



Undergraduate Clinical Experiences: Reciprocal Benefits to the Students and Clinic

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Abstract

The benefits of undergraduate clinical experience are well documented in the fields of medicine, nursing, and dentistry (Burch, Seggie, & Garry, 2006; Dunn & Hansford, 2008; Lekic, Schroth, Odlum, deVries, & Singer, 2000). Unfortunately, the field of psychology does not mirror this focus on clinical experiences with undergraduate students, despite the evidence that exposure to such experiences at the undergraduate level is beneficial in other health service fields. Instead, undergraduate psychology students are primarily exposed to research experiences rather than clinical ones due to reasonable, yet surmountable, barriers. The Assessment and Consultation Clinic (ACC) at the University of Missouri-Columbia provided two voluntary undergraduate positions in the 2008-09 academic year with positive effects.

Importance of Clinical Experience

With numerous specialties within the field of psychology, it is important to expose an undergraduate to an area in which they hold interest for the future. This can prevent realization of holding different or no interest in the field after starting graduate studies in a specific area. Exposure to clinical experiences at the undergraduate level can help narrow academic/specialty options and increase the retention for graduate students in clinical programs. By participating in early clinical experiences students are able to reaffirm their graduate path, learn of a more appropriate graduate path to pursue within psychology, or learn they hold no research or professional interest in psychology whatsoever. Regardless of which of the three outcomes occur, it is beneficial to the student in deciding the right path for their future, as well as to future potential graduate programs.



MU Assessment & Consultation Clinic

How the ACC is Surpassing the Norm

The Assessment and Consultation Clinic (ACC) sought two undergraduate student volunteers for the academic year to provide clinical support and a fresh perspective to client cases. Clinical responsibilities included literature reviews to provide empirical support for treatment recommendations, compilation of resources for clients, organization of clinic materials (i.e., test library), and participation in weekly staffings to discuss client conceptualizations and professional development issues.

Benefits to the Clinic and the Student

The positive outcomes to the clinic included time saved, decreased stress to clinicians, and new ideas regarding cases. Undergraduate student benefits include networking opportunities, observation of clinicians providing services, honing literature review and organizational skills, and frequent discussions on professional identity and development. Specifically, one of the undergraduate students confirmed her present interest in developmental disabilities after talking with a Child Clinical Psychologist specializing in the treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorders. This student was referred to a colleague of the psychologist at the University of North Carolina—Wilmington. She has since been admitted to their Clinical Psychology program and received an assistantship to work in the Applied Behavior Analysis program. The other undergraduate student became aware of a more appropriate graduate specialty after observing a School Psychologist, who partners with the ACC for student treatment, and attending an informational session on School psychology. Both students indicated they found great value in simply being in a clinical environment and learning how a clinic is run.

Recommendations for the Field

Based on the success of adding these undergraduate students to the ACC's supervision load, it is recommended that other clinics provide undergraduate training, being mindful of the students' interests, lower level of expertise, and appropriate responsibilities. Additionally, it is recommended that empirical examination of undergraduate clinical experiences be completed. The ACC is taking steps to compare these students and future undergraduate trainees to undergraduate psychology students without clinical experiences on different variables such as graduate school acceptance/drop-out rates, career paths, and career satisfaction.