Survey on Guidelines & Principles for the Accreditation of Programs in Professional Psychology: Clarity and Relevance of Domain Guidelines

BACKGROUND

The psychology accreditation process represents an effort to provide a standard of training intended to promote consistent quality and excellence in education and training in the field of professional psychology. In so doing, accreditation provides tangible benefits for students, consumers of psychological services, and the discipline of psychology itself. To that end, the Committee on Accreditation (CoA) implemented its new guidelines for the accreditation of doctoral programs and internship programs in professional psychology in January 1996, with the guidelines for accreditation of postdoctoral programs implemented in January 1997. These sets of guidelines were the final products of the CoA's work in evaluating and revising the accreditation criteria in use from 1979 to 1995. In revising the criteria, the CoA considered the work and opinions of their colleagues from psychology education and training, from practitioners in the field of psychology, and from consumers of psychological services. The final result was a new model of accreditation criteria, one designed to foster creativity and recognize institutional autonomy while also meeting the profession's training needs. The CoA's Guidelines and Principles (G&P) are now in their eighth year of use.

The current study represents the second survey effort in collecting and analyzing data on the clarity and relevance of the G&P. In order for the APA Office of Program Consultation and Accreditation to meet the Department of Education's criteria for the recognition of accrediting agencies, as well as satisfy an internal assessment of its own accrediting activities, the current survey was undertaken to determine whether the *Guidelines and Principles for Accreditation of Programs in Professional Psychology (G&P)* represent relevant indicators of quality of training in professional psychology and are clear in their meaning. The study represents a collaborative effort between the APA Research Office and APA Office of Program Consultation and Accreditation. Survey results will be provided in aggregate form to the Committee on Accreditation (CoA), Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the Department of Education, and the public.

METHOD

Instrument. Directors of training were asked to rate and provide feedback on the various domain guidelines. The order and content of the surveys are the exact wording taken from the *Guidelines and Principles for Accreditation of Programs in Professional Psychology (G&P)* for doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral programs. For each domain, the domain guidelines were presented as closed-ended questions, and respondents were asked to rate these for clarity of meaning and relevance to training along a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree". In addition, open-ended items were provided after each domain section to afford respondents the opportunity to make any domain specific comments.

Sampling. In October 2003, surveys were sent to 799 directors of training from accredited doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral programs in professional psychology. Three hundred fifty doctoral, 425 internship, and 24 postdoctoral directors of training comprised the sample.

Procedure. There are three program types (doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral) with corresponding domain guidelines (A-H). Given the in-depth nature of the G&P, different versions

of the instrument were created in an effort to increase response rate. Based on program type, directors were randomly assigned to different versions of the instrument (all domains A-H; domains A, C, D, and G; domains B, E, F, and H). Directors of doctoral and internship programs were assigned to a particular version: all domains (A-H); domains A, C, D, and G; or domains B, E, F, and H. Given the small number of postdoctoral programs, postdoctoral directors were asked to complete all the domains (A-H). In addition, links to the doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral surveys (all domains) were posted on the APA Accreditation website to elicit participation from the public. Paper forms (all domains) were also developed and mailed to those that experienced technical difficulties with the online survey.

Directors were sent an email describing the purpose of the online survey and were provided with a URL along with login details. At the login page, they were prompted to enter their email address and randomly generated passcode before they could proceed to the survey. Three weeks after the initial email, a reminder email was distributed to those who had not completed the survey. A final request for participation was sent out another three weeks after the reminder.

Response rate. Out of the 799 directors surveyed, a total of 324 completed surveys were utilized for the current report, yielding an overall response rate of 40.6%. After excluding participants with a bad email address (N ~ 37), the true overall response rate became 42.5%.

CAVEATS

This report contains sample statistics, not population estimates. That is, the data represent only those directors of training who responded to the survey, and therefore, inferences about non-respondents based on the survey results cannot be made. All close-ended tables include counts and means of respondents who provided information on a specific item/question. Although the means for several characteristics are reasonably accurate, readers of this report should consider possible error that may be introduced by non-response. Statistics were computed for the clarity and relevance of each domain guideline, however for the current report statistics are presented on the clarity and relevance of each domain. Keep in mind that guidelines per domain vary in number, and as a result may influence the overall domain means.

FINDINGS

Clarity and Relevance of G&P

As previously mentioned, similar studies have been conducted in the past to obtain input about the clarity and relevance of the G&P for doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral programs. In 2001, constituents were asked to complete three variations of an instrument (doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral). Hardcopy surveys were mailed to the following groups: Canadian Psychological Association (1), American Board of Professional Psychology (1), Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (1), National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology (1), and state/provincial licensing boards in the United States, District of Columbia, and Canada (61). Overall, the return rate was low with a total of 15 surveys returned.

With the current study, directors of training for doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral programs in professional psychology were selected to participate in an online survey. Based on program type, directors were assigned to complete either a survey containing all domains (A-H); domains A, C,

D, and G; or domains B, E, F, and H. Three hundred and twenty-four directors completed the survey, yielding a true overall response rate of 42.5%.

Respondents rated each domain guideline for clarity and relevance on a 5-point scale, where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree". Mean ratings on the clarity and relevance of domains for the 2001 and present studies are highlighted below. Keep in mind the differences in the survey methodology and response rates between the two studies when interpreting the results.

Doctoral

Means of 4 or higher revealed strong support for clarity of meaning and relevance to training of the doctoral domains. The highest clarity (4.61) and relevance (4.66) mean ratings were observed for Domain G, "Public Disclosure". Domain F, "Program Self-Assessment and Quality Enhancement", received the lowest clarity and relevance (4.08 and 4.26, respectively) mean ratings. Summary statistics are provided in Table 1a, mean ratings are presented in a bar graph (Figure 1a). In addition, domain specific comments are included in Tables 1b-i.

Similarly, in 2001, the overall mean ratings for clarity and relevance of doctoral domains were 4 or higher. Mean ratings increased the most from 2001 to present for Domain H, "Relationship with Accrediting Body", clarity (4.38 to 4.54) and Domain G, "Public Disclosure", relevance (4.53 to 4.66). In contrast, clarity mean ratings decreased most significantly for Domain F, "Program Self-Assessment and Quality Enhancement" (4.40 to 4.08). Relevance mean rating decreased from 4.62 to 4.42 for Domain B, "Program Philosophy, Objectives and Curriculum Plan".

Internship

The mean ratings for clarity and relevance of the internship domains were consistently high (means of 4 or better). Domain E, "Intern-Staff Relations", received the highest clarity (4.62) and relevance (4.73) mean ratings. The domain receiving the lowest clarity mean rating was Domain D, "Cultural and Individual Differences and Diversity" (4.01), while the lowest relevance mean rating was observed for Domain F, "Program Self-Assessment and Quality Enhancement" (4.41). Table 2a presents summary statistics and Figure 2a displays mean ratings in a bar graph. To see the open-ended comments for domains A-H, refer to Tables 2b-i.

In 2001, with the exception of the clarity rating for Domain F, "Program Self-Assessment and Quality Enhancement", the mean ratings for clarity and relevance of internship domains were also 4 or higher. Clarity (3.85 to 4.11) and relevance (4.21 to 4.41) mean ratings for Domain F, "Program Self-Assessment and Quality Enhancement", increased the most from 2001 to present. In contrast, clarity (4.83 to 4.61) mean ratings decreased for Domain H, "Relationship with Accrediting Body". Relevance mean ratings decreased from 4.66 to 4.45 for Domain D, "Cultural and Individual Differences and Diversity".

Postdoctoral

The mean ratings for clarity and relevance of postdoctoral domains were greater than 4, with the exception of the clarity rating for Domain D, "Cultural and Individual Differences and Diversity". Highest mean ratings for clarity of meaning and relevance to training were provided for Domain G, "Public Disclosure" (4.63, respectively). Conversely, Domain D, "Cultural and Individual Differences and Diversity", received the lowest clarity and relevance mean ratings (3.94 and 4.22, respectively). Table 3a includes summary statistics and Figure 3a presents mean ratings in a bar graph. For the domain specific comments, please refer to Tables 3b-i.

In 2001, the overall mean ratings for clarity and relevance of postdoctoral domains were 4 or higher. Across the domains, the overall clarity and relevance mean ratings decreased from 2001 to

present. Mean ratings decreased most significantly for Domain D, “Cultural and Individual Differences and Diversity”, clarity (4.90 to 3.94) and relevance (4.90 to 4.22).

The above findings lend support that professionals in the field of psychology appear to agree overwhelmingly that the G&P for doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral programs are clear in their meaning and relevant to the training of doctoral-level professional psychologists. This support gives educators and training staff the ability to confidently use these guidelines and principles as a meaningful reference in structuring their academic curricula and professional training components. For the CoA, these findings demonstrate support for the continued use of the G&P domains. In addition, the results of this study illustrate that slight variability between domains exists for clarity and relevance ratings. With this information the CoA can now address, through training, ways to improve clarity and relevance of specific domains during workshops, annual meetings, and in their future revisions of the G&P. Consumers of psychology can, at least on one level, be assured that there are quality control policies implemented to guarantee the education and training of psychology professionals.