

## Resolving the Internship Imbalance: Expanding the Commons or Limiting the Cattle

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Hatcher (2011, The internship supply as a common-pool resource: A pathway to managing the imbalance problem, *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 5, pp. 126–140.) has advanced the discussion of the internship imbalance in health care psychology by reframing the issue in economic terms. Expanding on his analysis, it is suggested that the source of the imbalance may be traced to elements of the accreditation guidelines that create an economic disparity between doctoral versus internship programs in professional psychology. The various potential responses to the internship imbalance are considered in light of this issue.

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Hatcher (2011) has made a valuable addition to the discussion of the internship imbalance problem by using Hardin's (1968) tragedy of the commons as a framework. The tragedy of the commons occurs when common-pool resources become degraded through overconsumption that results when each consumer maximizes their use for their personal gain. Hardin suggested that when a technical solution is not available to the problem, communal "moral" action to reduce use to sustainable levels becomes necessary.

Hatcher's (2011) most important contribution to the discussion may have been his reframing of the problem as an economic issue. I would like to expand on that perspective by suggesting the problem can be largely if not exclusively attributed to disparities in the economic implications of creating a doctoral versus an internship program.

The American Psychological Association (APA) Commission on Accreditation (CoA; 2009, p. 25) *Guidelines and Principles for Accreditation of Programs in Professional Psychology* stipulates that the resources necessary for an internship include "(a) Financial support for resident stipends, training supervisors, and training activities." Membership in Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (AP-PIC; 2011, p. 7) similarly requires funding of all interns at a level that is "reasonable, fair, and stated clearly in advance." The CoA (2011) *Implementing Regulations* document also places significant restrictions on unfunded internship slots and indicates the intern stipend should be sufficient to meet basic living needs for the area in which the internship is located.

Though the same requirement for student support is made of postdoctoral programs, no parallel requirement exists for doctoral programs. Instead, their required financial resources are restricted to "training and educational activities" (CoA, 2009, p. 9).

The expectation that the internship will support the intern without a parallel expectation of the doctoral program creates a disparity in the cost-benefit analysis of the two types of programs. Consider how a university administrator is likely to evaluate a proposal for a doctoral program in health care psychology. Doctoral students who will pay full-time graduate tuition with little or no university funding for a period of 3 years or more provide a significant financial incentive even after accounting for costs. The intangible benefit to an educational institution that results from increasing its portfolio of doctoral programs should also be noted. In contrast, an agency administrator will wonder whether any financial gain to the agency is likely to offset the intern stipends, particularly when services provided by trainees are often unreimbursed. Furthermore, for the many clinical settings where teaching is not considered an integral part of their mission, the existence of the internship offers minimal benefit in terms of prestige.

Given the disparities in the economic implications of doctoral programs versus internships, the imbalance was perhaps inevitable and is unlikely to be easily rectified. The remainder of this comment will summarize various options for addressing the problem in light of this basic economic disparity. I will remain agnostic about which is the best alternative, particularly as in some cases a full analysis of a proposed solution involves legal questions that need resolution. The goal is simply to lay out the full array of potential solutions and to analyze them in the context of the economic disparity issue as the basis for a more thoughtful discussion of solutions among the relevant stakeholders.

Conceptually, these solutions involve either limiting the cattle or expanding the commons. Limits on the number of new students could be implemented in several ways. It could involve voluntary reductions in incoming classes, or through changes in CoA policies to which programs would be obligated to comply to achieve

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accreditation. Hatcher (2011) suggested a third possibility, a new organization whose policies must be accepted by doctoral programs as a condition of participation in the APPIC match (though potential loss of accreditation would probably be a more effective means of assuring compliance than restricting access to the match).

As Hatcher (2011) noted, the voluntary solution to the tragedy of the commons often fails. The financial value of the doctoral program to the institution can be substantial, especially in institutions that are funded largely by doctoral-level training in psychology.<sup>1</sup> One even hears anecdotes of university administrators setting enrollment targets for professional psychology doctoral programs that exceed the recommendations of the program faculty.

Doctoral programs could also object to voluntary caps on the grounds that the internship imbalance results from an arbitrary disparity created by the accreditation system itself rather than objective evidence of overproduction of professional psychologists. In fact, though there was greater concern about the job market than in previous years and more were in postdoctoral positions, APA's 2009 Doctorate Employment Survey (Michalski, Kohout, Wicherski, & Hart, 2011) indicated only 6% of recent recipients of doctoral degrees in psychology were unemployed, with little differences in the percentage employed across specialty areas of psychology.<sup>2</sup>

The fact it is the student rather than the program that bears the burden of obtaining the internship should also be noted as a less palatable potential factor in resistance to voluntary caps. It is as if the farmer gets the milk but also gets to put the responsibility for finding grazing on the cow. Unfortunately, it is also the student who tends to bear the shame and consequences associated with failing to match.

Methods of reducing the flow of students through some governance structure can be divided into those that are specific to addressing the internship imbalance and those that address the issue from a more global perspective. An example of the former would be the recommendation that emerged from the imbalance meeting that requires programs with low match rates to reduce enrollments. One problem with an imbalance-specific solution is that it may not be legally defensible. Specifically, if the problem largely results from a disparity in the economic implications of doctoral versus internship programs, then it is questionable whether that problem could be used by some governance organization as a basis for limiting the profit of the educational institution. This is a legal issue that would need to be evaluated.

An example of a more global attempt at a solution would involve establishing more rigorous standards for accreditation that as a by-product reduces the number of students. Examples of strategies that fall within this group would include requiring certain minimum Graduate Record Examination scores for admission to accredited programs or (less effectively) requiring a very high faculty–student ratio. This approach might be particularly popular among psychologists who see health care psychology as an elite doctoral-level profession for which standards should be stringent. However, these approaches do not ensure resolution of the internship imbalance, and if it is evident that new standards are being introduced primarily because of the imbalance they could be susceptible to the same legal challenge as imbalance-specific solutions.

A third approach for reducing the number of students would require the doctoral program to support students at a level commensurate with internship funding. This approach could also result in legal challenge to the governance body for requiring student funding at any level of training, however.

There are two other issues that should be raised about any solution aimed at reducing the number of students. One was raised earlier, about whether it is desirable to cut the number of students based on accreditation standards rather than employment prospects. Second, a solution that retracts the profession but retains the economic imbalance between doctoral and internship programs may only solve the problem in the short term. Over the long term, as the number of psychologists in clinical settings declines, internships will close and the problem may reemerge.

Other solutions focus on expanding the commons. The discipline could advocate for increasing the potential for reimbursement of intern activities, but this will only go so far in a troubled economic environment. The other alternative is unpaid internships. This solution would likely create the same model as one finds in doctoral programs, where level of funding varies widely and the program determines the caliber of its students through the funding it offers.<sup>3</sup> It may be argued in response that intern stipends create a parallel with medical residency as a transition from student to colleague. It can also be argued that unfunded internships increase the financial burden for the student, though so does delaying licensure for another year, particularly if the student is unfunded by the university during the year's delay. The most serious concern is that it is another indirect approach to the problem and may not resolve the economic disparity sufficiently because accreditation of internships has other costs associated with it. Before implementing this option it would be important to estimate the number of new internships likely to develop and pursue accreditation if reduced funding and unfunded positions were permitted.

Voluntary caps are almost doomed to fail. Organizational approaches either reducing the number of students or creating a more economically viable model for internships are all likely to

<sup>1</sup> To be clear, this statement is not intended to imply any moral judgment about such programs. In a free-market economy, vendors will emerge to fill identifiable gaps in the market. One could, for example, assert the professional schools are no different than undergraduate psychology departments that have softened the curriculum to draw larger numbers of undergraduate students to the major, even though psychology majors later report relatively low satisfaction and wages (Carnevale, Strohl, & Melton, 2011; Landrum, 2009; Rajecki & Borden, 2011). The two scenarios differ primarily in the degree to which the outcome is proximal to the training experience.

<sup>2</sup> The finding that relatively more recent graduates in health care psychology were in postdoctoral positions could suggest an impending unemployment problem but may also reflect the additional year of training required before licensure as a psychologist in most states. This is not to suggest there is no cause for concern in the present economic environment, but those concerns may be no more serious for health care psychology than for other branches of the field.

<sup>3</sup> An interesting potential side effect of tiered funding is that internships interested in attracting future researchers would most likely be among those that continue to fund interns, making internship funding a reinforcer for increased research productivity in students.

be perceived as abhorrent by some stakeholders in professional psychology training. That said, it is time that those stakeholders address this ethical failure to protect our most important resource for the future of the profession, our students, even if it means adopting what is to some an unpalatable choice.

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