

Running head: DISSERTATION PROGRESS

Dissertation While on Internship:

Obstacles and Predictors of Progress

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Abstract

Dissertation status of intern applicants is an issue for training directors and students alike. Two major concerns are that students might fail to finish the dissertation after the internship, and that they might be distracted during internship while also working on the dissertation. The dissertation status and progress of 1,025 psychology interns is described, as well as obstacles to and predictors of dissertation progress. While a fifth of all interns start the year with the dissertation complete, students who start internship with a completed proposal make more dissertation progress while on internship than those beginning at pre-proposal stages.

Dissertation While on Internship:  
Obstacles and Predictors of Progress

Students in professional psychology often ask whether or not they should complete their dissertation before going on internship. At issue is the possibility that postponing dissertation work until the internship is complete will make it difficult to return to the research, thus jeopardizing eventual graduation. An additional concern is the drain on the intern's time and energy during their most intensive clinical training. Training directors, both at universities and internship sites, are asking the same question. Given that internship training programs have limited resources (the majority host fewer than five interns per year), sites have a real investment in their trainees eventually completing their degrees. It is certainly disappointing to invest a year's worth of training in a student only to have him or her remain ABD. Accepting only applicants who have completed the dissertation by APPIC Match Day might too severely limit the pool, but requiring significant progress on the dissertation seems a reasonable alternative to many training directors. One commonly held notion is that only interns who have had a formal proposal accepted before they start internship will make significant progress during internship.

The training community has begun to view dissertation completion as a marker of doctoral and internship programs' success in preparing students for the profession. Conferees at the National Conference on Supply and Demand: Training and Employment Opportunities in Professional Psychology reinforced this view by encouraging doctoral programs and internships to report the dissertation status of past students (APA & APPIC, 1998). Relatively little is known about factors that facilitate or impede progress (see Green & Kluever, 1997 for a discussion of impediments to dissertation progress in other disciplines). In general, psychosocial factors such as procrastination and perfectionism, and demographic variables (Muszynski & Akamatsu, 1991)

are considered predictors of psychology graduate students' dissertation progress. However, the data specific to the dissertation experience of psychology interns do not exist.

### The Intern Dissertation Status Survey

In this study we examine factors contributing to the dissertation progress of psychology interns prior to and during the 1994-1995 internship year. All internship training directors at the 416 American Psychological Association- (APA-) accredited sites were mailed research packets and were asked to distribute them to their interns during the first week of internship. The packet included the Intern Research Progress Inventory-Pre (IRPI-Pre; Krieschok, Somberg, & Cantrell, 1994a), which measures current dissertation status, research training, efficacy in research related tasks, perceived support for research, and demographics.

Of the 2,010 fulltime paid interns at accredited sites (Krieschok & Cantrell, 1994), 1,055 (52%) returned packets. When returning the IRPI-Pre, participants were asked to supply their name and address on a separate mailing label that included the identification number of their packet. During the last month of internship, follow-up packets were mailed directly to the interns and included the IRPI-Post (Krieschok, Somberg, & Cantrell, 1994b) which measures current dissertation status and the intern's perceptions about doing research while on internship. The 1,052 returned surveys included five from postdoctoral trainees, and 22 with severely limited data. Those were excluded from the analyses. Of the remainder, 68 were returned with no return address, making it impossible to send them a follow-up survey. Of the 957 interns mailed a follow-up packet at the end of the year, 655 or 68% returned usable IRPI-Posts. The original usable sample of 1,025 was remarkably similar (across all variables collected) to the 655 students who returned follow-up questionnaires. Given that nearly all interns from that year were invited to participate, the sample closely resembles the population of students in applied graduate study in psychology.

Sixty-nine percent of the sample was female and 87% was white. Clinical, Counseling, and School specialties made up about 70%, 25%, and 5% of the sample, respectively. Other noteworthy characteristics included an impressive record of scholarly productivity, with 65% having presented at least one paper and 42% having published at least one article. Data regarding the means by which students are introduced to formal research activities suggested that, typically, the first substantive experience occurs during the initial year of graduate training and is generally a departmental requirement.

#### Dissertation Status on the First Day of Internship

We grouped First-Day Dissertation Status into the following categories: Stage 1: No writing (11%); Stage 2: Not yet to proposal meeting (14%); Stage 3: Proposal meeting completed (25%); Stage 4: Data collected (25%); Stage 5: Full draft completed (6%); Stage 6: Defended (14%); and a group of interns who did not identify their level of progress was labeled as Other (6%). Thus, the vast majority of the participants (70%) had completed and defended their proposal.

Possible predictors and obstacles to students' dissertation progress up to the start of internship were factor analyzed and reduced to a more meaningful number of factors. We then used those factor scores to see if we could have predicted which students had already completed dissertations by day one. (Details of these analyses are available from the first author).

In order to examine differences between those who started internship with dissertation completed (or nearly so) and persons who started with a significant amount of dissertation work still to be done, we created a variable with two levels. The first included those who said they had defended their dissertation by day one, as well as those who had completed at least a rough draft of the entire dissertation by day one ( $n=197$ ). The second level included those who ranged from having done no work at all on the proposal, to those who had done some work up to but not

including a proposal meeting ( $n=252$ ). Persons not included in these two groups (e.g., those who had completed the proposal but not yet started the actual study, or those in the middle of data collection or analyses) were not considered in this analysis.

A discriminant analysis determined that 78% of those at the early stages could be correctly classified, while fewer than half of those in the completed group could be identified by the predictors. The two best predictors were Prior Productivity (interns had already presented their work at a convention or published it) and Academic Research Climate (as students they had participated on research teams, their faculty were active researchers, and they had gotten involved with research early).

#### Interns' Progress on Dissertation During Internship

Comparison of the interns' predicted Last-Day status and actual Last-Day status for the 655 students who completed the follow-up revealed that students tended to overestimate the amount of progress they would make over the course of the internship year. Approximately 75% of the interns predicted dissertation completion (defended) or near completion (draft completed) while only 42% reached these stages.

Of all students starting internship without the dissertation completed, 25% made no progress, 43% made some progress, and 32% completed the dissertation. While 78% of the interns who started the year having had a formal proposal meeting made at least some progress, nearly half of those who started the year with data collected (and 88% of those who started with a draft of the dissertation) successfully completed and defended their research.

Conversely, 61% of the students who started internship without a formal proposal meeting still had not had that meeting by the end of the internship, and only 7% of that group had defended the dissertation by the end of the internship. Thus, the notion that those students

who start internship with a completed proposal more often make dissertation progress while on internship than those in the pre-proposal stages was supported by these findings

$[\chi^2(4, n=594)=247, p<.001; \text{ see Table 1 for a more detailed breakdown}]$ .

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### Obstacles and Predictors of Dissertation Progress

To discover possible obstacles and predictors of progress, we compared the group of interns who made no progress (those who remained at the same stage from day one until the follow-up;  $n=229$ ) to those who made significant progress ( $n=196$ ). The significant progress group was defined as those who started at Stage 1, Stage 2, or Stage 3 who finished at Stage 5 or Stage 6, and those who started at Stage 4 and finished at Stage 6. As with the First-Day data, factor analysis reduced the possible predictors of progress to a smaller number of factors, which were then entered into a discriminant analysis to predict interns who made significant progress.

The single best predictor was simply the Number of Hours put in on the dissertation during the year. That was followed closely however by an Efficacy to Progress factor collected on the First-Day (confident I can find the time to work on it, confident I will make progress, confident I can ask for help if I need it, and confident about my prediction of how far I will get on the dissertation this year). The third factor to predict significant progress was Actual Support at School (from advisor, training director, and committee), and finally an Early Achiever factor (fewer years to get to internship, early first experience with research in graduate school, and younger age). In combination, these factors were able to correctly classify 81% of the cases as making either no progress or significant progress. No differences were found by gender.

### Summary and Recommendations for Facilitating Dissertation Progress

Nearly 20% of students begin internship with dissertation complete or nearly complete. Of the remainder who have work yet to accomplish, 75% make at least some progress during the year, though they tend to overestimate the magnitude of that progress. Identified below are recommendations that could facilitate not only dissertation progress, but also the development of research interest and activity in students prior to, during, and beyond the internship. We understand that these recommendations may not be easily implemented and some may necessitate program policy changes or internship admissions policy modifications.

### Academic Programs

While it is difficult to predict who will complete the dissertation prior to internship, it is easier to predict who will have completed very little of it. Students who have presented or published are at little risk for that status, but that begs the question of what facilitates their achieving those accomplishments. Perhaps the most helpful predictor is a healthy academic climate for research, as demonstrated by a faculty involved in research themselves. Specifically then, we offer the following suggestions to faculty in academic programs:

1. Stay actively involved in research yourself. If you are not modeling the process and the attitude, you cannot expect your students to do so.
2. Encourage your students to work with you on your research. In spite of their abilities and obvious academic skills, many students lack the specific knowledge of the research process, including the developmental nature of the research enterprise (i.e., generating ideas, consulting the literature, framing the question, etc.). This lack of knowledge translates into lack of efficacy for engaging in the process, one of the strongest predictors of progress while away on internship.
3. Invite students to (or insist that students do) get involved in research as early as possible, preferably their first semester in the program. Another clear predictor of both



completion prior to internship and progress during internship was the timing of the first graduate school research experience.

4. Get students involved with research teams. O'Brien (1995) noted the importance to students of working on research teams. That importance may be the social component of such teams that mitigates some of the anxiety surrounding research activities, or it may simply be the instructive qualities of working in small groups. Whatever the reason for their success, participation on such teams was a significant predictor in this study as well.

5. Finally, a strong predictor of progress while away on internship was the support of the academic program, including the advisor and the dissertation committee. Any efforts you can make to maintain supportive ties (e.g., regular e-mail correspondence) might go a long way toward keeping the dissertation project in focus.

### Internship Programs

Many of the best predictors of success while away on internship are already in place or accomplished by the time interns show up for their first day of work. The contribution of internship training directors to interns' dissertation progress will come in two main ways, encouraging them to do their homework before they get to you, and supporting them during the internship year. Specifically, we would urge you to consider the following recommendations:

1. Consider whether or not you would want to require a defended dissertation proposal prior to the start of internship (or even prior to application, as some sites are doing). This is about the only thing sites can do to affect the process until students are actually in their employ.

2. Provide a healthy climate for research, and specifically for dissertation completion. Be very up-front about your expectations that students will finish the internship with degree in-hand. Then make good on your expectations by adhering to the remainder of these recommendations.

3. Offer regular structured support. Meet regularly with the interns to discuss their dissertations and to offer assistance. As an example, the first author held a weekly “Dissertation Focus Group” for four years at the Kansas City VA Medical Center for any interns who chose to participate. Not only did all the interns over the years choose to participate, but they also reported it to be of great assistance in keeping them focused on the project and providing encouragement and minor technical assistance.

4. Encourage ties to the academic program. Part of our success with the weekly focus group was in our attention to the boundaries of dissertation ownership. We regularly found ourselves encouraging students to call their advisors to work out a thorny data collection or analysis issue. Many times students would get “stuck” when they came up against such an obstacle, and without the group might have stayed stuck for weeks. We would offer an outside perspective and the support and encouragement to ask for help when necessary. Of course this would also argue for maintaining strong ties with the academic training director or advisor for the interns at your site. Even a single discussion during the year with the advisor via phone or e-mail could make a big difference in the expectation that all parties indeed share responsibility and expectations for dissertation progress.

5. Build in time for dissertation work, and hold students accountable for that time. Given the demands of internship, it is very easy for students to attend to their new responsibilities full-time, figuring they will eventually get a handle on the job and then return to working on the dissertation. Students overestimate how much progress they will make during the year, and the number of hours spent over the course of the year was the best predictor of real progress. It is not uncommon for sites to allow a half day per week for dissertation work, but sites may not insist that those hours be spent working on the dissertation (rather than catching up on case notes for example). From the very first day, we recommend building in such dissertation time, and

building in the expectation that students must be working on the dissertation during that time (similar to how we expect them to be meeting with clients when those hours are scheduled).

Finally, checking with them regularly to ensure they are making progress would not only help to pace the intern, but might alleviate concerns that the site is simply giving away a half day each week to a project to which they have no connection.

### Students in academic programs

While some of the predictors are out of the control of individual students (e.g., faculty and advisor involvement in their own research), many are clearly in your hands. In a general sense, the findings require you to be assertive in seeking out opportunities and structures that will support your success. Specifically, we recommend the following:

1. Choose an academic program whose faculty are involved in research. While graduate school applicants are not likely to be reading this article, advisors of such students are, and they should note to their advisees that a strong predictor of progress is a faculty active in research.

2. In programs that allow you to choose or request your advisor, gravitate to faculty involved in their own research, and ask if they will let you get involved with that research. While most programs do not allow for such choice, some do, and all other things being equal, such an advisor will be a better bet for your getting involved early and completing on time.

3. Get involved with research as early as possible. Especially if the task seems daunting, throw yourself into it by asking for opportunities and asking for help. You will never be allowed to get away with being so unknowledgeable as during your first year, so take advantage of that “freshman” status. By your second and third year, you will start telling yourself, “I should already know how to do this.” That’s not necessarily true, but efficacy is not about truth, it’s about perception.

4. Join a research team. These may work for a host of reasons, but several studies, including this one, demonstrate their effectiveness. If these are not available in your program, find a group of like-minded students who want to pursue study in a common area and recruit a faculty member to meet with you regularly.

5. Plan to present your work. Whether you collect empirical data or write a paper on a professional topic, do so with the belief that you will be presenting it in some forum, either as an article, or as a presentation or a poster at a convention. Two-thirds of internship applicants will have accomplished this by the start of internship, and such an attitude may be a critical factor in your progress.

6. Complete at least the dissertation proposal by the day you start your internship. If not, your odds are less than one-in-fourteen that you will defend before the year is up.

#### Students on internship

Once you are on internship your ability to manage extraordinary competing demands will dictate any progress you make on your dissertation. Starting a new job, moving to a new level of professionalism in your status, moving to a new city (for many), and very soon beginning the search for yet another new job that starts after internship are some of the major categories of demands (Lamb, Baker, Jennings, & Yarris, 1982). (Pity the intern who marries or adds a family member while on internship). The dissertation might at times seem trivial by comparison, but make no mistake, while it may not be due tomorrow, your success in many of these other life roles depends on its successful completion. You would be wise to heed these recommendations:

1. If you get accepted to an internship prior to defending your proposal, drop everything else and get the proposal done. You will thank us later.

2. Every day spend at least two minutes on your dissertation. The greatest obstacle to progress in our focus group was inertia. Once the project gets cold it is much more difficult to

get back to it. It looms too large. You can keep it from getting so huge by staying on top of it and never letting it get cold. The two minute formula suggests that even if you do nothing more than talk through a small section of your methods on your commute to work, you will be staying on friendly terms with the project, and that is critical.

3. Schedule several hours each week to work on the project, and protect that time. Just as if you had scheduled supervision with your internship training director, never let yourself miss this appointment. Get out of your office and go to the library if you have to (and can), but put in the hours. In the end, it's the hours that will predict your success, but you have to be very clever to make the hours happen.

4. Meet weekly with the other interns to support each other's progress. Set up expectations from the very first week that non-completion is not an option. Tell yourselves you will do whatever it takes to stay on top of it. Knowing that for some interns the anxiety associated with this process will be very high might allow you to normalize it more effectively.

5. Communicate with your advisor regularly. Perhaps even more than when you were on campus, it is now important for you to stay connected to your advisor. He or she will not likely be checking up on you (out of site, out of mind), but that is not really a good thing for you, in spite of what you might have thought at one time. Just like you cannot afford for your project to get cold from your lack of attention to it, you don't want it to get cold for your advisor either.

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Table 1

Stage of Dissertation on Last Day of Internship by Stage on First Day of Internship for Those Starting Internship With Dissertation Incomplete (n=655)

	Last Day Stage						
	No Dissertation Writing Defended	Pre-Proposal Meeting Other	Meeting Completed Total %	Data Collected	Draft Completed		
	(n=49) (n=202)	(n=61) (n=38)	(n=95) (n=655)	(n=138)	(n=72)		
First Day Stage							
No Writing	<b>44</b>	33	7	3	6	4	4
Pre- Meeting	<b>10</b>	<b>28</b>	24	14	10	10	3
Meeting Completed	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>29</b>	31	9	25	3
Data Collected	0	0	<b>2</b>	<b>27</b>	16	48	7
Draft Completed	0	0	0	0	<b>9</b>	88	3
Other	12	9	12	12	7	23	26
Total	8	9	14	21	11	31	6

All table entries except n are percentages.  
 Cells in bold indicate percentage of interns from that day-one stage who made no progress or lost ground during the internship year.