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# Field-Based Experience in Light of Changing Demographics

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## Abstract

*Due to changing demographics of students admitted to the School Psychology Training Program at Marshall University Graduate College, it has become imperative to significantly expand field experiences beginning in the first semester to address the lack of educational background of most of the students entering the program. This organized sequence of field experiences continues throughout the program, parallel to classroom instruction, affording opportunities for students to put theory into practice and to interact with professionals in the field, while also allowing for exposure to the public school environment. The collaborative field experience sequence provides the students with early and continuous feedback on their personal fit with schools as organizations and culminates with the summer enrichment program.*

The demographics of students admitted to the School Psychology Training Program at Marshall University Graduate College have changed (Krieg, 2005). According to a five year study, students are younger; have less work experience and most importantly, less educational background. As a result, field experiences in the School Psychology program have been significantly expanded so that beginning in the first semester of professional course work students are exposed to the public school environment. These field experiences continue throughout the training program, parallel to classroom instruction culminating with the Marshall University Summer Enrichment Program. Supervised field experience is essential to demonstrate attainment of competencies required to be a successful school psychologist and must be an integrated experience for students in the School Psychology Program. The purpose of the field experience is to provide an opportunity for students to apply theory into practice and to interact with professionals in the field to ground their learning and aid in their development as emerging school psychologists.

In the first semester students choose a mentor and an adoptive school with guidance from a faculty advisor. In the second year they complete practica under supervision of a site supervisor and the evaluative review of a school psychology faculty member. Just prior

to the NASP required internship year, students are immersed in an intensive summer experience designed to apply the data-based decision problem solving model within a collaborative, interdisciplinary, consultative approach that embraces both direct and indirect service delivery.

## The Mentorship Program

Students are required to have a School Psychologist mentor, a practicing school psychologist who has volunteered to serve as a mentor for a school psychology graduate student in their geographic area. This individual serves as a professional guide and colleague to help the student become socialized to the role of the school psychologist during his or her years in the program. In order to facilitate this relationship, several courses provide the students structured opportunities to interact with their mentor through participant observation, interviewing, shadowing, attending professional meetings, and analyzing schools as organizations. It is required that all students have a volunteer mentor by the end of the first semester. Students are encouraged to speak with practicing school psychologists in their area and to select someone to serve in this capacity. The program faculty is available to help students identify qualified mentors.

A letter of invitation is extended and becomes the signed agreement defining the relationship between the student, the mentor and the MUGC School Psychology Program. An additional agreement creates the adoptive school program, which legalizes the student's participation in activities with their mentor and the youth and families they serve. The adoptive school agrees to serve as a "home" for the student so that the student can learn how schools are organized and operate. This school serves as a site for completing observations, practice assessments, and other class assignments. Students have the opportunity to interact with children from diverse backgrounds and a variety of handicapping conditions. Students usually elect to complete Practicums I and II within their adoptive school. Often students have access to more than one school since their mentor serves as a

school psychologist to several schools. Through the mentor/adoptive school program, students learn the written and unwritten rules of working in a school; how to communicate with teachers and other educational professionals and have the opportunity to apply lessons learned to real life public school situations.

## Practicum I and II: School-based Practice

Two practicum experiences occur during the second professional year, which include, a wide spectrum of clinical experiences. These experiences typically occur at the student's adoptive school under the supervision of their mentor. The purpose of these two Practicum courses is to provide an opportunity for students to practice emerging skills in a school setting under the supervision of Practicum faculty. Students completing Practicum I (SPSY 738) and Practicum II (SPSY 739) register for three hours of practicum credit for each course which are completed one day a week (or two half days) at the student's adopted school with the school psychologist mentor serving as a site supervisor. The Practicum Instructor provides primary supervision of all practicum requirements which include observation, assessments using standardized instruments, functional behavior assessments, curriculum based assessments, consultation, and tutoring. The students are expected to attend four Practicum Seminars held on Saturdays during the semester.

Alternatively, students may elect to complete the practica requirements at MUGC's summer lab school due to work or home schedule conflicts. If students make this choice, they are expected to attend the summer lab school daily for five weeks. A practicing school psychologist is on site to serve the mentorship role while providing feedback on assignments. Evaluative feedback and re-teaching is also provided by program faculty who are on site. No student is permitted to fulfill all their field requirements in the summer program. As a result each student has experiences in several settings, including the opportunity to participate in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program as part of our middle school experience.

*"Field-Based..." continued on page 16*

### Practicum III: Marshall University Summer Enrichment Program

The final Practicum III (SPSY 740) occurs at the beginning of the student's third professional year and requires students to attend MUGC's summer lab school daily for five weeks. Students provide a full range of school psychological services in a multidisciplinary training setting supervised directly by the School Psychology program faculty. This Practicum serves as the culminating experience for the students prior to the internship. The expectation for students is that they will apply their learning to practice by collaborating with other educational professionals in a summer school experience. This capstone experience allows the students to demonstrate through practice the competencies and professional demeanor of a school psychologist and prepares them for the internship year that is to follow.

Designed to provide multidisciplinary training, the MUGC Summer Enrichment Program affords a unique learning opportunity for both graduate students and children in grades K-12. The setting provides a clinical field-based experience for graduate students seeking certification or licensure in special education, school counseling, school psychology, writing or reading. Education and support personnel completing graduate training participate in the practicum for 6 weeks, 4 days per week from 7:30-1:30.

Classrooms contain multi-age, multi-ability students along with full inclusion of students with special needs. All mild handicapping conditions are represented. The students are racially representative of the demographics in the state. Instruction is activity based with emphasis placed on best practices. As a direct result, children enrolled in the program have an opportunity to become actively involved in the learning process through numerous hands-on activities. Each classroom is staffed with a team of graduate students comprised of each of the disciplines: school psychology, school counseling, special education, reading, and writing. Thus, graduate students have an opportunity to experience best practices within a collaborative model, which is central to the philosophy of the program.

As a fully inclusive program, the children are recruited in a variety of ways and reflect diverse reasons for attending. Typically participants are recruited through school referral, parent contact, or public and private clinics. While some learners attend to extend their skills or simply because they enjoy being in a

school setting, others seek to offset the usual summer vacation loss of skills. Children, who are enrolled due to school failure, frequently have contracts with their home schools making promotion contingent on summer school participation or educational gain.

In addition, socially maladaptive children attend to decrease their phobic reaction to educational settings and group instruction. These referrals are usually from attendance workers. Moreover, developmentally young children are there seeking an age-appropriate school experience with normally developing role models. Also included are children with a variety of medical conditions placed by their parents so they might have summer learning experiences in a protective setting with full accommodation for medical differences. Students with behavior problems are enrolled in the program to enable psychologists and teachers to observe and develop appropriate behavior management plans. Racially diverse students are recruited through principals of low income and racially mixed schools. While the fee for the program is \$100, students who qualify for free or reduced lunches are offered scholarships as an incentive for attendance. All children are provided free breakfast and lunch through the USDA subsidized meal program.

During the field experience training occurs in three stages. At the initial three hour orientation meeting, Stage One, graduate students are given an overview of program philosophy, goals, and objectives. For the first time grade level teams meet and form to begin working together. Typically six teams of 9-10 graduate students are formed with each team having representatives from all five disciplines. Prior to the meeting, college supervisors assign members to the teams based on experience, strengths, and training needs. Traditionally two-thirds of the graduate students have public school experience. Students are assigned to an age/grade level which compliments and extends their previous experiences. In addition to an overview of the program, students participate in initial team building activities. Students leave the Stage One orientation session with discipline specific assignments, as well as an overview of the program and the realization that team members must collaborate across disciplines.

Four weeks later graduate students return to begin Stage Two of the field experience and to further develop the framework of a functioning team. This four half day long portion of the training further extends team building. Graduate students are provided in-service

training in collaboration, teambuilding, diagnostic teaching of reading through short cycle assessment and curriculum-based assessment. Working as teams they design curriculum, a behavior management plan, and program evaluation. All students participate in evaluating the effectiveness of the program, the impact of the program on school children, and the satisfaction of the parent consumers. Team members develop lesson plans emerging from projects organized around an overall unifying theme. Thus, tools taught in the in-service sessions are immediately applied in team meetings.

The next five weeks of the program encompass Stage Three of the field-experience. Having prepared for the arrival of the children, team members share responsibility for program and child outcomes. During this phase, graduate students have an opportunity to apply skills and competencies in a shared learning environment. In addition to discipline specific assignments, each team keeps a professional portfolio detailing experiences.

Literacy is at the center of the curriculum, evidenced by an uninterrupted 90 minute reading block each day. All team members, instructional and support are involved in teaching using short cycle assessment, running reading records, leveled reading materials, and weekly regrouping of children based on skill level and instructional needs. Instruction and planning are based on the learning needs of the children. Team members use assessment information to differentiate instructional activities which provide project oriented, hands-on, discovery learning opportunities. Thus, graduate students participate in determining the scope and depth of the material the children are expected to learn.

Faculty and site supervisors provide observation, documentation of competency completion, and back-up throughout the program. Site supervisors are certified professionals who have demonstrated excellence and expertise as service providers in their respective disciplines. They model competencies and critique the performance of the graduate students in their assigned disciplines. Students are provided with daily feedback on their performance through competency based observation logs that are completed by the faculty and students together. In addition, each day the faculty meets with the students to discuss any concerns and provide consultation to resolve problems. At the conclusion of each day, all students and faculty attend a group supervision session involving an interpersonal skill build-

ing experience led by program faculty where students analyze their activities as school psychologists and team members. The overall process serves to enhance students' group counseling skills.

### Year Long Internship

The final field experience requires a commitment to a school system for a full academic year. This paid internship consists of 1200 hours (12 credit hours), which is required for certification as a school psychologist and must meet stringent criteria specified by the program and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). This experience provides the intern with the opportunity to integrate the knowledge and skills learned in the program and to apply them to a real world setting, with the support and guidance of both an experienced field supervisor and a university supervisor.

### Contributions of the Field Experience Track

Offering a field experience sequence in parallel to the academic coursework provides the students with early and continuous feedback on their personal fit with schools as organizations. Students who have not had any experience in schools are able to become acclimated to the school culture under the supervision of faculty. This increased field experience has served to meet the need created by the change from students who were experienced educators seeking a second career to young students who have recently graduated. Students have the opportunity to practice the skills which are developed in classes in a field setting at the same time they are learning the skill. An organized sequence of field experiences begins with participant observation, progresses to application and skill practice and culminates with attainment. This attainment is validated first in the University setting and then in a school setting during the year long internship.

### References

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**Table 1**  
*Fast Track Course Sequence for the MUGC School Psychology Training Program*

SUMMER	FALL	SPRING
<b>First Year</b>		
	<u>SPSY 601</u> Professional Competence I – Schools as Systems	<u>SPSY 618</u> Direct Service Delivery I
	<u>SPSY 621</u> Data-based Decision Making I	<u>SPSY 616</u> Child Development
	<u>SPSY 674</u> Biological Bases of School Psychology	<u>SPSY 675</u> Psychological Foundations of School Psychology
<b>Second Year</b>		
<u>SPSY 603</u> Professional Competence II	<u>SPSY 622</u> Data-based Decision Making II	<u>SPSY 624</u> Data-based Decision-Making III
<u>SPSY 617</u> Indirect Service Delivery I	<u>SPSY 619</u> Direct Service Delivery II	<u>SPSY 620</u> Indirect Service Delivery II
	<u>SPSY 738</u> Practicum I	<u>SPSY 739</u> Practicum II
<b>Third Year</b>		
<u>SPSY 740</u> Practicum III	<u>SPSY 745</u> Internship	<u>SPSY 745</u> Internship
<u>SPSY 750/SPSY 751</u> Thesis/Program Evaluation		

Marshall University encourages other training programs to consider this approach. Feedback about our graduates confirms our impression of a more fully prepared program product. Representatives of Towson State University visited the program in 2005 and will be replicating this summer laboratory as The Pride Program during 2006. The field experience sequence demands a different style of teaching and openness to learning. School Psychology faculty members have been significantly informed about the effectiveness of their classroom instruction through this feedback loop. All of our university and public school partners benefit from this collaborative approach.