay full tuition, thus this graduate program is seen by administrators as a revenue generating program.

A series of successful issues from the program relate to its nature of targeting educators in the field. One of the positive outcomes from the program has been the increase in partnerships between the program and school corporation across the state. These relationships have the potential of leading to increased practicum and internship placements, as well as, opening opportunities for advanced student to participate in the provision of professional development services. Also, including the ITASP students within our model has increased the flexibility relative to program delivery. This has led some of the traditional on-campus students to take advantage of the distance delivery. Also, by targeting current educators, the program was able to tap into a different knowledge base that our traditional students do not have, classroom experience. School psychologists' role is expanding into classroom consultation and direct student intervention. The distance students experience adds important contributions to class discussion and class presentations. The experience of the distance students provides our traditional students with a unique experience. Finally, since the ITASP students are working, they come with established relationships within the schools. This eases their ability to get practicum experiences, which also uniquely contributes to course discussions.

A final indicator of success has been the students' ability to obtain high quality internships. At the onset of the program, the program expects district level support for students during their internship year. The program faculty anticipated certain variables to be important related to the completion of the internship experience. Such factors included salaries and benefits for student given their employment status within the corporations. The program faculty chose to discuss these matters during recruitment and encouraged the students to address questions directly to the administrators of their corporation.

Also, in terms of internship attainment, the program faculty saw that once districts or cooperatives learned the value of school psychology interns, this led to further opportunities for students entering the program.

12 Challenges

With the above successes came an equal number of challenges. A variety of the challenges were related to the fact that several students are a significant distance from the campus. First of these is the distance that must be traveled by the students and faculty to bring about the needed f2f interactions to supplement distance presentations. The distance made it difficult to schedule face-to-face meetings. To include travel time, a three hour meeting turns into an eight hour event. Also since the students come from different places, finding a suitable central location was also challenging. As mentioned earlier, an important component of the program was the use of field personnel to provide additional support for the distance students. This very important position provided two substantial challenges. The first challenge was to hire an individual with

the appropriate experience and knowledge located close enough to a sufficient number of students to provide the necessary support. The second issue was the cost associated with hiring a qualified person. Without grant support, the fees to cover this essential person have to come from revenue generated by the program. This is a difficult but important negotiation to be held with university administration.

Another series of challenges were centered around the school-based practicum. Among the difficulties are supervision and ensuring the variety of experiences needed for today's school psychologists. Supervision for the practica is often a challenge in any school psychology programs. For distance students it can be more problematic because there is no control over the placements. The students simply complete practicum requirements where they are located and there may not be sufficient supervision readily available. Even if a person is available the issue as to whether the person has sufficient time to supervise the student is another important issue. A second issue was the type and breadth of practicum experiences. Local procedures for school psychology services may not be sufficient to represent the full breadth of school psychology. For example, if a district solely uses Response to Intervention (RtI) to identify students, then practicum students may not get experience with other approaches and models such as cross-battery or CHC interpretations of norm-referenced assessments. A related difficulty in reference to the lack of control of practicum placements is equalizing the practicum experiences between the ITASP students and the on-campus students. While the faculty has worked at ensuring minimum experiences, there are different opportunities available for on-campus students as compared to ITASP students. Specifically, on-campus students participate in universal screenings at a local school, which is an experience the faculty is unable to mandate of an outside school district.

Additional challenges came from the qualities of effective instruction. Two major issues within effective instruction are active engagement (Greenwood , 1991) and re-teaching of unlearned concepts (Lalley & Miller, 2006). Both of these concepts are difficult to manage with distance education. While technology affords increasing possibilities for active engagement across a distance, it is still difficult to actively engage distance learners. The re-teaching of unlearned concepts is always a challenge but with distance students, it is often difficult to assess learning during instruction. Thus, determining what concepts need re-teaching becomes even more challenging.

Additional challenges for the ITAPS program came from unique sources. First, distance students that are working not only have more life experiences than traditional students, but also have more life pressures. These additional life pressures can and have lead to problems with students completing classes and continuing through the program. Thus, additional support and accommodations are important for these students. Another significant source of challenge was follow-through on the compact from the school district. While the school districts agreed to provide a variety of support, some have not always come through for the student. Unfortunately, it is again something that is outside the control of program faculty. Finally, university expectations, resources, and demands also presented challenges. Increasing demands and responsibilities are natural occurrences in today's climate. However, such increasing demands may inadvertently result in diminished eagerness, availability, and opportunity to devote to new and innovative program and course delivery models. Unexpected issues that occurred were the level of the need for f2f contact and a need for increased relationships with administrators. While some face-to-face contact was anticipated and included, it was surprising how much more was desired by the students. It continues to be a request with new ITASP students to be able to spend more time with faculty and to ensure that the ITASP students are receiving the same preparation as the on-campus students. As stated earlier, there has been difficulty getting some districts to follow through with the support promised in the compact. One response has been the need to establish stronger relationships with district administrators. This was unexpected given the explicit nature of the compact. However, good relationships with district administrators are the goal of several school psychology programs.

13 Lessons Learned

Lessons learned from program implementation were focused around instruction, fieldwork, and relationships with districts. With respect to instruction, an important lesson learned is the importance of increasing

the interaction between the instructor and the ITASP students and between the on-campus students. All students have provided more positive feedback for courses taught through the distance technology software or with Saturday face-to-face sessions as compared to all online classes. The faculty continues to examine methods for increasing interactions. These include encouraging on-campus students to log into distance system supported by our university. This encourages all students to interact using the same medium, such as the white board and discussion boards. Faculty is also encouraging use of headsets and microphones with the distance technology. Use of the microphones and headsets would allow for more spontaneous real-time interactions among the distance students, on-campus students, and faculty. Real time interaction is highly desired by the distance students making the selection of software essential to the success of a distance program. Thus, it is critical that universities invest in technology and software that facilitate real-time interactions among distance students and on-campus faculty and students.

Another lesson learned was related to course size and delivery of course content. The additional preparation needed to integrate distance student participation requires more planning and additional activities than had initially been anticipated. Even with highly interactive distance programs, significant changes to lecture presentations and instructional delivery were needed. Specifically, some programs are not fully compatible with presentation software programs such as PowerpointTM. This is especially true of slides that are animated, contain video, or contain overlaps. Thus, many lectures needed to be reformatted. Also, large group and small group discussions have to be reformatted to make them compatible with distance technology. All of these changes required specialized training in the use of distance technology. Programs considering moving towards distance delivery should consider the additional instructional activities that will be required by faculty.

Also, the increased instructional demands associated with distance programs require the consideration of alternate instructors. This meant the possibility of employing school psychology practitioners as instructors that could travel to distance sites to provide instruction. Even with highly interactive distance delivery programs, distance students, like on-campus students, need contact with well-learned professionals. Making contact with regional practicing professionals helped meet the important need. Another way of meeting the need was for faculty to consider delivering instruction and offering special meetings at sites that are centrally located for the distance students. Sites to consider for instructional delivery are local libraries, colleges, and public schools. It might even be possible to deliver distance instruction at off-campus sites. Therefore, it would be possible for the distance students to be the in-class students and the on-campus students to participate via distance technology. Thus, universities considering moving to a distance delivery may wish to focus the recruitment of students to specific geographic areas to facilitate use of local professionals as instructors to support classroom instruction and to facilitate faculty holding off-campus meetings or courses.

Fieldwork is as important if not more important relative to distance programs. A key issue with fieldwork is the breadth, depth, and consistency of experiences. In order to address this need, distance practica are based on experiences and generation of multiple artifacts. Unfortunately, the experiences are not always available within the student's district. Thus, faculty has worked with school districts to supply specific experiences. It is important that programs moving to a distance delivery model have clear expectations of the types and frequency of available experiences. It is equally important to establish relationships with local school districts to assist in providing those experiences. Thus, programs looking to move into distance delivery should clearly define practicum not in hours but in specific experiences. Further, faculty should make contact with sites across the states to ensure that necessary experiences are available across the region. Again, programs moving to distance delivery may consider limiting recruitment to a geographic region to facilitate the development of practicum experiences that are consistent in breadth and depth.

14 Summary

Higher education is undergoing significant change in many aspects with drastic changes expected over the next several years (i.e., reduced funding, retirements, a focus on alternative delivery methods). With this in mind, faculty and administrators will be exploring the possibility of offering existing programs in non-traditional means. The ITASP program is one such example. Delivering a quality program was possible,

but it took a great deal of forethought and planning. With deliberate intention, the faculty anticipated the needs of the students and how these identified needs could be met given all of the variables involved. With this anticipation, we developed a clear plan for implementation, sought support from stakeholders, developed specific program materials, and delivered courses that met the unique needs of the ITASP students. The successes were many including working with a strong group of committed students and the continued support of administrators at all levels. Challenges included the integration of technology, hiring qualified and available personnel, securing the necessary type and breadth of field based practicum experiences, and course delivery given the unique needs of the students. After two years, all related parties associated with the ITASP program have seen the benefits of this delivery model and hope this article is useful to others considering such a venture.

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