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Problematic Students of NASP Approved Programs: An Exploratory Study of Graduate Student Views

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Problematic Students of NASP Approved Programs:
An Exploratory Study of Graduate Student Views

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Graduate College of
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the requirements for the degree of
Education Specialist
in the School Psychology Program

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Abstract

This study reports the findings of an electronic exploratory survey forwarded to National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Student Representatives by their Faculty Sponsors. The purpose of the survey was to gather information about the perspective of graduate students concerning problematic peers and their experiences with them in school psychology training programs. Findings suggest that (a) students are not sure whether or not their training programs have an official procedure in place for dealing with problematic students; (b) the problems they observe most commonly involve poor interpersonal skills; (c) consistent with other mental health programs, school psychology graduate students most often talk with their peers or avoid contact with the problematic peer when they have concerns rather than go to faculty; (d) the majority (49.4%) of the respondents feel that faculty or training directors have the most responsibility for the identification of problematic peers but that students have an ethical duty to provide information to the teaching staff if they feel they have a reason to believe there is a problem of which the faculty is unaware.

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Chapter I

Literature Review

There is a national trend towards focusing on competency-based education, training, and credentialing (Kaslow et al., 2004) of which school psychology is a part (Cruise & Swerdlik, 2009). Within professional psychology as a whole, academic faculty serve as the profession's gatekeepers, which gives them the responsibility of protecting the public by identifying and intervening early with graduate students who exhibit difficulties with maintaining professional competency. Decisions regarding the identification and intervention or termination of *problematic students* have significant consequences for the student, the program, and the public (Vacha-Haase, Davenport, & Kerewsky, 2004) and should not be taken lightly. Although most faculty members of graduate programs are in agreement that they should address problematic behaviors exhibited by students, the current research available leads to more questions than answers (Vacha-Haase et al., 2004). The research on *student impairment* that does exist is characterized by confusing terminology and poor methodology (Brear, Dorian, & Luscri, 2008; Forrest, Elman, Gizara, and Vacha-Haase, 1999). In particular, terms such as *distressed*, *impaired*, or *problematic student* have been used interchangeably in the literature (Vacha-Haase et al., 2004), along with the catch-all term *unsuitability* (e.g., Brear et al., 2008) with no provision of a unified definition. It is difficult to determine if a student is exhibiting competence when the field has not come to an agreement as to what it should look like when it is observed. In turn, graduate students, without knowing what is clearly expected of them, may not demonstrate the skills that the faculty desire to see when they are present. It is sometimes difficult for faculty to get to know students well and vice versa when they only see each other once per week in class. For this reason, some research has suggested that student reports may provide

useful information for faculty members to consider when evaluating the professional and competent behavior of individual graduate students. Being much closer to the problems, students may be aware of issues concerning their peers because they may see them outside of the academic environment as well as in the classroom (Rosenberg, Getzelman, Arcinue, & Oren, 2005). This is a delicate issue, however, because students nor faculty want to be a part of a vicious circle of gossip and unethical behavior. Such problems evaluating professional competency of graduate students highlight the need for more open communication between faculty and students, the need for a clear picture of what professional competency should look like for graduate students and how it should be evaluated, and the need for additional research on this matter. Previous research (Oliver, Bernstein, Anderson, Blashfield, & Roberts, 2004; Rosenberg et al., 2005) has consistently found that students did not believe they had a sufficient way to address their concerns about problem peers in their graduate programs. Rosenberg et al. (2005) noted in their research that students overwhelmingly felt that they wanted problems to be acknowledged and promptly remediated although they were uncertain as to who was responsible for addressing concerns among their peers. The authors' study results also suggested that graduate students experience frustration when they sense that faculty are not resolving issues concerning problematic students. The disconnect between feeling like they are attending classes with students who may not have the skills to be in the graduate program, and feeling like they have to wait on faculty to take control of the issue brings confusion and frustration for students who feel like they have worked so hard to get where they are. Thus, discussions of problematic peers led some respondents to feel like admission procedures needed to change.

Progression of Definitions Related to Student Competencies

The term *impairment* was once suggested by Kutz (1986) to refer to situations in which a person had once reached and demonstrated an ability to maintain a proficient level of professional competence but for one or more reasons the individual's functioning became diminished over a period of time. Lamb

et al. (1987) further viewed impairment as occurring when several conditions apply. These may include the following:

(a) the intern does not acknowledge, understand, or address the problematic behavior when it is identified; (b) the problematic behavior is not merely a reflection of a skill deficit that can be rectified by academic or didactic training; (c) the quality of service delivered by the intern is consistently negatively affected; (d) the problematic behavior is not restricted to one area of professional functioning; (e) the problematic behavior has potential for ethical or legal ramifications if not addressed; (f) a disproportionate amount of attention by training personnel is required; (g) the intern's behavior does not change as a function of feedback, remediation efforts, or time; and (h) the intern's behavior negatively affects the public image of the agency (Lamb et al., 1987, p. 599).

Lamb and his colleagues' definition was written concerning behavior at internship sites and recognized that the student's behavior could potentially damage the public image of an agency. Thus, the impact of negative student competency behavior can have far reaching consequences, and can even prevent the agency from being willing to work with a university in taking an intern at a later time.

There have also been questions presented in the literature inquiring if some students just never achieve a proficient level of competence in the first place. Gizara and Forrest (2004) feel that in such situations when the student's level of attained professional competency is in question, the student's behavior should be considered as "not competent" as opposed to impaired. A major problem lies in the fact that such distinctions on the continuum of professional behavior are not always clear cut, especially since there is currently no consensus within the profession of psychology regarding what should be mastered at each stage of professional preparation or who should even be setting the performance standards (i.e., doctoral programs, accrediting boards, internship sites, etc.) (Litchenberg et al., 2007).

This lack of consistency exists in the literature despite the fact that the American Psychological Association's (APA) most recent *Guidelines and Principles for Accreditation of Programs in Professional Psychology* indicates in Domain E (Student-Faculty Relations and Intern-Staff Relations)

that programs are to provide students with annual written feedback on the extent to which they are meeting the program's requirements and its performance expectations (APA, 2009). Less specifically, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (2000)'s *Professional Conduct Manual* encourages training program faculty and clinical or field supervisors (in Domain III, Section F) to develop and utilize evaluation practices for trainees that are objective, accurate, and fair. It also mandates faculty to provide "specific and comprehensive instruction, feedback, and mentoring to student trainees" (p. 24-25).

Even though a consensual definition of student issues with professional competency behavior has not been presented in the literature to date, some tenets of a definition are worthy to note. First, there has been a mass movement shifting away from the use of the term impairment, as it has a legal association to the definition of disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). According to the United States Equal Opportunity Commission (2009), as described in the Executive Summary of the Compliance Manual Section 902, the term impairment is associated with a physiological disorder, which may include a mental or psychological disorder. Secondly, it has been found in studies from the student's perspective that psychology students are not generally fond of the term impairment, and some students have noted it to be unclear or offensive. (Bernstein, Collins, and Merlo, 2003; Oliver et al., 2004). Finally, although having so many varied definitions is cumbersome, having distinctions ranging from "never having achieved competence" to "diminished competence" may be helpful in pinpointing effective interventions (Forrest et al., 1999) when it comes to remediating individual students. Competence is not static and demonstrating competence at one point does not in any way guarantee that an individual will demonstrate competence at a later point. Further, competence in one area of practice also does not imply that an individual will possess competence in another area. To put it simply, one is not either competent or incompetent (Barnett, 2007).

For the sake of the review of the recent research presented here, the encompassing term *problematic student* (Rosenberg et al., 2005) will be used for consistency ,when appropriate, unless the author or authors' specific term must be used for sake of clarity to refer to a particular work. Many terms

have been used interchangeably in the research to refer to problems with students' professional competency. The term *problematic student* in particular does not distinguish between the attainment and subsequent loss of competence and the lack of the initial attainment of professional skills. It does, however, recognize that a problem has emerged with a student that prompts increased attention from the faculty and the student's peers.

Review of Current Research

Within the school psychology literature in particular, there is limited research on problematic student behaviors. To the knowledge of the authors of this review of the literature, there have only been four known studies to date that have included school psychology PhD programs as part of the subject base, and they have been wrought with very limited participation (e.g., Huprich & Rudd, 2004; Procidano, Busch-Rossnagel, Reznikoff, and Geisinger, 1995; Schwebel & Coster, 1998; Vacha-Haase et al., 2004). Huprich and Rudd (2004) presented the only study of the four that differentiated school psychology from clinical and counseling psychology results; their work also separately identified how many participating program directors from school psychology participated. Unfortunately, only four school psychology programs returned usable surveys. There are no known studies to date involving Education Specialist (Ed.S) degree programs.

The most recent publication on the topic of problematic students is a chapter by Cruise & Swerdlik (2009) that can be found in a new book entitled the *Handbook of Education, Training, and Supervision of School Psychologists in School and Community (Vol 2)*. In their chapter in the handbook, the authors Cruise and Swerdlik emphasize the conditions under which problems with competence may arise. They state that students may struggle with professional competence when they do not yet have sufficient experience or education, when they repeatedly do not demonstrate an adequate response to feedback; in instances where they have had difficulty managing personal stressors or have professional development concerns; when they have problems with interpersonal relationships, or when mental health difficulties arise. Further, in their discussion of the identification of problematic behaviors, the authors

differentiate between transitory issues that can be resolved through appropriate support, and behaviors that are more severe and resistant to remediation. For these more severe issues, the authors subscribe to Lamb et al., (1987)'s definition (previously provided). Their chapter, entitled "Problematic Behaviors: Mediating Differences and Negotiating Change," (Cruise & Swerdlik, 2009) highlights the importance of summative evaluations (which may come in forms such as comprehensive exams, Praxis scores, internship, and graduation) that relate to formative evaluations that take place throughout the course of a student's program. The authors emphasize the importance of notifying students at the start of their program on what they will be assessed, and they state that assessment should focus on students' "knowledge, practice based skills, and personal work characteristics" (p. 138). The examples of personal and professional skill areas that they note should be assessed as part of a graduate program in school psychology include (but are not limited to) "Professional Deportment" (including professional attire or behavior), openness to supervision, and the ability to manage personal stress. Kaslow et al. (2007) indicated their belief that the integration of all of these areas allows for effective task performance. Kaslow and colleagues also stressed that programs should utilize multiple raters (multiple supervisors who are from diverse environments) to rate trainee competence to ensure reliability and validity and to reduce bias.

Ethical Codes and Components of Professional Functioning

Kaslow et al.'s (2007) work also emphasized self-assessment as an important piece of overall assessment, as well as of professional development. The *APA's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* indicates that "Psychologists undertake ongoing efforts to develop and maintain their competence," (2.03 Maintaining Competence) (APA, 2003). The APA (2003) also admonishes psychologists to pay close attention to their professional boundaries. Section 2.01, Boundaries of Competence, emphasizes that "psychologists provide services, teach, and conduct research with populations and in areas only within the boundaries of their competence," (p. 4). In addition, psychologists are also beseeched to self-monitor their own thoughts and behaviors in order to maintain a

high quality of work, to manage their competence, and to “do no harm.” The following Codes of Conduct apply:

2.06 Personal Problems and Conflicts

(a) Psychologists refrain from initiating an activity when they know or should know that there is a substantial likelihood that their personal problems will prevent them from performing their work-related activities in a competent manner.

b) When psychologists become aware of personal problems that may interfere with their performing work-related duties adequately, they take appropriate measures, such as obtaining professional consultation or assistance, and determine whether they should limit, suspend, or terminate their work-related duties.” (APA, 2003, p.5)

The transition to graduate school involves ongoing monitoring of one’s own personal as well as professional behaviors, which may be difficult especially for new graduate students to manage and monitor. Since graduate students are in the process of learning about the expectations of their new profession, it is unrealistic to expect new graduate students to be able to adequately monitor their own risk for impairment (Schwartz-Mette, 2009). However, as underscored by the APA codes listed, being able to monitor one’s own competencies and limitations is part of sound professional functioning as a psychologist. School psychologists whose ethical behavior is governed by NASP are held to similar policies in Section II of the *Professional Conduct Manual* (NASP, 2000).

There are numerous components that make up professional functioning, and some researchers have identified attributes that contribute to the success of a professional psychologist. In a study on *Well-functioning* psychologists, researchers Coster and Schwebel (1997) interviewed 6 psychologists (from the fields of clinical, counseling, and school psychology) and subsequently identified 10 factors that all of them shared that contributed to their well-functioning. Well-functioning, the authors operationalized, “refers to the enduring quality of one’s professional functioning over time and in the face of professional and personal stressors” (p. 5). For 5 out of the 6 psychologists they interviewed (who had at least 10

years experience in the field) peer support was of highest priority to help them cope with personal and professional stressors, and such support was ranked as having higher importance to their functioning than past and present supervision. The second part of their study that immediately followed their smaller, interview-based study generated data through a response questionnaire administered to 339 randomly selected licensed psychologists. Among well-functioning psychologists and among those who indicated that they were currently impaired or had considered themselves impaired previously but resolved their issues, all indicated that self-awareness/self-monitoring was the number one activity that helped them to maintain well-functioning. Interestingly, it was noted that all of the factors listed in the top seven were concerning relationships with self and others and may likely have “a large educational and training component associated with graduate training and subsequent supervision and education” (p. 9). In addition, the authors also discussed in their research implications that the identification of early warning signs of distress is crucial to well-functioning, and that it may be necessary for professionals to ask themselves honestly if their workload is too heavy from time to time. Not having enough time for adequate sleep, family, and leisure activities are important indicators of distress that need to be monitored. The authors advised that it is of utmost importance for psychologists to have close, cooperative, trusting relationships with colleague(s) because such relationships provide a powerful resource for coping with various struggles (Coster & Schwebel, 1997).

Training Program Protocols for Handling Issues with Student Competencies

Considering the discrepancy in power between faculty and graduate students, the graduate faculty of training programs possess an increased responsibility to identify and deal with potentially problematic behaviors (Schwartz-Mette, 2009). The 2009 accreditation guidelines provided by APA’s Commission on Accreditation require programs to provide students with written policies that inform students of performance evaluation, feedback, advising procedures, retention and termination decisions, along with due process and procedures for filing a grievance (APA, 2009; Vacha-Haase et al.,2004). Despite this policy, researchers have uncovered alarming rates of programs who report that they do not have an

official written plan in place to deal with student professional competency issues. Olkin and Gaughen (1991) surveyed chairs of clinical and counseling psychology, counseling, counselor education, community psychology, and marriage, family, and child counseling programs (all Master's degree programs) and of 54 usable surveys, 45% of respondents indicated that they had no such written policies in place. However, 81% indicated that they made routine evaluations of all students. Most program chairs (76%) reported identifying one to three problematic student behaviors per year that required some sort of response from the program faculty. In a comparable study, Procidano et al. (1995) surveyed 71 doctoral programs in professional psychology (including clinical, counseling, and school psychology) and found that approximately 52.5 percent of responding programs indicated that they had some policy in place for dealing with professional deficiencies among students, but only about 35 programs had policies that were written. Thus, according to their findings, one-fourth of doctoral clinical, counseling, and school psychology programs have no policy (not even an informal one) for dealing with issues of professional competency among students, and approximately half do not have written policies in place. Interestingly, the authors also found that having a policy was inversely related to reported instances of problematic behavior associated with personality or emotional problems and positively related to reported instances of clinical skill limitations. Thus, having a policy in place may have encouraged faculty to make the issues of which they became aware more reportedly academic and thus observable in nature for documentation purposes, in turn decreasing attributions associated with the problematic student's personality.

Interestingly, Huprich and Rudd (2004) surveyed clinical, counseling, and school psychology doctoral programs and internships and found that only 58% of the doctoral programs reported having a formal program policy in place but 84% of internships had such a policy. The results, according to the authors, may suggest that programs choose to only invest time in managing issues of student competency when faced with a problem. This can be a risky move in the event of a lengthy litigation process. Speaking from a voice of experience, McAdams, Foster, and Ward (2007) expressed that they were relieved that they were protected when a student sued them and select administrators of their university.

Having a written plan in place helped them to defend themselves adeptly in federal court when the student sought legal action. For example, their written documentation helped them to directly challenge the charge that the student was expelled without notice and was denied to right to a procedural due process. Through the plan, they provided the student with formative feedback that helped to make a solid case for the university and the training program. Although the university's decision to dismiss the student was upheld, the process was a lengthy one (the case was initiated in July 2002, it went to trial in August 2003, and then an 18-month appeal process took place up until February 2005) and even involved the cross-examination of other students in the program who were considered potential witnesses. The authors reported that possibly their most regrettable error was promising students that their confidentiality would not be breached when they came forth to the faculty with their concerns about the classmate's hostile behavior; it was a promise the faculty was not able to keep when the courts became involved. Overall, the authors noted that it was clearly to their benefit that "a structured professional performance evaluation protocol had been developed and implemented in advance of the need for it," (p. 220).

As this case example illustrates, having a plan in place does not eliminate problems just as requiring ethics coursework does not prevent students from having ethical dilemmas. As de las Fuentes, Willmuth, and Yarrow (2005) noted, it is naïve to think that training programs can develop specific moral characters in their students. That does not, however, discourage organizations such as the APA and NASP from having requirements of ethical functioning. Without awareness, problems cannot be resolved. In the most recently published (2003) APA ethical code, Standard 7.04 explains that although programs are not generally permitted to require students to disclose personal information (such as previous psychological treatment or history of abuse) in class or in other program-related activities, they can do so if the program has *clearly identified* (p. 10) such a requirement in its recruitment materials and program documentation, or the information is required to determine if the student's difficulties are severe enough to keep him or her from effective professional performance or to help him or her obtain assistance for such severe personal problems. This standard also applies if the student appears to pose a threat to self or others.

Although having such a code highlights a need for open communication between faculty and students, and students are notified up front that it may be necessary to extract personal information from them if the need arises, there is no easy way to accomplish the task of gathering such information. Simply because such a mandate is in the ethical code does not mean that any student who needs assistance is going to be forthcoming with information. Further, being governed by such a standard or even having a plan in place (albeit a good idea for legal protections) does not necessarily make the process of giving feedback any easier. Lichtenberg et al. (2007) points out that many professionals find it challenging to give effective evaluative feedback in general. They explain that professionals are less likely to provide negative feedback in a constructive way versus positive feedback because they find it difficult to frame their critique in such a manner that the information is useful to a student or peer. The authors further explain that although positive feedback seems easier to give than the negative, it is not uncommon for educators, trainers, and those who issue credentials to provide very little of it. Such professionals may subscribe to the prevailing thought of “no news is good news.” In that framework, there is little priority given to the role that positive feedback can play in the learning and assessment process (Lichtenberg et al., 2007).

Need for Current Study

Since the Competencies Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona in 2002, the research over the last 8 years has helped to create a paradigm shift in the mental health field towards a focus on competent practice and training for psychological services. The field has ruminated over a definition of professional competence for quite some time, a consensus is yet to be reached, and we are left with more questions than answers (Vacha-Haase et al., 2004). Over time it has been discovered that some programs have an official plan in place for dealing with student competency issues, some have unofficial and unwritten plans, and some seem to only deal with issues as problems arise. Thus far, the research we have is characterized by confusing terminology and poor methodology (Brear et al., 2009; Forrest et al., 1999), and no study has been fully replicated (Schwartz-Mette, 2009). With recent faculty estimates in some

areas of mental health training indicating that between 7% and 13% of enrolled students are experiencing significant competency issues (depending on if students who are not remediated or dismissed are included) (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002), it is clear that a plan for a resolution needs to be developed in the near future so training programs can matriculate quality graduates through training curriculum and release successful employees into the workforce. What important pieces of information are graduate programs missing that could help prevent or ameliorate at least some of the problems students have with performing in a consistently professional manner? Could including the students themselves in the process help them to take increased responsibility for their own and their peers' professional behavior?

Despite the prevalence of research on this topic, the views of the students themselves remains relatively unexplored (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Oliver et al., 2004). It is an important component nonetheless because faculty may not be aware of the problems graduate students are having with professional competence until after such problems are salient and habitual (Schwartz-Mette, 2009). The perceptions and insight students may have concerning their peers could help to confirm or rebut faculty members' reports on student behavior (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006). Being much closer to the problems, students may be privy to more information on their peers because they may see them outside of the academic environment as well in the classroom (Rosenberg et al., 2005). In turn, student views may help to inform the design of more effective interventions for remedying trainee competency issues (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006). No study to date has examined the views of students in school psychology on this matter, and the views of students in Education Specialist degree programs (the most common degree of practicing school psychologists) have been virtually unexplored.

In 2002, the Council of University Directors of Clinical Psychology (CUDCP) had a training director's meeting that focused on the concern over how to address the needs of students experiencing difficulties in their training programs. At that time, the group took special interest in knowing how students viewed their programs' responses to impaired students, what impact problematic students have on their peers, and what recommendations students might have in remedying problems associated with

student impairment. To gather this information, students of CUDCP affiliated clinical training programs were invited to respond to emailed surveys regarding the issue. Much of the impetus for recent research on this topic stems from outcomes of that CUDCP survey. However, it should be noted that school psychology and counseling were not part of that CUDCP survey process (Oliver et al., 2004).

Review of Current Research on Student Views of Peers' Professional Competency

There are 4 known studies to date that have examined, via survey data, students' views of behavior associated with professional competency. All of these studies combined cover a span from 1991 to 2006. Three of these studies involve clinical psychology training programs, while the study by Gaubatz and Vera (2006), which is the most recent, involves only master's level counseling students. Their study suggested that in the counseling field students report that 21% of their peers are deficient, which is significantly higher than the rate reported in studies of professional psychology training programs. It is interesting to note that in 2002 Gaubatz and Vera were the researchers who coined the term *gateslipping*, which refers to the estimated number of deficient students who are permitted to progress through a training program (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). These counselor educators surveyed in their 2006 study reported that less than 3% of all enrolled students are considered to be gateslipping trainees, while student reports coupled with the numbers of students reported by the faculty to receive intervention suggest that as many as 18% of trainees are progressing through training programs that may not be suitable for the program (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006).

In an exploratory study on the student view, which included clinical and counseling graduate student representation, authors Rosenberg et al. (2005) presented student respondents with six survey questions, two of which mirrored questions from Mearns and Allen's (1991) study. The two replicated questions sought to find out if psychology graduate students are aware of problematic trainees in their program and to assess what types of problems graduate students observe among their peers. The remaining 4 research questions explored student's opinions on whose responsibility it is to handle problematic behaviors of students, and they examined information on the actions or responses students

emit upon finding out about the actions of a problematic peer. It was also explored how the presence of a problematic peer among the student cohort affected the students, their relationships with peers and the faculty, and the perceptions of the academic program. Their final objective solicited recommendations from respondents as to how to address the issue of problematic trainees in an attempt to find a “best practices” strategy. Of 129 student respondents, 85% indicated that one or more problematic peers were among them in their graduate training program. Further, the mean number of students who were identified as peers with problematic behavior by any one respondent was 3.32, a score derived by averaging the number of problematic peers that each of the 129 respondents reported in their program. The authors indicated that their yielded rate of problematic students was commensurate with the rate of 1 to 3 problematic students per program reported by Olkin and Gaughen (1991), who surveyed faculty only. The authors also synthesized that their data was very similar to the results of other studies in which students were the respondents, but that the rates of problematic students reported by students were found to be higher than those reported by training directors in general. When considering this information, it is worthy to note that Rosenberg and colleagues (2005) asked students about current rates of problematic trainees in their programs whereas previous studies of training directors have often asked about frequencies over a span of time such as five to ten years (e.g., Huprich & Rudd, 2004).

Rosenberg and colleagues (2005) also sought to find information on student views of their faculty’s awareness of problematic peers in their cohort, and they examined the student’s views of their own abilities to identify problematic students. Students indicated that faculty held most of the responsibility for dealing with problem students but students also believed it was “somewhat true” that they had a shared responsibility for such student issues among their peers. Further, it was noted in the study that students had a tendency to believe that they were better able to identify problem peers than their professors, and they were not really sure whether their faculty had a clear idea of what was really going on among the students in the program. The respondents were similarly unsure that the faculty was

open to hearing their concerns about a problematic peer, and they generally believed there was no identified protocol in place for dealing with problematic students.

When identifying the most common problems they observed among problematic peers, student respondents identified lack of awareness of impact on others, emotional problems, clinical deficiency, and poor interpersonal skills as the top four respectively listed problems observed. Of the top ten identified, six were related to emotional problems and interpersonal functioning. The authors questioned if students were just unaware of professional issues that may exist among their peers or if behaviors such as unprofessional behavior, drug abuse, and sexual involvement with clients were actually not that common among graduate students (Rosenberg et al., 2005).

The next area explored in Rosenberg and colleagues' (2005) study was the actions students took upon discovering that one of their peers was displaying problematic behaviors. This fourth section contained a checklist, on which the students reported that they were most likely to gossip among themselves. The second most prevalent response was to consult with other students; the third involved withdrawing from the identified problem student. Interestingly, it was noted that one quarter of the time students made an attempt to include faculty in their reaction, and 33% of the time they made a direct or indirect attempt to address the issue with the problem peer. The authors questioned if more students did not choose to disclose their concerns to faculty because they viewed their professors as unsupportive or unresponsive.

In assessing the impact a problematic peer(s) had on the student cohort, the authors (Rosenberg et al., 2005) asked respondents to select choices from a list of possible effects. Only 5% indicated that having a problem peer among them had no effect on them while nearly 50% indicated that the class's functioning was disrupted by the presence of a problematic peer. Further, the students indicated that they often felt angry or frustrated by their professor's lack or perceived lack of identifying problem trainees (55%) and at the lack of response regarding the problematic peer (50%).

For the last research question, the researchers (Rosenberg et al., 2005) solicited information via six open-ended questions in an attempt to gather information for the development of a best practices approach for dealing with problematic student behaviors. The results for this section indicated that students did not believe that they had an adequate outlet to address concerns about problematic peers, and they felt that admission procedures possibly needed to change in order to bring in higher quality students. Students also reported that if they themselves were considered a problematic peer that they would hope that people would be honest with them and would assist them in developing a plan to resolve their issues.

As Rosenberg et al.'s (2005) recent study demonstrated, much information can be gathered from research that allows participants to construct their own responses. Oliver et al. (2004) constructed a survey entirely comprised of open-ended questions. Their study was originally intended to only be shared with the CUDCP board and general members so as a result their methodology left out the collection of important demographic information. The summation of all six areas assessed by open-ended survey questions generated approximately 50 pages of student responses. The two primary authors screened responses for recurring themes for the compilation of the presented data.

The authors (Oliver et al., 2004) asked about what types of problems students saw among their peers, and once again it was noted that alcoholism and drug problems were typically not the types of problems observed. Rather, personality traits and stress management difficulties were noted to be of concern. The authors also found that students generally feel resentment and confusion about how to react towards peers who are having problems performing in a way that adheres to program standards, and that students sometimes find themselves irritated with the faculty when they feel that they are ignoring problematic student behaviors. The student participants in the study indicated that they felt confusion about how the problematic peer's clients were being taken care of, and they reported that they did not always know how to deal with the gossip that spread through the cohort when seemingly everyone knew there was a problem. Further, some respondents estimated that approximately 12% of the students per individual programs are perceived as having significant difficulty that would interfere with their

successful matriculation through the coursework. This high rate, the authors reported, may be the result of the sample bias and should be interpreted with caution. For example, it was proposed that students who responded to the survey may be those who were eager to discuss how exhausting it is to have a problematic peer among them. Another limitation was found in the wording of a key question, which asked how many “impaired students” were known and labeled as such by the students’ clinical training directors. Many students indicated that they could not possibly know the outcome of such a question while others adamantly expressed that they perceived that their director only knew of about half of the students they perceived as impaired.

In soliciting information from the students about how the faculty intervened in issues of problematic student behavior, it was found that over half of the students surveyed were unaware of their program’s policies for identifying and remediating student impairment, and one student felt that his or her program had an “ignore and hope it works itself out” approach when dealing with impaired students (p. 144). Yet another student reported that confronting the impaired student only led to that student resenting the faculty, which did not really help bring resolution to the situation (Oliver et al., 2004).

The responses generated to the final question of the survey indicated that some students were quite adamantly against the term impairment, and they felt like the wording on the survey possibly would lead to limited results. One student specifically commented that the terminology and phrasing used in the survey made it seem like problems only lie within students and that systemic problems related to the training program itself are not possibly part of the problem when they in fact play a significant role (Oliver et al., 2004). For the benefit of the relationships between trainers and trainees and the trainees and their peers, it is important for students to be able to feel respected and for them to feel that their program faculty is responding proactively to the presence of competency problems among their peers. Trainers may need to reassure students that the faculty is working with their peer who has been identified as having difficulties, and students may require help distinguishing the boundaries between respectful silence and the limits of their confidentiality when problems arise (Forrest, Elman, & Miller, 2008).

Students, like other mental health professionals, have concerns about ethical behavior despite their limited experience.

In an earlier study, Mearns and Allen (1991) surveyed a total of 29 faculty and 73 graduate students who were selected among 40 randomly selected clinical psychology training programs. Although the survey was lengthy and may have attracted only those individuals who were willing to take the time to complete the survey, it was significant to note that the faculty overestimated the number of students who chose to take a hands-off approach when it came to dealing with their peers who demonstrated problematic behaviors. To the faculty's surprise, it was indicated that students were motivated by ethical concerns to respond to issues of professional competency among their classmates. Indeed both Mearns and Allens (1991) and Rosenberg and colleagues (2005) found evidence that students believe they are less responsible for dealing with students with competency issues than the faculty. However, student respondents in the Rosenberg and colleagues' study indicated that they were at least somewhat responsible for dealing with problematic peers, and students in general are often put in the unique position of getting to know their peers outside of the academic environment as well as in the classroom. As Mearns and Allen pointed out, bringing student perspectives into the ongoing evaluation processes within programs could help to dispel the belief that students have little responsibility for ensuring that qualified individuals enter the profession.

As previously noted, many professionals have difficulty giving useful, constructive feedback (Lichtenberg et al., 2007) and providing students the opportunity to learn how to give positive and negative feedback well could serve them well throughout their professional careers as psychologists, colleagues, and supervisors. Furthermore, being able to look at one's own performance in a critical way is a vital component of sound professional functioning for a psychologist. Coster and Schwebel (1997) indicated that self-awareness/self-monitoring activities are the main activities that well-functioning psychologists participate in that help them to maintain their high level of overall functioning. They also found that for 5 out of the 6 psychologists interviewed individually, peer support was noted of highest

priority in helping them manage personal and professional stressors; peer support was also ranked as having higher importance to the psychologists' well-functioning than past and present supervision experiences. If peer support is indeed so crucial to students' and professional psychologists' long-term adjustment, would it not be beneficial for programs to help foster those peer critiquing and self-critiquing skills among their students?

In keeping in line with a developmental framework and realizing the inherent power differential between faculty and students, the Student Competence Taskforce of the Council of Chairs of Training Councils (CCTC) (2006) proposed a comprehensive model for the evaluation of student trainees. As part of their model, they stressed that students should be made aware up front that their competency is going to be evaluated in areas other than their coursework and exams and will include (but will not be limited to) an evaluation of their ability to be self-aware, to self-reflect, and their ability to evaluate themselves (CCTC, 2006). Schwartz-Mette (2009) also suggests that self-monitoring has its place but she expresses that it is not sufficient to remediate the problem of appropriately identifying impairment. She explains that given the variability in individuals' self-awareness, their level of insight, and their willingness to be honest about their personal limitations, it may be impossible for some individuals to identify, monitor, and manage their own psychological or professional distress. Further, she also indicates that because graduate students are in the beginning stages of adopting the professional role expected of more experienced psychologists, they are inundated with developmental social and academic stress which makes it difficult to meet professional expectations and manage stress in an efficient way. With all of the pressure that students experience, the author expresses, having open discussions on aspects of self-care may aid academic programs in cultivating an environment in which graduate students can find ways to manage the stress associated with their training. Overall, Schwartz-Mette reports, it is of utmost importance that the culture of training programs matches the ideals taught in the classroom. Without such alignment, students may experience frustration and confusion about the ways to conceptualize and manage their own problematic behaviors and those of their peers.

The research thus far on student opinion of problematic behaviors and competency, although limited, highlights the need for a shift towards a culture of open discussion wherein students can learn from faculty by example (modeling) and by instruction on how to monitor their own ethical behavior and the ethical behavior of peers. Faculty in turn can gather information from their students on issues among the student cohort and on problems often unseen by professors that take place outside of the classroom. Further, as Rosenberg et al.'s study (2005) indicated, when students observe problems among their peers, they commonly observe that their problematic peers do not realize the impact of their own behavior on others. If students can learn to be more cognizant of their own impact on others and they realize that their peers will be holding them accountable for professionalism as well, an environment for change may be fostered. When faculty members are the only individuals searching for problems, as some research demonstrates, students sometimes feel singled out or targeted when asked to participate in remediation. It is naïve to think that faculty and students will ever share an equal responsibility in identifying and remediating students with diminished competency or those students who never reach competency in the first place. However, it may be possible for students and faculty alike to see the importance of identifying problems early and remediating them in a way that is collaborative and communal in nature instead of punitive and attacking.

Specific Need for Current Research of Student Views in School Psychology

Despite the trend towards competency-based research and education in all areas of professional psychology training and credentialing, students in school psychology training programs have had little representation. Sample sizes in studies of the student view have been very limited at best, and the views of students from school psychology graduate degree programs have been severely underrepresented in the literature. The current research will strive to find out what types of problematic, competency-related behaviors graduate students from NASP-approved programs have observed among their peers. This study will also seek out information on how NASP Student Representatives as graduate students view their faculty's ability to identify problematic students as compared to their own abilities for identification, and

it will ascertain if and to what degree graduate students feel responsible for the identification and remediation of problematic peers. In a self-report survey format and based on previous research findings, participating Student Representatives will be asked how they would prefer to be notified if they themselves were identified by faculty to have difficulties with professional competency. They will also be asked to report how they feel the presence of problematic peer(s) (students with identified issues of professional competency) has impacted the other students in the program. More specifically, the survey will be utilized to find out if the presence of such problematic students has changed the emotional and interpersonal behavior of students in their program in general and how their behavior has changed (when applicable) towards the student who has been identified as problematic. In addition, rates of NASP-approved school psychology programs that possess an official (written) protocol for dealing with problematic students will be ascertained via student reports. Student respondents will also be asked to provide their opinion as to whether they feel their faculty adequately addresses the issue of problematic peers, if they feel their faculty are open to hearing about students' concerns about one or more of their peers who may be experiencing problems or whether they even feel that student opinions should be taken into consideration, and if they feel they have been sufficiently notified about the plan of action that faculty plan to follow when an issue with problematic peers arises in their program. To the knowledge of the authors of this research, answers to such questions have not been presented to date in school psychology research.

Chapter II

Method

Subjects

The subjects of the current study were NASP Student Representatives who are faculty appointed and supervised by NASP Faculty Sponsors. The Student Representatives were from various graduate training program types that are NASP-approved (i.e., Masters, Education Specialist, and Doctoral). A total of 103 NASP Student Representatives clicked to begin the survey from the informed consent page, but 77 (74%) respondents were considered to have completed the survey by clicking the “done” button on the last page of the survey. The majority of respondents were from the South (30.5%) with a close second in the Mid-Atlantic (23.2%). Graduate school psychology programs in the Northeast were represented at 14.6%, Midwest at 19.5%, West at 9.8%, and Pacific West at 2.4%; it was also found that 21 respondents skipped the question and therefore preferred not to indicate the location of their program. The majority of programs represented were doctoral, with the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) programs being represented by 30.1% and an additional 4.8% being represented by Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) students. The second most represented degree was Education Specialist (Ed.S.) (25.3%), followed by other (20.5%) and Master of Arts students (M.A.) (19.3%). The size of the participating graduate programs varied from unknown to an estimated 100 with all class years combined. From the responses received, it appeared that some participants interpreted this demographic to include all graduate students from, for example, Ed.S. students as well as doctoral students if the student’s program had both programs available; it could have also been interpreted as the total of all first year doctoral students, second year doctoral students and others within the same program type. It was noted that 21 of the students skipped the question indicating their program size and 3 students indicated that they did not know. In the “Number of School Psychology Graduate Students in your Cohort” question, 21 skipped the question and 82 responded. Responses on this question ranged from unknown to 50. The most frequent (mode) program size in a student’s own cohort

was reportedly 13 students, representing approximately 15% of the respondents' reports. Approximately 95% of the respondents estimated that their cohort size was in the 0 to 20 students range.

Procedure

Overall, three weeks were allotted for online recruitment and data collection. In order to initially recruit Student Representative respondents, an email was sent to NASP Faculty Sponsors of the 166 NASP-approved School Psychology graduate programs (excluding the university hosting the survey) in the United States of America (U.S.) that were included on a spreadsheet of NASP Student Leaders and Faculty Sponsors as provided on NASP's website (NASP, 2009). The spreadsheet contained names of 172 Student Representatives, their Faculty Sponsors, and the name of the university with which they are associated. The Faculty Sponsors' email addresses were obtained by using Google (an internet search engine) (Google, 2010) and researching posted curriculum vitae or staff biography pages at the various universities included on the list. The faculty sponsors were asked to forward via email the information about the study to the NASP Student Representative(s), and the forwarded message included a survey link that was provided by SurveyMonkey.com (Finley, 2010).

After program Faculty Sponsors were emailed, one program replied back to the student researcher and indicated that were no longer approved by the National Association of School Psychologists. It was also discovered that three other listed NASP Faculty Sponsors were on sabbatical, but in two of the cases alternate names and emails were provided as contacts by auto reply emails; in the third case there was no additional contact information for the program that could be obtained. In addition, one other program was not able to be contacted because the email address for the Faculty NASP Sponsor was rendered invalid and no alternate addresses could be obtained. Also, for five schools the listed NASP Sponsor email information could not be obtained or it was indicated that the professor only worked part-time or during specified semesters on campus and would likely not be able to respond or forward the information along to Student Representatives in a timely manner. In those cases, the designated program director was emailed the recruitment information in lieu of the NASP Faculty Sponsor. After these concerns were

addressed, there were a total of 163 programs confirmed to be represented and contacted at least once via email for the purpose of the current study. Most programs were contacted twice by email but several emails were returned up to five days later indicating that they were undeliverable. Thus, it was not possible to confirm for certain that all programs were contacted twice. (However, it is estimated that ≤ 3 programs were contacted only once). Based on the originally provided spreadsheet, the possible number of NASP Student Representatives who had the opportunity to respond to the survey if the information was forwarded to them by their Faculty Sponsors was 169 Representatives. In addition, identical information as to what was previously sent out via the recruitment email was put on *Trainers of School Psychologists* Listserv (hosted by the University of Kentucky) 15 days into the data collection period. This was done to allow programs with NASP Student Representatives that may have not been included on the original spreadsheet or for others who had not yet participated to have a chance to participate and respond to the survey. An additional week was allotted for the potential respondents recruited from the Listserv message after the email was sent out. It is unknown how many total programs are represented in this study since it also unknown how many additional programs were contacted through the Listserv recruitment; some larger programs have more than one representative so assuming that the number of programs is equivalent to the number of participating Representatives may not be accurate.

Instrument

A survey format and questions similar to those presented by Rosenberg et al. (2005) was used for the purpose of this exploratory study. The noteworthy differences between the current survey and that of Rosenberg et al. is such that the current study was geared to all graduate-level school psychology program types (i.e., Masters, Education Specialist, and Doctoral) whereas as their study focused on the opinions of clinical and counseling psychology masters and doctoral students. The current study, like Rosenberg et al.'s, asked how the presence of problematic peers affects the professional functioning of students when there is a problematic peer(s) involved. In addition, it was designed to differentiate between the interpersonal and emotional reactions students had when interacting with their peers and faculty.

The first page of the five page electronic survey included an informed consent page asking students to confirm that they were at least 18 years of age, that they understood that they could back out of the survey at any time, and that they understood that their participation was voluntary. The number of responses received per question varied from 59 to 83 on the survey, with the lowest number of responses received being on the final item of the survey. (The final item was an open-response item soliciting suggestions as to how faculty might decrease the number of problematic students in school psychology programs).

Precautions for Respondent Privacy

All universities in the population assessed were informed in the recruitment email that they would be provided information on where they could read about the results of the study upon its completion. This information follow-up was also provided regardless of whether the NASP Student Representative(s) chose to participate in the study. This provision of feedback was added as a layer of protection for respondents so that they did not feel pressured by Faculty Sponsors to complete the survey. No identifying information about the respondents was collected in order to protect their identity. Student Representatives' responses were automatically compiled in a spreadsheet provided through SurveyMonkey.com's online data collector software (Finley, 2010), and responses could not be traced back to the participant. In addition, the researchers were not able to identify who participated in the project or determine any one person's response pattern. Internet Protocol (IP) addresses were also not collected for the respondent's protection. Taking the survey was expected to take approximately 15-20 minutes of the respondent's time. Participants were instructed to print a copy of the consent to save for their own records when they clicked to begin the survey. The survey data was maintained by a password-protected electronic server provided by SurveyMonkey.com (Finley, 2010).

Chapter III

Results

According to related studies in mental health training programs, rates of problematic students reported by faculty have ranged from 89% of enrolled graduate students (Procidano et al., 1995) to a rate between 93% and 95% reported by both faculty and students (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). In seeking out the rate reported by graduate students, Rosenberg et al. (2005) found that 85% of their sample (of 129 students) reported that at least one problematic student was involved in his or her program. The current study asked NASP Student Representatives if they were aware of problematic trainee(s) in their school psychology training program and 71% (of 80 respondents on this question) reported that they were aware of such problematic trainees, 29% reported that they were not aware of problematic trainees, and 23 respondents chose to skip the question. Although lower than the previously reported percentages in other areas of the field, it appears that problematic students are a significant concern in school psychology training programs as well.

When asked the follow-up question about how many problematic trainees the Student Representatives expected to be in their own cohort, 36 respondents skipped the question, 38.8% (of the 67 responses received) reported 1 problematic student; 14.9% reported 2, approximately 4.5% reported 3, and 35.8% reported that the question was not applicable to their cohort, indicating there were no problematic students reported. When collapsing the data, this means that 58% of the respondents indicated 1 to 3 problematic students to be in their cohort, and 89.5% reported 0 to 2 problematic students. In comparison, Mearns and Allen (1991) reported a rate of *impairment* ranging from “0 to less than 3” from all program participants who reported an average of 50.3 students (p. 195), but their data did not appear to specifically differentiate the number found within cohorts in a program as the current study did. The size of the participating school psychology programs were between 31 and 50 students (46.3% of the sample), and 95.1% of programs reported 0 to 20 students per cohort. The difficulty comparing the results highlights the need for convergence in the field. It is a difficult task to compare data results with

previous research when the definition of problematic students (or impaired, unsuitable, etc.) has varied between studies over the last decade, the definition has largely been left up to survey respondents since no operational definition has been provided in most studies thus far (a definition was provided for participants in the current study), and previous results have presented limited representation from the field of school psychology.

The next question in the survey asked respondents if they thought their program deals with problematic students appropriately, a question presented in Oliver et al.'s (2004) study. The results of the current research indicated that 31.3% of the Student Representative respondents (of 80 on this particular question) reported "yes" while 30% reported that they were "uncertain," followed by 18.8% who reported that such students were not dealt with appropriately in their program. Taking into consideration the close rates of those who endorsed yes and uncertain, according to the sample, it appears that school psychology NASP Student Representatives have mixed feelings on this matter or they are unaware of how problematic students are handled. Oliver et al. reported, based on their research, that the topic of "student impairment" is typically met with "confusion and awkwardness," (p. 144). Students in their study were noted to be in favor of opening up the lines of communication on the issue as long as confidentiality played a major role in the process for all parties involved.

The next survey question asked, "What types of problems have you observed or encountered among problematic peers in your program?" Answer choices were provided and survey takers were instructed to select all that apply. The checklist of problem behaviors came from the top 10 reported in the results of Rosenberg et al.'s (2005) survey wherein their initial checklist included 34 items. On their survey, the top 5 most common problems endorsed in order included lack of awareness of impact on others (60%), emotional problems (58%), clinical deficiency (54%), poor interpersonal skills (52%), and academic deficiency (47%). In the current survey, the top four items the respondents endorsed in order included poor interpersonal skills (59.7%), academic deficiency (defined as difficulty meeting deadlines, disorganized, poor work quality, etc.) (53.7%), unprofessional behavior (49.3%) (was not defined for

respondents), and lack of awareness of impact on others (46.3%). In addition, tied (at 28.4%) in the 5th position on the current survey were maturity problems and clinical deficiency. (Clinical deficiency involves difficulty applying skills taught in classroom, such as providing interventions or following protocol when administering assessments, etc.). In comparison to Rosenberg et al. (2005)'s study, it was noted that 4 of the same observed behaviors were on both top 5 lists, but they were found to occur at different rates in school psychology graduate programs. The results indicate that the most common problematic behavior observed in school psychology graduate programs is poor interpersonal skills. Emotional problems did not score near the top of the list, but they were selected by 26.9% of the respondents.

Other problems reported from the checklist included personality issues (23.9%), inability to respond to social cues (20.9%), and cheating/plagiarizing (10.4%). Other was indicated by 2 respondents: one respondent said that the problematic peer(s) with whom he or she had contact seemed to talk too much and the other respondent indicated that there was "a lack of community within program," suggesting that the majority of the students were too consumed with their course loads to become more involved. (This may suggest that in some instances students are not involved with each other enough to really have the opportunity to observe problematic behaviors in others, but it is unclear if this message was the respondent's intention). It was also noted that one respondent checked that he or she preferred not to respond.

In the current survey, the respondent's interpersonal reaction and emotional reactions were asked about separately via different questions spaced several pages apart. The first question about the student's reaction asked, "What was your interpersonal reaction upon discovering that a peer among your cohort was having difficulty with professional competence?" Student Representatives reported that they talked to other students about the issue but not directly with the student experiencing difficulty (49.3%), that they withdrew from the problem peer (40%), or they consulted with other students about how to handle the situation because they were unsure if they should say something to the problematic peer or not

(29.3%). (This item indicated that the student did not actually have to go the problem peer as a result of the consultation but that they spoke to peers about the situation with the intention of getting advice on the matter). Some respondents indicated that they themselves talked to the peer experiencing difficulties to express support or concern (16%) and the same percentage (16%) reported that they could not recall a response or action they took concerning a problematic peer. In addition, some students (9.3% for each factor respectively or 7 respondents) reported that they went by themselves to talk to a respected faculty member about their concerns; that they went with a peer to speak to a faculty member about their concerns, and 7 also entered their own constructed responses with 2 of those responses suggesting that no such actions were taken because there were no problematic students in their program (additional respondent comments will be noted in the next [Thematic Categorization] section). It was noted that some indicated that they preferred not to respond (5.3%), and others (4%) reported that they emailed the peer themselves to address the issue in a non-threatening way. Student Representatives also reported (2.7% each) that they sent an email to a faculty member to bring up the issue in a less-threatening manner or they somehow otherwise addressed the issue with a faculty member anonymously by leaving a note. In comparison to Rosenberg et al. (2005)'s results, the same behavior categories were endorsed in the top 3 but at different rates. The current study did not specifically refer to "talking to other students about the issue" as gossip as Rosenberg et al. did, but it appears that both surveys are referring to the same demonstrated behavior. The results of the current study suggest that Student Representatives in school psychology, in comparison to clinical and counseling graduate students as reported by Rosenberg et al.(2005), are more likely to withdraw from the problematic peer (40% versus 45% in Rosenberg et al.'s study) than consult with other students about the issue (29.3% in the current study versus 49%) although both percentages were found to be lower in the current study in comparison. However, it should be noted that the current study specifically indicated that talking to another student was intended to resolve whether or not the student should try to talk to the problematic student directly---a specification that no other study provided. If students just spoke to or gossiped with other students about the problematic

student and the respondent did not on any level intend to go to the problematic student directly about the issue, this item may not have been endorsed. Therefore, the results yielded within school psychology may not be different from those of Rosenberg et al. but the way they were asked may have had an impact on the results yielded.

The second question about Student Representatives' reaction involved soliciting information about the emotional reaction they had when finding out that there were one or more problematic students among their classmates who had problems with professional competence. The majority of respondents (33 of 74 or 44.6%) reported that they began avoiding interaction with the problem peer(s); some indicated (33.8%) that they had concern that the problem peer(s) would be hurtful to the children with whom they were working or that they would cause damage to the consultative relationships with parents and teachers in their line of work. These top two concerns were also noted as primary in Rosenberg et al. (2005)'s study with 58% of the sample endorsing both individually. In addition, approximately 31.1% in the current study indicated that they were fearful that the reputation of the program would be damaged and 29.7% said they feel that the screening process needed to be enhanced or changed (54% in Rosenberg et al.'s study in comparison). Closely ranked, 28.4% reported that they felt frustrated at the faculty for not screening out and accepting problematic peers in the program. It was also found that 27% felt frustrated, angry, or experienced a lack of faith in faculty for not identifying problematic peers or for not identifying them more quickly in their program (55% endorsed this item in Rosenberg et al.'s study). Notably, 21.6% (or 16 respondents) also entered their own comments with 9 (56%) of these comments indicating that problematic students were not an issue in their program. (The themes that emerged on these reaction questions will be addressed in next section, which will address open responses). Another 6 respondents indicated that they preferred not to respond. Overall, it was noted that the majority of respondents reported that they began to avoid the problematic peer when they realized that the individual(s) was having difficulty with professional competence, and they also talked to other students about the issue when they became cognizant of the issue. Since both of these questions permitted respondents to check all

answers that applied, it is possible that some NASP Student Representatives indicated that they engaged in more than one action.

A core purpose of the current research was to find if students in school psychology graduate programs felt responsibility and to what degree they felt responsible for the identification of problematic peers in their graduate training programs. Among 79 responses, 49.4% (39 respondents) indicated that faculty or training directors have the most responsibility for the identification of problematic peers (consistent with previous studies) but that students have an ethical duty to provide information to the teaching staff if they feel they have a reason to believe there is a problem of which the faculty is unaware. Rosenberg and colleagues (2005) noted that participants answered less definitively when asked whether or not students have responsibility for dealing with problematic peers. To moderate a less definitive response, the current study did not have the respondents to rate their responses on this item (i.e., somewhat, very much). Rather, they were asked to select a statement that most closely reflected their views. Only 15.2% of respondents indicated that students have little responsibility for the identification of problematic peers. Even a smaller percentage (12.7%) indicated that students and faculty have an equal or joint responsibility for the identification of problematic peers while 10.1% said students have a moderate responsibility for the identification process. It was also found that 7.6% feel that training directors have the ultimate responsibility, and 2.5% reported that the response choices did not reflect their thinking on the matter of problematic peer identification.

In relation, it was also asked if student opinions should be taken into consideration by faculty when problematic students are identified, and an overwhelming 81.6% (62 of 76) respondents indicated that student opinions should be taken into consideration. Students were asked to respond with additional information on their yes and no responses and the themes of their answers will be further discussed in the next section. It was also indicated that 17.1% felt that student opinions should not be taken into consideration, 3 students selected that they preferred not to respond, and an additional 27 respondents

chose to skip the question. It should also be noted in reviewing these responses that 2 respondents indicated both yes and no in their answer choices, slightly inflating the results.

Student Representatives were also asked to think about how they would prefer to be notified if they themselves were identified as a student struggling with problems of professional competence. The results of the survey (among 76 responses received) indicated that 57.9% would prefer to have an informal meeting after class with a professor, and 55.3% indicated that they would prefer to meet with their faculty advisor only about the issue. The remaining responses included 6.6% preferred to have a formal meeting with multiple faculty at the same time, 5.3% prefer an action letter, and one respondent selected that he or she preferred not to respond.

The authors of the current study were also very interested in knowing if school psychology training programs report similar rates of protocols or procedures in place for dealing with problematic students that other mental health training programs have reported. Specifically, the authors wanted to know if such plans were in existence and if they were written, binding documents. Olkin and Gaughen (1991) indicated that 45% of their Master's level sample had no written plan; Procidano et al. (1995) reported that only about 49.3% (of a sample of doctoral students in professional psychology programs) had a written plan; Huprich and Rudd (2004) reported that 58% of their sample had a formal policy in place, and Oliver et al. (2004), who also assessed this information from the student point of view, found that 53% of the respondents were unaware of their program's protocol, a number commensurate with what Rosenberg et al. (2005) found in their research. In the current study, 61.3% of 75 respondents indicated that they did not know if their training program had a written procedure for dealing with problematic students. It was also indicated that 33.3% thought there was a written plan, and 5.3% thought that there was not a written plan. It is difficult to compare the current rates with the actual rates of previous studies when the majority of students are unsure if their program has a written plan in place for dealing with problematic students. Many previous studies utilized the opinions of training directors, which are must more likely to know definitively about the presence of a written plan.

A related question asked if the student's program had a written plan in place and where the plan could be found. The most frequently endorsed item (47.3%) indicated that the plan could be found in writing in the program handbook if the respondent was aware of the existence of a written plan, and 23% indicated that they were unsure if there even was a plan. Another 17.6% indicated that they were pretty sure there was a plan but they were not sure where to find it, and 20.3% said they did not think there was a plan. The remaining 8.1% thought the written plan could be found in the university catalog, and 2 respondents (2.7%) thought that the plan may have been provided as a separate handout or document to students.

Despite the knowledge of a written, definitive plan, the respondents overwhelmingly (78.9% of 76 respondents) reported that the faculty of their program was sensitive to the issue of problematic peers and student professional competency. This is interesting considering that earlier in the survey 30% of respondents and 31.3% respectively indicated *unsure* and *yes* when asked if their program dealt with problematic students appropriately. So students reported that their faculty were sensitive to the issue of problematic students but they were not entirely convinced that the faculty appropriately handled the situations that arose. It appears that this feeling of uncertainty is not uncommon---Rosenberg et al. (2005) found that student respondents were not really sure if faculty know what is going on among students in the program, if students have better awareness of the competency of their peers, or if faculty perceive problems in a similar way to students.

As part of the survey, students were asked if they felt they had been sufficiently informed of the protocol or procedure used by faculty to deal with problematic students regardless of whether it was written or not. An *unwritten* protocol meant that there seemed to be a course of action that the faculty commonly followed when issues with problematic students arose but that the student had no knowledge of such a plan being in writing. With this question there were 76 respondents, 27 who skipped the question, and 1 who indicated that he or she preferred not to respond. It was noted that 52.6% of the respondents indicated that they had been sufficiently informed of the process, and 46.1% indicated that

they were not sufficiently informed of the process that faculty use. The majority of respondents (68.4% of 76) also reported false to the statement that “not enough attention is paid to problematic peers in my program, and the issue never seems to get resolved.”

In addition, it was indicated by 72.4% (also of 76 respondents) that the presence of a problematic peer disrupts class functioning (3.9 indicated that they preferred not to respond, and 23.7% indicated that a problematic peer does not disrupt class functioning). In comparison, only 5% of the sample in Rosenberg et al. (2005)’s study indicated that the problematic peer had “no effect on them at all,” (p. 669) while nearly 50% indicated that the class’s functioning was disrupted by the presence of a problematic peer. Interestingly, in the current study, the majority of students also indicated (47.4%) that the presence of a problematic peer did not motivate them to be better or work harder, but 42.1% did indicate that their presence made them want to work harder or be better.

To evaluate a series of statements ascertaining whether NASP Student Representatives feel students are better at identifying problematic peers than faculty, if they feel students should be assisting faculty in that process, if they feel comfortable providing information about their peers to faculty, and if they feel their faculty are aware of and open to the issue of problematic students, a 4-point scale was used with the additional option of prefer not to respond. Student Representative respondents were asked to rate each statement with either Not at all true (Not at all likely); somewhat true (somewhat likely); probably true (very likely); Almost certainly true (I feel adamantly that...), or prefer not to respond. Twenty-eight respondents chose to skip this item, 75 answered, and 9 students chose not to respond throughout the matrix, with the majority of prefer not to respond answers (5) showing up on the “faculty is open to hearing about students’ concerns about a problematic peer” item. (It is not clear why respondents were reluctant to comment on this item, or if they feared that their responses would not be confidential). The majority of responses indicated (38.7%) that it is “somewhat true” that students are better able to identify problem peers than faculty because they know and observe things about their peers that faculty may not observe solely in the classroom, although a close second (37.3%) indicated that this statement was

“probably true.” This result relates to that found in Rosenberg et al. (2005)’s study, which indicated that students are not really sure if they have better awareness of their peer’s competency in comparison to faculty. Other respondents in the current study (18.7%) indicated that it is almost certainly true that students are better able to identify problematic students while 3 students (or 4%) indicated not at all true and 1 person indicated that he or she preferred not to respond. These results are also fairly consistent with those reported by Rosenberg et al. (2005), which indicated that clinical and counseling doctoral students felt it was *somewhat true* that they were better able to identify problematic students.

Interestingly, on the next item, 38.7% indicated that it is “probably true” that the identification of problematic peers is of joint ethical concern to both faculty and students because both perspectives are needed to identify the problem fairly, whereas 29.3% said this is “somewhat true.” It was noted that 22.7% of respondents indicated that they feel adamantly students are better able to identify problem peers than faculty while the remaining 8.0% indicated not at all true and 1 student indicated that he or she preferred not to respond to the item. Aligned with the current research, Rosenberg et al. (2005) found that overall students believed that faculty held most of the responsibility but that students believed they share some responsibility for dealing with problem peers. In comparison, a previous question in the current survey asking how much responsibility students feel for identifying a problematic peer in their program yielded a rate of 49.4% of the respondents (39 of 79), indicating that faculty and training directors have the most responsibility for the identification of problematic peers but that students have an ethical duty to provide information to staff if they feel they have a reason to believe there is a problem of which the faculty is unaware. It appears from the results that when Student Representatives feel that not giving the information to which they are privy to faculty could lead to an ethical concern, they are more likely to divulge that information. Otherwise, when ethics is not obviously on the line, they are not as eager to believe that the identification of problematic peers is of grave concern to graduate students.

On the next item which asked if faculty are open to hearing about students’ concerns about a problematic peer, Student Representatives indicated that they “felt adamantly that” the faculty are open to

hearing about students' concerns about a problematic peer. This view was endorsed by 32.4% (of 75 respondents) and a close 31.1% said it is "probably true" that faculty are open to hearing about such issues. It was also indicated that 6.8% reported "not at all true" on this item and the same percentage (6.8%) chose "prefer not to respond" (there were a total of 74 respondents on this item). In comparison to the earlier true-false item which asked if the respondents feel that their faculty members are sensitive to the issue of problematic peers and student professional competency (an item which had a comparable 76 responses and was endorsed by 78.9%), the response seems less definitive. This may indicate that some school psychology graduate students feel that their faculty are sensitive to the issue, but that the faculty's perceived sensitivity has different weight when a student considers approaching the faculty about a problematic student issue to which they have become privy. In light of these results, it is important to keep in mind that the respondents of this study were faculty appointed class representatives who may have an even closer working relationship with some of the faculty than other graduate students who do not engage in such roles. As Rosenberg et al. (2005) hypothesized, students may not disclose their concerns to faculty if they sense it is unsafe, or if they perceive the faculty as unsupportive and unresponsive. For Student Representatives, the risks of revealing that information (e.g., loss of peer respect as Student Representative or fear that student body will see them as "teacher's pet") may be even greater than for the student who is not in a leadership role in the program.

It was also found, as rated by 39.2%, that it is only "somewhat true" that faculty members have awareness as to what is going on among students in the program (Rosenberg et al. (2005) indicated "not really sure" on a similar item (p. 668)). Another 36.5% indicated that this statement is "probably true" while only 14 respondents (18.9%) reported that they felt adamant that the faculty know what is going on among students in the program (4.1% indicated "not at all likely" and one student indicated that he or she preferred not to respond).

Student Representatives were asked if faculty may be able to identify and intervene with problematic students earlier if they had information from students. On this question, the results suggested

that Student Representatives had mixed feelings on this matter as 38.7% (the same percentage on each) reported that it is “somewhat true” and “probably true” that the faculty may be able to identify and intervene with problematic students earlier if they had information from students. Only 3 respondents out of 75 reported that it is “not at all true.” It was found that 17.3% reported that they felt that it was “almost certainly true” and again 1 student indicated that he or she preferred not to provide a response. In addition, despite the feeling that the identification and intervention process with problematic students could “possibly or probably” be aided by information from the student perspective, 38.7% of respondents indicated that it is “not at all true” that they would feel comfortable anonymously rating the performance of their peers as part of a formative assessment process. Interestingly, it was also indicated on a previous item that 38.7% feel that students are better able to identify problematic peers. (Bear in mind that students may overpathologize due to their limited experience; it may be difficult for them to separate what behaviors are within the learning curve and which are not). It appears that Student Representatives place value on the student view and opinion and most feel that it is at least somewhat likely that faculty could identify and intervene with problematic students earlier if they had information from students, yet they also feel strongly that they would not feel comfortable providing information about their peers’ competency behaviors, even if that information was provided anonymously and faculty had no other way of obtaining the information. These results present the question, “Would students feel differently if they knew their information was actually anonymous?” This concern may have played a role in the results, as there is a lot on the line if such information is leaked to other students in the program. It was found that nearly a quarter (24%) of the respondents reportedly felt that it is “probably true” or “very likely” that they would feel comfortable providing such information anonymously; in addition, 22.7% reported that they would feel somewhat comfortable, while 14.7% (11 respondents out of 75) reported that it was *almost certainly true* that they would feel comfortable providing an anonymous rating to faculty about their peers’ performance.

The last question within the same likert-scale asked if students are aware of their progress in the program because faculty provide them with regular, ongoing written feedback about their performance and progression of skills in the program. This question piqued the interest of the authors of this study because a review of the literature indicated that in order to be an accredited program, both the APA (2009) and NASP (2000) (less specifically) mandate the practice of providing students with regular, specific feedback about their performance in their graduate coursework. The APA's policy specifically states that the feedback must be written and provided annually (APA, 2009). Despite these policies, only 25 Student Representatives (33.3%) reported that it is *somewhat true* that they are aware of their progress in the program because they received such feedback in written form, and 14.7% (11 respondents) reported that it is not at all true that they received such written feedback (It was also indicated that 25.3% reported *probably true* and 26.7% (20 respondents) reported *almost certainly true* that they were aware of their progress because of the written feedback they received).

Thematic Categorization of Open Responses

Some questions on the current survey included an option for the respondents to enter a response in a dialog box if they felt that the provided response options did not reflect their thinking, if they had a comment or response option to add in addition to those provided on the research-based checklist, or if the question required them to expound upon their yes or no response. As noted, the questions concerning the Student Representatives' emotional and interpersonal reactions to finding out about the presence of a problematic peer in their program were examples of questions that had additional open response components. On the question addressing emotional reactions, 16 constructed responses were received. Over half of these constructed responses indicated that there were no problematic students in the respondent's program; having the option to write in an answer made this question answerable for students for whom the issue of having a problematic peer among their peers did not directly apply. Other responses received conveyed the themes reflecting that the issue discovered in the respondent's program was not severe enough to warrant the actions suggested in the provided response options. The second most

common theme (with the first being that the issue does not apply) among these constructed responses indicated that the Student Representative felt bad for the identified problematic peer. A selection of illustrative quotes follows:

- “I felt bad for my peer because he was working hard but was a little misguided in his efforts.”
- “I was concerned with the problem peer’s well-being, levels of stress, lack of friendships and social supports, etc.”

The interpersonal reaction aspect was addressed with the question, “What was your interpersonal reaction upon discovering that a peer among your cohort was having difficulty with professional competence?” There were 7 constructed responses received on this item, and the resulting themes suggested that respondents wanted to take the opportunity to again communicate that there were no problematic students in their program. Two others, however, provided comments providing information on how a problem was addressed within their program. These quotes are as follows:

- “{A} Faculty member asked my opinion about a few problematic students.”
- “As advanced doctoral student supervisors, we discussed our concerns as a group in our weekly meta-supervision.”

Another question which had an open-ended response component was the question, “Do you feel student opinions should be taken into consideration by faculty when a problematic student is identified? Please indicate why below if you answer yes or no.” The results indicated that 76 respondents answered the question (provided a yes or no response), 27 skipped the question entirely, and 61 provided an explanation. The view predominantly expressed among these constructed responses reflected that Student Representatives feel that students see things that professors are not able to see, partially because they spend more time together. A selection of illustrative quotes follows:

- “Students spend more time together and thus have more opportunities to witness and

experience problematic behavior from other students. Professors do not always get a realistic or true view of how the student is overall, as many times they only see the student in class and see completed work without any understanding of how the work was completed.”

- “As students who are learning how to apply our skills, we many times work closely together. In this regard, professors should pay attention if we voice specific concerns since we work more closely with each other.”

- “Students need to be considered professionally mature and that their opinion matters. This helps ensure the quality of the program and of its future students. Often students may be aware of certain issues a faculty member may not be.”

The final section of the administered survey consisted of open-ended questions presented with the hope of getting Student Representatives to think critically about how their programs handle problematic students. Similar questions were asked in the survey on the student view by Rosenberg et al. (2005) to solicit feedback from graduate students and to gather information for the future development of a best practices strategy. The first question on this page for which 66 responses were provided read, “Do you feel that you have an adequate outlet to address problems associated with a problematic student in your program? Please explain.” The response themes which emerged on this item ranged from

“There is no procedure” to *“Faculty have an open door policy so I feel like I could discuss an issue,”* or *“I feel close to my faculty advisor and could address the issue with him or her,”* to *“We (students) have tried to address the issue with faculty but nothing has been done”* and to *“there is no one to talk to.”*

Illustrative examples of the predominant theme that faculty are approachable, and the less commonly endorsed themes represented are in the following section. It is important that the sample utilized is considered when exploring that the predominant view is such that faculty are open to addressing the issue. NASP Student Representatives are indeed faculty appointed and may have a different quality of relationship with their advisor or faculty than the general graduate student population may have.

Illustrative quotes follow:

- “I think the professors would be open to talking about problems associated with a problematic student in my program once the situation presented itself. “However, I am not sure of how to actually go about that as the professors have never verbalized how and when to express such concerns. They have not said that is an option nor have given us any opportunity to talk about it...”

- “Our faculty are very open to discussion and although we don’t have formal procedures in place, I would feel comfortable going to any one of our faculty members to discuss issues I am having professionally with others in the program.”

- “Yes, I feel that I could talk to my advisor about a problematic student in my program. I attempted to talk with him once about such a student, and he responded fairly.”

- “No. Another peer and I have spoken with faculty about it but nothing has been done probably because they themselves do not see it...”

- “No. Significant concerns were addressed with faculty members about a cohort member’s severe unethical behavior, and nothing seemed to happen as a result. This student did not receive any consequences and continued to act unethically during practicum.”

- “My program is very small and I am not sure that I would feel comfortable discussing a peer’s problems with a professor. The professors tend to talk and share information about students freely, which seems somewhat uncalled for. I would be worried about being stuck in an awkward position in class or with other students if I had to consult with faculty or be placed in a “tattle tale” position.”

- “No. The outlets we have are informal and frankly inappropriate---like faculty asking student opinion informally.”

The remaining question in the current survey asked NASP Student Representatives, “ Do you have suggestions as to what faculty might do to decrease the number of problematic students in school psychology programs?”

The primary emerging theme of the responses entered on this question was consistent with what Rosenberg et al. (2005) found in their research: Student Representatives suggested that existing

admissions should be changed to be more stringent to enhance the effectiveness of the screening process. Many also felt that student opinion should be included in the admission process, allowing current students, for example, to attend social outings with the potential students and report back to the program if the potential students would be a good fit for the program. In addition, some respondents felt that a minimum of annual feedback was important so that students would know where they stand in the program and what is expected of them. Other open-response portions of the survey indicated that many Student Representatives already feel their faculty are supportive, but numerous comments on this question suggested that faculty need to have an open-door policy that allows students to feel open about addressing difficult issues, such as those with problematic students. Some respondents recognized that faculty would likely need to witness the problematic behavior themselves in order to have evidence of the reported behavior (as opposed to taking a peer's word), which was evidenced by comments stating that faculty could then follow-up with observation on their own after being informed of the issue. Other less frequent comments indicated that some felt that addressing the stress factor in graduate school would be a major help. As Schwartz-Mette (2009) reported, it may be unrealistic to expect new graduate students especially to be able to balance the demands of their program and to identify their own risk for impairment. There are a lot of new changes to manage in starting a graduate program, and the stress associated with the demand of it all can be overwhelming. Some comments received indicated that having a way for the faculty to check in with students on their stress level or having built-in activities in the program that help students build a network of support (i.e., planned events or outings) may help some students self-manage their stress and their own risk for problematic behavior. A selection of quotes for this item follows:

- "... Make sure that the program has a support system for students so that they have some form of outlet for their stresses—institute social outings, weekly student group meetings, etc. ..."
- "...Through dinners, outings, and other social events, current students could gain insight to interviewees' social behavior and see things that faculty could not gauge in a formal interview."
- ... "I think that ongoing feedback from professors, as well as from peer colleagues,

should be given throughout the program and used to assess the progress of students. Formal evaluation forms given to supervisors and other professionals who supervise our work should have ratings that correspond with interpersonal skills, style, maturity, personality concerns, etc. I think this should be in place, given the nature of our work and the collaborative nature of the field.”

- “Have an open door policy where students can discuss concerns about fellow students. Faculty should then make an effort to observe behavior themselves.”

- “I think my program would benefit from having more frequent contact between students and their advisors. This would allow students a better outlet to express their concerns to professors, while it would also allow professors a better glimpse of each student outside the classroom.”

- “A faculty member should meet with each student every semester to provide feedback as to how they are performing and to find out if they are experiencing any difficulties.”

Chapter IV

Training Implications Resulting from Survey Data

Up until recently, the perspective of graduate students in professional psychology was ignored in the issue of problematic students. In addition, the research on this topic in the field of school psychology has been extremely limited. The current survey yielded valuable information about the experiences of NASP Student Representatives, who are also graduate students in predominantly Ph.D. and Ed.S. degree programs based on the sample. The results indicate that school psychology graduate students, like students in other subfields of professional psychology, have experienced difficulties with problematic students. The current study asked NASP Student Representatives if they were aware of problematic trainees in their school psychology training program and 71% reported that they were aware of such problematic trainees. Further, when broken down by cohort, 58% of the respondents indicated 1 to 3 problematic students, and 89.5% reported 0 to 2 problematic students to be in their cohorts. To the knowledge of the authors of this study, this is the first study that sampled only school psychology graduate programs.

Corresponding to previous studies on the student perspective in other mental health-related programs, Student Representatives reported that they feel at least partly responsible for the identification of problematic peers, especially when there is a risk for an ethical violation to emerge if the problem is not resolved. The respondents reported that they feel that their faculty are pretty open to discussing issues of problematic students, but they are more hesitant when it actually comes down to speaking to them about the issue. This could be from fear of consequences from students, confidentiality issues, or perceptions of faculty. Further, as the open response sections revealed, students sometimes go to faculty and feel like no changes were made as a result; sometimes the faculty may not see the same behaviors or may not have the opportunity to witness them. This can be very frustrating for students who feel like the problem they are witnessing is continuing with no consequences.

When considering these points, one must also consider that the data collected by the current study was provided by NASP Student Representatives, whom are faculty appointed. In some cases, approaching faculty concerning issues with problematic students may be even more challenging for graduate students who are in appointed leadership roles. They may fear “social suicide” if they are put in a tattle-tell position, or they may feel increased pressure to provide information about other students because they work so closely with both parties (faculty and students).

Results from the current research and previous studies highlight the need for programs to have a clearly outlined procedure for students to follow when they have concerns about the professional behavior of their peers---a procedure that will provide protection for both faculty and students. Rosenberg et al. (2005) recommended educating students about what may be considered problematic by faculty, teaching them how they could carefully approach a peer initially when concerns emerge, and then teaching them the proper channel to go about reporting the information to the faculty, preferably through a neutral party such as a “ombudsperson” (p. 670), if the problem persists.

The current survey data also revealed that the majority of respondents (61.3%) were unsure if their training program had an established written procedure for dealing with problematic students. However, they thought that if there was one it was in their program handbook. Once a plan is in place, it should indeed be included in the program handbook and reviewed with students in their initial introductory courses in the program. Rosenberg et al. (2005) also propose having professional seminars or informal topical discussions on the issue to make sure that the procedures are actively publicized and fully integrated into the program curriculum. It was their hope, the authors noted, that by having a publicized formal procedure that students would become more likely to report their concerns to faculty and less likely to gossip among themselves, which was the predominant response noted in their study and in the current research. Having a documented procedure is protective for both students and faculty so that the procedure of remediation or dismissal can be documented timely and appropriately. Such a documented

plan also helps to keep the situation formalized, professional, and helps to ensure that due process rights are not denied when difficulties arise.

Another major concern of students that emerged in the current survey results was admission procedures. Students expressed concern how problematic peers got admitted to their program in the first place, and there were numerous comments in the open response section suggesting that admission procedures needed to change. For instance, some students expressed that student opinion should be included in the admission process, allowing current students, for example, to attend social outings with the prospective students and report back to the program if the potential students would be a good fit for the program. Further, some respondents indicated that addressing the stress factor in graduate school in general would be a major help. As previously noted, some comments received indicated that having a way for the faculty to check in with students on their stress level or having built-in activities in the program that help students build a network of support (i.e., planned events or outings) may help some students self-manage their stress and their own risk for problematic behavior. To address this issue that also emerged in their results, Rosenberg et al. (2005) recommended for training programs to provide continual training on competencies, wherein issues such as stress tolerance would be addressed as a preventative measure.

Valuable Insight from a Former Problematic Student

An unanticipated yet valuable piece of information emerged in the results of the current study. One of the respondents anonymously disclosed that he or she was considered the problematic student at one point in his or her graduate program. This is a difficult perspective to study empirically, especially since in some cases the people who were once considered problematic are no longer participating in graduate coursework. The information revealed gives a little insight to how a student feels when perceived as problematic by peers. The individual who revealed his or her former status as a problematic student expressed his or her concerns via the open response portions of two of the survey questions. The

individual's thoughts and feelings expressed through the two questions are summarized below in the form of illustrative quotes:

- “Being the problematic student, I felt that there was no way for me to talk to my peers in an informal setting because no one approached me about the issues. My status as a problematic student arose from being found competent and then later not viewed competent, without direct intervention of how I could improve my behaviors...I felt hurt, disappointed, and unsupported by others in my program. No one came to talk to me about the issues, and I felt angry/frustrated/betrayed by others.”

The noted reaction of the individual's peers is not shocking considering the results of the current study and previous studies on the student perspective; students tend to shy away from the individual who is considered to be having difficulties with professional competence. Unfortunately, the perspective of the alienated student is likely often lost and difficult to address. If the faculty overtly show support, it can be seen as favoritism or seem like the student is receiving privileges that other students do not receive. If fellow students go out of their way to be supportive, they may fear being seen as taking sides by faculty. If a student openly asks for or accepts faculty assistance to remediate his or her problematic behaviors, should that behavior be stigmatizing? There should be no shame in desiring to better one's self. As Coster and Schwebel (1997) found in their study on well-functioning psychologists, peer support is crucial to successful long-term personal and professional functioning. Out of the psychologists interviewed in their study, 5 out of 6 indicated that supportive relationships with peers carried more weight a decade down the road than past and present supervision. This information, combined with the information received anonymously from the student with former competency issues in this study, again emphasizes the need for open discussions about expected behaviors and competencies among professors and graduate students in programs if the issues are ever going to be resolved. Students may have a vantage point and rapport with their peers that faculty do not have, and faculty are in a unique position as gatekeepers to the field. Additional research may indicate that all perspectives are truly needed to find a

solution to decrease the number of problematic behaviors reported in professional psychology graduate programs.

Chapter V

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

The current study was conducted via an online survey distributed to NASP Faculty Sponsors, who in turn forwarded the information to NASP Student Representatives. The authors of this study obtained a list of names of NASP Student Representatives on NASP's website, on which no email contacts were included. By receiving the link from their Faculty Sponsors, Student Representatives had the opportunity to participate in the study for a period of up to three weeks. Allowing additional time may have yielded a larger sample size.

Although most studies of a similar design have been traditionally conducted with primarily doctoral students, it is worthy to note that the predominant degree in the field among practicing school psychologists is the Education Specialist degree. The survey demographic was comprised of 25.3% Education Specialist degree program Representatives, and the sample majority (30.5%) was from the South. This percentage, the overall small sample size, and the sample being limited down to NASP Student Representatives may make it difficult to generalize the results found to be representative of the views of most graduate students in school psychology training programs. The relationships that NASP Student Representatives may have with the faculty may, in some cases, moderate how they see things. The reasoning for utilizing NASP Student Representatives as the subjects of the current study was to limit some problems that previous studies on the student perspective have cited as limitations. Specifically, Rosenberg et al. (2005) reported that a high percentage of their subjects came from two graduate programs, and that they were concerned that the individuals who self-selected to be in the study were those who were very eager to discuss their feelings about issues associated with problematic students since in many cases students do not have an outlet to reveal how they feel about the issue. The authors also expressed that they could not confirm or deny if some students themselves were problematic students or if those students would be honest about the difficulties they experienced. By reaching out to as many NASP Faculty Sponsors as possible, it was our hope that in turn we could gather information about

the views of students all over the United States in NASP-approved programs. In addition, although the students also self-selected to be in the current study, it seems less likely that the population from which the student respondents were chosen would have high numbers of students who would be considered problematic. However, even by limiting the sample to faculty-appointed representatives it cannot be confirmed or denied that only students who were eager to discuss the issue participated in the survey. A particular strength of the current study is that a definition of problematic peers was provided in the survey on every page so that respondents could refer back to it, and take it into consideration when answering survey questions. Previous studies on this topic deferred the definition to the respondents' interpretation. The current study was exploratory in nature, but future studies on this topic should possibly consider expanding the survey to include the general population of graduate students in school psychology, and to in turn strive to gain responses from a stratified sample across the country.

Other considerations for limitations can be identified with the survey itself. One or more student respondents wrote in the open responses that it was difficult to complete the survey in its entirety if he or she did not have problematic students in his or her program. The questions were ordered for a natural flow and to be user friendly, but they could have been organized with "skip logic" in sections so that students for whom the issue of problematic students did not apply could have skipped certain parts. Some questions received a higher number of responses than others, and this may have been part of the reason. In reviewing the questions, it was determined that eight questions would be notably difficult to answer honestly without having experiences with problematic students. However, five of the eight questions had open response components or were entirely open response questions which allowed those students to write in that the issue did not apply. Some may have and did choose to write this information in, while others may have opted to skip the question because it seemed redundant when the issue did not apply. Others yet may have simply not wanted to answer the question due to the length of the survey or feared that their anonymity would not be held in the strictest confidence considering the risk of their leadership role as a Representative. It is difficult to fully know or anticipate the reasons behind some questions being

skipped while others experienced higher response rates. (Again, the number of responses received per question varied from 59 to 83 on the survey, with the lowest number of responses received being on the final required item of the survey).

Another survey question that may have led to confusion was the question asking respondents where their program's written (officially documented) plan could be found if their program had one. An array of four location choices (e.g., program handbook, university catalog, program website) were provided as response options, along with an option that it was distributed and discussed in the introductory course to the program. An additional three responses included "I'm unsure if there is a plan," "I feel pretty sure there is a plan, but I am not sure where to find it," and "I do not think there is a plan." None of these response choices specifically state that they do not think the plan was *written*, with written being the key word of the question. This may have led to confusion for some students, and they may have skipped the question (as 29 respondents did) as a result. Having a smaller test group give feedback before the survey is released to the larger population may help to alleviate some of these stated issues.

An additional concern with the survey is that almost every question provided a "prefer not to respond" option which was notably selected by very few respondents throughout the survey. This option was provided because it was thought at the time of survey construction that this option had to be present in an electronic format so that the rights of the survey participant to back out at any time were not violated; it is largely thought as an ethical concern to make it so questions must be answered in order to move forward in the survey. However, due to the options provided in the settings in the software provided by SurveyMonkey .com (Finley, 2010), participants could skip over questions at any time. As long as they clicked submit and used the navigation buttons throughout, it was considered a completed survey. Further, since most respondents who chose to skip questions simply skipped them (without indicating that they just preferred not to respond), it is unknown if they read over the question and chose to skip it or if they intentionally or unintentionally skipped over a survey question on the page. This is a concern with the survey construction that may need to be addressed in future studies of a similar design.

At the end of the survey, respondents were given the option to provide comments and feedback about the survey. Eighteen responses were received on this item, and again themes emerged. It was noted that 5 students commented that the survey was thought-provoking, indicating that participating in the study encouraged them to think about the impact that their peers have on their learning experiences and the learning environment. Another respondent indicated that the survey led him or her to think about “the ethical responsibility that students have in ensuring that everyone who leaves their program is fully trained and ready to work in the school or community environment.” Other comments addressed how it would be helpful to be able to skip non-applicable questions (already discussed), and one comment was about disliking the term “problematic peer.” Notably, having only one complaint about the definition is a small victory in this area of research due to the fact that previous studies on this topic from the student perspective, which utilized the word “impairment,” received many more complaints from students about the negative connotation. Nonetheless, the student respondent’s concern is noteworthy. Professionals in the field have become accustomed to putting the person first when discussing the disorder or behavioral concern with which a student is having difficulty (i.e., student with ADHD as opposed to ADHD student), and the respondent seemingly felt that this issue should be no different (“Peers who have exhibited problematic behaviors”).

The findings of this work highlight some areas for future research that may bring insight to the complexities involved in the training of school psychology graduate students. First, since this is the first study (to the knowledge of the authors) that focused solely on school psychology programs and their students’ experiences with problematic students, much more information is needed to get a complete picture. Student Representatives largely reported in the current study that they did not know if their program had an established written plan in place for dealing with problematic students. It would be helpful to get this same information from training directors and compare the rates to get a better picture of the percentage of programs that have such a plan. In addition, the survey results also indicated that students were unsure if their program faculty dealt with problematic students appropriately. This is a

question that is difficult to address with students from an ethical and practical standpoint due to the inherent confidentiality issues at work. Professors are not at liberty to discuss the performance or behavior of other students with concerned graduate students when they approach the faculty member about their peer. There is a difficult balance to strike---faculty must communicate to the concerned student(s) that they are listening and will take their reports of problematic or otherwise unethical behavior seriously. However, at the same time, they must also stress the importance of keeping student records confidential just as NASP (2000) stresses maintaining confidentiality for the child and adolescent populations that many school psychology clinicians serve. Nonetheless, it needs to be recognized that without the reassurance that their faculty are concerned, open to student concerns about problematic peer behavior, and that they are continually seeking to remediate or correct such problems, graduate students may feel a sense of social injustice that some students are unfairly getting passed on (or given second chances) while others are working diligently to make it through the graduate program; the rapport that graduate students have with faculty and student morale as a whole both may become impacted if students do not at least feel heard.

One platform for faculty to communicate that they are open to addressing concerns about problematic behavior could be through required ethics coursework. The ethics course is where many students begin exploring the ethical issues inherent to their field of study for the first time. They learn about case studies and mentally explore ethical dilemmas in a “safe” environment as opposed to experiencing them firsthand. Ethical behavior and functioning have many layers, and often times professionals require support from peers to get through stressful times or to help them to even identify their risk for competency difficulties. As Coster and Schwebel (1997) found, for many psychologists, peer support is of highest priority, and such support helps them cope with work-related and personal stressors more so than past and present supervision experiences. Direct instruction on developmentally appropriate behaviors to expect while learning (i.e., benchmarks), and information on monitoring one’s own stress level could be provided as part of ethics training and reinforced throughout the training program. In

receiving such instruction, students may become better able to identify their own risk for problematic behavior and develop a somewhat better grasp on what competency difficulties may look like when observed in others. Graduate students often work closely with one another in their programs due to the nature of the coursework, but striving to foster those relationships in the context of the classroom could help add to the support network that students carry with them beyond their training programs and into their professional lives. NASP's *Professional Conduct Manual* (2000) indicates that faculty can "promote the ethical practice of trainees by providing specific and comprehensive instruction, feedback and mentoring" (p. 24-25), and the ethics coursework can help provide a modality for this structured feedback.

The findings of the current study overall highlight the need for better communication between faculty and students so that concerns about student behaviors do not become severe before they are addressed. For example, if a student had been plagiarizing his or her work for several semesters, and students became aware of this at the first occurrence, faculty may have been able to have addressed the issue much earlier if they had been notified of this information. As previous studies and the current work suggest, leaving out the student perspective sometimes leaves out an important piece of the bigger picture. However, it would be naïve to think that the difficulty ends with the faculty's knowledge of the issue. Even then the faculty have to investigate the situation to make sure that other students are not reporting this information with malicious intent, and the faculty may even need to witness the act themselves to be able to take action. It may be that the only hope for improvement in student competency issues lies in developing a community of concern between faculty and students that allows and promotes communication; students need a way to address their genuine concerns with the faculty without the fear of loss of status or being seen as a tattle-tale among peers and faculty alike. It seems reasonable that graduate students who have demonstrated proficient skills in their school psychology coursework and practicums, and have in good faith expected to receive a quality education should be afforded the

opportunity to attend classes with colleagues who support them and have a positive impact on their learning.

In turn, faculty need a way to regularly address the importance of healthy stress management and provide information about the process of identifying problems as a preventative measure rather than a reactive one. Many student respondents in the current study reported that their faculty members are open to listening to students if they have concerns about a peer, but again, the respondents in the current study may have closer relationships with their faculty than many other students may have. Some students may not perceive that their faculty are open to hearing their concerns. Therefore, they turn to their peers and release their frustration through gossip, as previous research (Rosenberg et al., 2005) and the current study have suggested. Having an open door policy for students to express their concerns to faculty and having an official plan in place for addressing such concerns may be a place to start. As Schwartz-Mette (2009) emphasized, it is of utmost importance that the culture of training programs matches the ideals taught in the college classroom. Without such alignment, students may experience frustration and confusion about the ways to conceptualize and manage their own problematic behaviors and those of their peers. There is likely no simple fix, but it is clear that faculty only communicating with other faculty and students only gossiping to other students about issues they have observed with problematic students is not creating solutions.

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Appendix

Survey of School Psychology Graduate Students

Student Professional Competencies

PLEASE INDICATE THE REGION WHERE YOU ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY:

Northeast (ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT)

Mid-Atlantic (NY, PA, NJ)

Midwest (WI, MI, IL, IN, OH, ND, SD, NE, KS, MN, IA, MO)

South (DE, MD, DC, VA, WV, NC, SC, GA, FL, KY, TN, MS, AL, OK, TX, AR, LA)

West (ID, MT, WY, NV, UT, CO, AZ, NM)

Pacific West (AK, WA, OR, CA, HI)

NUMBER OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENTS IN YOUR PROGRAM: _____ (all class years combined)

NUMBER OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENTS IN YOUR COHORT: _____

TYPE OF PROGRAM: M.A. Ed.S. Ph.D. Psy.D. other _____

GENDER: MALE FEMALE PREFER NOT TO RESPOND

Operational definition of Problematic Peers: This term refers to students who exhibit problems or difficulties with professional competency that are severe enough for increased attention from the faculty and the student's peers to be warranted. The term problematic does *not* distinguish between the attainment and subsequent loss of competence (The student was considered to be competent and then later was not viewed as competent for any particular reason) and the lack of the initial attainment of professional skills (The student did not develop the appropriate clinical skills in the first place). ***Please consider this definition when answering the questions below.***

1. Are you aware of problematic trainee(s) in your school psychology training program? _____

If yes, how many would you estimate to be in your own class/cohort? _____

Do you feel your program deals with problematic students appropriately? _____ (yes, no, uncertain, Not applicable—I do not feel there are problematic peers in my program).

Prefer Not to Respond _____ (check here)

2. What types of problems have you observed or encountered among problematic peers in your program? (Please circle all that apply).
- a. Lack of awareness of impact on others
 - b. Emotional problems
 - c. Clinical deficiency (i.e., difficulty applying skills taught in classroom, such as providing interventions or following protocol when administering assessments, etc)
 - d. Poor interpersonal skills
 - e. Academic deficiency (i.e., difficulty meeting deadlines, disorganized, poor work quality, etc)
 - f. Maturity problems
 - g. Personality issues
 - h. Inability to respond to social cues
 - i. Unprofessional behavior
 - j. Cheating/Plagiarizing
 - k. Other _____
 - l. Prefer Not to Respond

3. What was your *interpersonal* reaction upon discovering that a peer among your cohort was having difficulty with professional competence? (Please circle all that apply).
- a) Talked to other students about the issue but not directly with the student experiencing the difficulty
 - b) Consulted with other students about how to handle the situation because you were unsure if you should say something to the problematic peer or not (The endorsement of this item depends on what you “intended” to do and not the action you actually took.)
 - c) Withdrew from the problem peer
 - d) By yourself, you attempted to talk to a respected faculty member about your concerns
 - e) You and one or more peers went together to speak to a faculty member about your concerns
 - f) You sent an email to a faculty member to bring up the issue in a less-threatening manner
 - g) You somehow addressed it anonymously with the faculty member by leaving a note, comment card, or other means.
 - h) You talked to the peer experiencing difficulties yourself to express your support or concern.
 - i) You emailed the peer experiencing difficulties to bring up the issue in a non-threatening way.
 - j) I cannot recall a response or an action that I took concerning a problematic peer.
 - k) Other ---The action I took was....(please indicate on the lines below)

- l) Prefer not to respond

4. How much responsibility do you feel fellow students have for *identifying* a problematic peer? (Indicate only one response).
- a) Students have little responsibility for identifying problematic peers.

- b) Students have moderate responsibility for identifying problematic peers.
 - c) Students have a significant (high level) of responsibility for identifying problematic peers.
 - d) Students and faculty have an equal/joint responsibility for the identification of problematic peers.
 - e) Training directors have the ultimate responsibility for the identification of problematic peers.
 - f) Faculty and/or training directors have the most responsibility for the identification of problematic peers, but students have an ethical duty to provide information to staff if they have a reason to believe there is a problem of which the faculty is unaware.
 - g) None of these reflect my thinking on this matter.
 - h) Prefer Not to Respond
5. Do you feel student opinions should be taken into consideration by faculty when a problematic student is identified? _____ (Yes or No) Why or why not? (You may also type "Prefer Not to Respond" if you so wish).
6. How would you prefer to be notified by the faculty if you were identified as a student struggling with problems of professional competence? (*Circle all that apply*)
- a. An action letter
 - b. An informal meeting (i.e., discussion after class)
 - c. Formal meeting (with multiple faculty by appointment)
 - d. Meeting with Faculty Advisor only
 - e. Other _____
 - f. Prefer not to Respond
7. Please indicate if the following statements are **true or false** based on your own experience. (You may also indicate Prefer Not to Respond for any question if you so wish).
- a. My training program has an established **written** procedure for dealing with problematic students. _____ (T or F, or Don't know (DK))
 - b. I feel the faculty members of my program are sensitive to the issue of problematic peers and student professional competency. _____ (T or F)
 - c. I feel I have been sufficiently informed of the protocol/procedure (written or unwritten) used by the faculty of my program for dealing with problematic students. _____ (T or F)
 ("Unwritten" means that the protocol, to your knowledge, is not officially written, but there seems to be a course of action that the faculty usually follow when problematic students are identified in the program).
 - d. The presence of a problem peer disrupts class functioning _____ (T or F).

- e. Not enough attention is paid to problematic peers in my program, and the issue never seems to get resolved. _____ (T or F)
 - f. Knowing there are problematic peers in my program motivates me to be better or work harder _____. (T or F)
8. If your program does have a written/official plan in place for working through issues with problematic students, where can this procedure/policy be found? (Please circle all that apply).
- a. University Catalog/Graduate Catalog
 - b. Program handbook
 - c. Handed out separately to students in another format
 - d. Program website
 - e. Reviewed in introductory class to the program
 - f. I'm unsure if there is a plan
 - g. I feel pretty sure there is a plan, but I am not sure where to find it.
 - h. I do not think there is a plan.
 - i. Prefer Not to Respond
9. What was your *emotional* reaction to finding out that there were one or more students (problematic peers) among your classmates who had problems with professional competence? (Please circle all that apply).
- a) I began to avoid interacting or working with the problem peer(s).
 - b) I was concerned that the problem peer(s) would be hurtful to the children with whom he/she/they worked or damaging to other clients (i.e., consultative relationships with parents and teachers)
 - c) I felt frustrated at faculty for not screening out and accepting problematic peers in the program.
 - d) I felt angry/frustrated/lack of faith in faculty for not identifying problematic peers or for not identifying them more quickly.
 - e) I felt fearful that the reputation of my program would be damaged.
 - f) I felt that the screening process needed to be enhanced or changed.
 - g) Prefer Not to Respond
 - h) Other _____
-
10. Please rate the following statements using the criteria below.
- 0 Not at all true (Not at all likely)
 - 1 Somewhat true (Somewhat likely)
 - 2 Probably true (Very likely)
 - 3 Almost certainly true ("I feel adamantly that...")
 - 4 Enter "4" if you Prefer Not to Respond
- a. Students are better able to identify problem peers than faculty because they know and observe things about their peers that faculty may not observe solely in the classroom. _____

- b. It really is a joint ethical concern of faculty and students to identify problematic peers because both perspectives are needed to identify the problem fairly. _____
- c. Faculty is open to hearing about students' concerns about a problematic peer. _____
- d. Faculty members in my program have awareness of what is going on among students in the program. _____
- e. I feel that faculty may be able to identify and intervene with problematic students earlier if they had information from students. _____
- f. I would feel comfortable with anonymously rating the performance of other students as part of a formative assessment process. This information could give faculty information about student competency behaviors that they may not otherwise be able to acquire. _____
- g. I feel that I am aware of my progress in the program because the faculty provides students with regular, ongoing written feedback about our performance and progression of skills. _____

Open-Response Format Questions

- 11. Do you feel that you have an adequate outlet to address problems associated with a problematic student in your program? Please explain.
- 12. Do you have suggestions as to what faculty might do to decrease the number of problematic students in school psychology programs? Please explain.

Comments about Survey (optional):