

14 December 2015

Re: Interview Tips for Students from CPA Division II Leaders & Members

Dear Students,

Please see below responses to questions posed by CPAGS students on the internship and practicum/externship interview process. Members of CPA Division II (Education and Training) have anonymously provided answers based on their experience as Directors of Training for internships, externships, grad programs, and as former interns themselves! Feel free to utilize these advice points as you prepare for interview season, and pass these tips along to peers and colleagues. Best wishes to you!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Monica U. Ellis".

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Question 1 of 7: How many clinical practicum hours are enough when it comes to applying for internship? Is it okay that I just have the minimum? Or should I go for as many practicum hours (specifically providing direct service) as possible?

Responses:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We require 500 face to face. Sites vary significantly on whether more are needed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 350 to 500. It's ok to have the minimum, depending on where you spent those hours. I'm at a community mental health center - so it helps to see clinical placements that reflect an interest in chronic and severe mental illness.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As much direct service as possible will be beneficial in the interview aspect of the application process as you will set yourself off as being more experienced than your competitors. Also should be practical experience related to the site.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A commitment if more hours than required in particular fields of interest is good. The hours themselves are not as important as what learning and knowledge was acquired during those hours. Be clear about what you have learned --- not just racking up 'token' hours.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality of the hours and the quality of the supervision is most important. If you have a ton of hours, but they are done with little supervision (or all group supervision), this isn't as good as fewer hours with a lot of supervision. Of course, having done a good amount of therapy during practica is important. 400 is a fair number of hours.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The breadth of the hours completed - i.e. clinical assessment, psychological testing, child/adolescent/adult, inpatient as well as outpatient, individual and group experiences - would be of more value in my review than the total number beyond the minimal expectation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I believe most Directors/sites still adhere to the "more is better" philosophy. Although I do compare hours across candidates in my initial reading of applications, I also consider the site/type of direct service.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The amount and type of practicum hours you have does make a difference. If you have well over the minimum, but none of them are with relevant populations or services, that won't help, but if you only have the minimum but they are concentrated in the area the internship site most values, they will see your application more favorably. Most internships leave room for the fact that all of your previous hours may not be directly related to the type of clinical work done at the internship site, but you need to have had some relevant experience. For example, if you've focused all of your practicum training on testing, you are not likely to be a first choice for an internship site that focuses on therapy alone, or vice-versa.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having the minimum or just above will keep you in the competition, but I see people with 700 to 800 direct intervention hours. Don't think of applying with less than 500.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had to work part-time while in school, so I had the minimum practicum hours. I managed to do just fine and was offered stellar sites for internship and fellowship. If you are hoping for APA sites or plan to have an assessment or forensic focused internship, you probably want to get as many practicum hours as possible. This might also depend on how much direct service/clinical experience you do or don't have coming in. I had some pre-grad school clinical experience which helped.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ok to just have the minimum, as there are many criteria that sites look for in applicants besides prior practicum experience.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sites that want to make it easier for them to supervise you will want more practicum hours, while sites that are more focused on training you won't care as much. 1500 hours should be enough for the latter.

Question 2 of 7: How important are letters of recommendation?

Responses:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They can be very important. Especially with the new form, supervisor impressions and discussion of the various competencies may guide selection. Some previous research had minimized them...but I believe there is high variability among training directors...and some really trust letters most.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Particularly indicating strengths and growing edges that are honest and from supervisors as well as academics.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• At my site, not that important - unless every one of them is a negative review, which almost never happens.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Usually required and will help determine whether or not you get an interview. they should really represent you as a stellar applicant
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very. But you must help those who write them by asking them to describe anything in particular that makes you different from the rest.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Least helpful in making a decision. But it's important to get therapy and assessment supervisors to write letters (if you're applying to therapy/assessment sites). Those sups can speak to your clinical skills much better than professors can (most of the time).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimal value as they often all say about the same thing - perhaps, if the writer displayed a greater understanding of distinct or unique characteristics of the applicant that would have a greater impact or a likert scale checklist comparing the applicant with others at a similar level of education/training.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extremely important. I assume all letters will include strengths; I appreciate letters that also note "growing edges". It is generally notable when a letter writer has not had a discussion with the applicant about these issues.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Depends. If your AAPI is strong by itself, letters are not usually of that much value. If your AAPI is weak, a strong letter can sometimes help you to get offered an interview, because the site might take the approach of "maybe we'll see what their letter writer sees, when we meet them in person."
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The answers on this from practicum sites varied. General consensus was that sites use recommendation letters to get a "picture" of the applicant and look for comments regarding interpersonal skills, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Letters usually don't make or break an applicant on their own. They lend credibility to your materials and can sing your praises in ways you can't. Several strong letters can help when there's a "tie" between two good candidates.
<p>We look at letters to see how well the person writing knows the applicant, what specific strengths or skills are highlighted and whether or not the writer "damns with faint praise". Boilerplate letters from training directors provide more information about the training than the applicant, we interpret these as indicating that you didn't do anything awful and are ready to take the next step, but that's about it.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very important. Don't send more than asked for. Most letters are too long this year (new form). It is important that the writer conveys he/she knows you well and talks about you as a person, not just your professional skills.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very. You definitely want to have the requested number in your application.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extremely important. It is also important to not use 'To Whom it May Concern' letters of rec, and to instead make sure that each letter has been written specifically for that site.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most letters of recommendation are useless, but the few that include a relatively honest portrayal of your strengths and weaknesses (both skill-wise and relationship-wise) have considerable impact. If you want serious training, don't be afraid of honest recommendations.

Question 3 of 7: Do you have any suggestions as to how to best "market" oneself during the application process when coming, at midlife, to psychology as a second (or third) career)?

Responses:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Just the usual...describe competencies, previous careers or work or life experience—and what you learned/know that contribute significantly to competence (knowledge, skills, and attitudes)—and highlight rather than minimize these. How that distinguishes you from others. Integration of experience is excellent rather than shedding previous careers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I think you should be honest, and not apologetic. You bring a wealth of life experience, which is great. And I hope you bring some humility, as well, since (technically) you've had the same three or four years of doctoral coursework that your 20-something classmates (and competitors for internship) have had. Have clarity about your professional trajectory - - you may even discuss the ways in which you had to "change" (adjust, alter) your previous professional viewpoints to incorporate the perspective of a psychologist. You may want to emphasize how "trainable" you are. It would be easy for a training director to assume that you are not thrilled about being "re-trained" or taking instructions from a supervisor or training director who is younger than you. My guess is that these issues may have arisen already during practicum; in an interview, it's nice to discuss your previous experiences (without trash-talking any previous supervisor or agency).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highlight skills learned in "previous life." Perhaps explain what drew you to return to school in midlife. Always share how you have grown in the program indicating that you are still a willing learner.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It's important for anyone to "market" that you're interested in the population that the site serves, and that you're interested in learning from the clients and the supervisors. Doesn't matter what age you are.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you're applying as an intern to a private practice your ability to market yourself and therefore confidence in bringing in your own clients will be hugely helpful. Know your "niche" & make sure it's aligned with or complementary to your intended site.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yes. Wisdom, patience and knowing more about life to wisely apply what you have learned. And that there are more options for connecting the dots.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be yourself, know what you want to learn, be open to feedback and the learning process. But this advice goes to everyone, not just those doing a career change. But specifically, it would be helpful to know why the change to psychology.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incorporate professional and life experience as having a role in providing greater depth in your clinical acumen. Be sure to trace the mindset which brought you to the profession of clinical psychology.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highlighting life experience, whether it be in a separate/different field, or personal experiences that might better prepare one to work inside the therapy room. Noting one's awareness of what "appearing older" might bring, both benefits and challenges would be important (e.g. working with a college population vs working with a geriatric population). Don't assume Directors will pick up on these experiences just by your resume/vita (dates between BA and MA or "other work experience")-do your best to highlight this in cover letters that help move you to the interview process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Life experience counts. Talk about how your pre-psychology background informs your clinical work, how it helps you understand clients better, or helps you know how to work well within a team or professional environment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Life experience and maturity are enormous assets in psychology. Play up what you've learned in life, other skill sets that you use, life lessons. Hold your head up!
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You are a mature person and the life experience you bring to the table is an asset, but you are not stuffy and will bond with the younger interns.

- I came into grad-school at midlife and after 2 other careers. I feel it helped to promote the skills I'd developed which were transferable from my previous careers into work in the field of psychology. Throughout my training, I had supervisors mention how impressed they were, and how uncommon it was to have a more experienced and professionally confident trainee. They seemed relieved. However, I also had to learn when to adopt a more humble (and sad to say, subservient) trainee role so as not to step on toes!
- In the cover letter to the agency, discuss how your prior career(s) gives you a unique skill set that you bring to the profession.
- What is of interest with these applicants is the "why" of the change and showing that the psychology career is a solid commitment and represents evolution or growth for the applicant.

Question 4 of 7: How do applicants from out of state better communicate their seriousness regarding 1) willingness to interview in person and 2) relocating for internship? I've noticed, and have heard from others (both in California and other states) that there is often a feeling that internship sites don't take applications/interest from out of state students as seriously.

Responses:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good to express some anchor or reason for application (family nearby, desire to remain after internship, or some other authentic reason why one is applying...it could be a excellence of the training and a desire to be in a different part of the country. Be authentic though
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have not experienced that out of state students are either not taken from CA or not taken in other states. I think that they may be slightly hindered if they cannot interview in person though that was not experienced in round 2.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We take them seriously, especially if they say that they are interested in relocating to So Cal, or they have family/friends in SoCal, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One component would be the long term plan. Where does applicant intend to be licensed? Will the site be interested in a longer term commitment to you should they desire to extend your internship into an offer of full time employment with an expectation that you will become licensed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a difficult point to speak to as I am not sure as to how true it is. If many who apply out of state with no intention of relocating ruin it for those who do then sincerity in ones application along with intentionality will be important. Willingness to fly out to visit the facility in person in advance if any interview would also convey seriousness.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not at all true!! We make our rank list based on the fit/match - not where the person lives. In my experience of reading thousands of applications, it doesn't at all sway me when a student says they want to live in southern California. Who knows - by the time they submit ranks they might change their mind. And after California applicants visit other cities and states, they might change their minds. Don't promise something that you really can't promise yet.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having completed my graduate program on the East coast and applying to CA sites for Internship (albeit some time ago), I was very clear from the outset that I intended to be in CA either for a tour, meeting or interview. I realize that Directors may be a busier now, but reverting to Skype only options does not present the same opportunity (especially in our field) as in person interviews.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your willingness to travel/relocate in a straightforward, professional fashion. Be ready to specify why - maybe a type of setting or training offered, personal reason for wanting to move to that particular area, etc. Own it and be up front about it.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GO TO THE OPEN HOUSE! Ask about any opportunity to visit and GO! I went to several open houses and was amazed to see only a handful of applicants there. The two other interns at my site and myself met at the open house. Coincidence? I don't think so.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This was not an issue I had to deal with. But I've talked with colleagues and friends connected to out of state internship sites, and what they have told me is that they are often wanting trainees that are willing or wanting to stay in their state or community after training.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State very clearly that this is your plan. Not just that are you are committing to do move to CA if you get the internship, but that you are planning to move to CA regardless - or if you are hoping to move to CA regardless and this is part of your plan for doing so - mention this early in your cover letter.

- **Many sites want a diverse cohort of interns, including influences from out of state. You can check on the diversity of intern cohorts to see the places that are interested in that kind of diversity (in the brochures of APA-accredited programs). The best marketing is showing that your school gives good preparation, since sites here may not be familiar enough with distant schools to know.**

Question 5 of 7: What is the first thing that stands out (positively) in the application packets of students you end up offering an interview to?

Responses:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An applicant whose record and presentation really and genuinely is compatible with the clients and experience relevant to the setting, and exhibits excellence in presentation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a DCT so don't interview. I tell the students that their cover letter and autobiography tell the most about them personally.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissertation topic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant score totaled from 7 factor rating scale based on review of their pkg. Falls into the "top 10" plus Matches where on the top 10 from a secondary rater. Also level of confidence, enthusiasm and knowledge of what is important to the site that is conveyed in the cover letter.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good writing skills. And someone who impresses me by being themselves --- not by trying to impress me. EQ over IQ. The GPA speaks to IQ. But skill and connection comes from EQ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality and quantity of supervision (ie, licensed psychologist, individual sup) Having used videotapes of client sessions during supervision Quality essays
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A hand written cover note
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear progression of work toward degree, timelines on training that are consistent with noted sites; professional development (conferences, memberships); public speaking/teaching experience (even if it's a community lecture, a parenting class)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many sites start with screening in/out those who meet minimum requirements like # of hours, etc. Beyond that the things that positively impact interview decisions are: Excellent writing skills - seriously - have someone check your AAPI for typos and grammar! Beyond these technical skills, writing that is clear, direct (not overly flowery or full of psych jargon), and reveals as much as possible who a candidate really is and what they really care about therapeutically.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong writing skills, unique qualities about the person, articulate goodness of fit for the site - why are you interested in the site, what excites you about it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well organized materials that make it evident that the applicant read and followed the specifics of our application, rather than put together a generic packet. A cover letter written in a clear and CONCISE manner, connecting the applicant's interests with the training program. Graphic design counts - cover letters and CV that are well formatted and pleasing to the eye get read first.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cover letter must do a good job of showing the applicant is a good fit (i.e., your long and short-term career goals, what you bring, and what the site will give you.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For my program it was indications of comfortable and humble, self-awareness and willingness to explore and grow.

Question 6 of 7: What personal and professional characteristics make interviewees (potential interns) most appealing to your site?

Responses:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility, genuineness, NOT using questions from a book or article about interviewing.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I imagine it would be good fit at the intern interview stage.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimistic, professional, hopeful, creative, bright
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never be late for an interview, friendly, engaging enthusiasm. Confident and professional comportment including site-appropriate attire, ability to articulate philosophy and values that are a "good" site match, flexibility, willingness to go the extra mile, service orientation, contribution.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impeccable grooming. Good manners - those that have studied etiquette. Appropriate attire: well-fitting properly pressed clothes. Don't look like you rolled out of bed in your clothes. Ladies have a hairstyle - not a mass of hair pulled back in a rubberband. Try enough--- but not too hard. <p>Being sincere, open but not too open. Assertive, but not rude. Good eye contact. Real.</p> <p>Those who constantly show a curiosity for how humans grow and change.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openness to learning, self-awareness, curiosity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional appearance and presentation; poised demeanor; direct response to queries; and a well thought out list of questions to inquire regarding site.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excitement about what we have to offer; experience with our population; flexibility, desire to learn; willingness to "stretch" through training (although this may be a given, not every interviewee verbalizes it)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly articulated training goals that align with what we have to offer, and a genuine openness to learn, grow and be challenged. Confidence, interpersonal warmth, evidence of self-awareness and self-reflection, especially as it relates to cultural identities/diversity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong communication skills, interests described in interview match what is on paper in the application, a genuine passion for the population and level of professionalism (attire, language, behavior, etc)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole-heartedness, an evident enjoyment of your studies and clinical training, Flexibility, willingness to say you don't know and think out loud a bit.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence without entitlement. Humility. Clinical and cultural competence. Flexibility.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indications of comfortable and humble self-awareness and willingness to explore and grow. Also, indications of being able to get along with others (comfortable, tolerant, non-competitive).

Question 7 of 7: When interviewees have asked you (the training director) questions, what questions most pleasantly surprised you? What question(s) should every potential intern ask?

Responses:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions that reveal they read the brochures and websites and actually came up with an original question—for example, I was so interested in your early ADHD group. I was wondering whether it was influenced by...and they ask about a particular model that has some evidence base.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every potential intern should ask where do interns go after internship? Postdoc opportunities at the site. I don't think I've ever been "pleasantly surprised" by an applicant question.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pointed questions about the clientele, site/my personal values/philosophy, site specific challenges. "What are the opportunities for growth at the site?"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please ask what you are curious about, not questions you feel you have to ask because you're "supposed" to ask a question. Because of my stance on this (ie, not having "canned" question), I prefer not giving examples because I don't want 45 interviewees to come in with that question. Be yourself, be curious, get YOUR questions answered.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In response to crafting a vision of what professional activities would you be involved in five or ten years down the road, "I would want your job" as the answer provided in an assertive and kind manner.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What do you like most about your work?" "What drew you into this field/population/site?" "What do students who have completed this internship generally say about _____ (e.g. supervision, etc.)"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You invest a lot of time, energy and resources into creating a _____ (fill in this blank with something specific to the site) training experience for your interns. What is it you hope every intern who graduates from your program takes with them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't ask obvious questions that are in the brochure.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pleasant surprise: What are some of the challenges you face here at 'X' site?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The kind of training that I want and my training goals are _____. What aspects of your program will provide this for me? Do supervisors here answer phone calls or knocks on the door during supervision? When you have "difficult" interns, how do you work with them to make things better?