

# Tips for Trainers: The Place for Postdoctoral Training

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The 2010 revision of the APA Model Licensure Act – which suggests that psychologists be licensed post-internship and prior to postdoctoral training – resurrects questions about the role of postdoctoral training in psychology. Should we continue to recommend that interns seek postdoctoral fellowships? What should such fellowships now provide? And how should postdoctoral fellowships reconfigure themselves to meet a changing landscape in professional psychology training?



In advising trainees, I would identify at least five reasons why formal postdoctoral training may be an advantage for the rising psychologist. These features also serve as a list against which to measure potential programs:

- **Licensure.** License portability issues strongly argue for at least some kind of supervised postdoctoral experience. Regarding licensure, the rules are changing more slowly than one might expect, at least in the United States. Twenty years ago, ten states did not require a postdoctoral experience for licensure, and as of this writing, only a handful of others have joined this group, so that supervised postdoctoral work is still required by more than two-thirds. This means, that if a candidate takes an unsupervised job in a state that does not require postdoctoral work, he or she may then not be able to be licensed in another state with different requirements, even after extensive work experience. It is important to take this picture into account in mentoring interns about their next step.

- **Specialization.** In a competitive market, it is increasingly important to identify added skills that provide an edge and a niche for economic survival. In some specializations, such as neuropsychology, postdoctoral training is now a clear necessity in order to obtain the needed skills for professional competence.

- **Research and academic skills.** Many formal postdoctoral experiences (such as MIRECCs in VA hospitals) offer significant applied research opportunities on clinical populations, leading to increased focused experience that can strengthen an academic portfolio in seeking an academic position.

- **Consultation and collaborative preparation.** With the rising importance of primary care consultation and health psychology, postdoctoral experience offers a higher level of collaboration and consultation experience than can typically be obtained in an internship setting. Since many formal postdoctoral programs are hospital-based, the range of opportunities from such programs is often greater than one might obtain in an entry level job.

- **Leadership and program development skills.** Mentorship and professional development seminars in postdoctoral fellowships can lead to a clearer professional identity, and an expanded understanding of the potential roles of the doctoral level psychologist.

Despite the clear advantages of postdoctoral training, many interns appear unprepared in going forward with the postdoctoral application process. This may be partly because doctoral

programs may emphasize the internship application process, but may neglect to address postdoctoral training. Essential preparation for proceeding to a postdoctoral position includes:

- **Dissertation completion.** This should go without saying, but one cannot be postdoctoral without it. For this reason, it is increasingly important to complete the proposal, and ideally data collection, before proceeding with internship. It is difficult to be competitive for a postdoctoral position with a dissertation completion date that is post-internship.

- **Determination of a professional path.** It is crucial to decide where one next wants to go, even if that choice later changes with experience. And even if one has already chosen a specialization, not all postdoctoral training sites are alike in their training offerings or patient populations. Since the postdoctoral position is often closely related to the entry-level job that follows it, it is important to try to match a postdoctoral experience to an identified career trajectory.

- **Consideration of personal circumstances.** Since there are many more types of postdoctoral possibilities than there are accredited internships, the postdoctoral step allows more thought about how personal life may dovetail with a postdoctoral training site, especially since the location of postdoctoral training often coincides with where one is licensed and begins work.

- **Identification of appropriate postdoctoral sites.** Unlike the internship process, postdoctoral sites reside under a number of different umbrellas. The APPIC directory and postdoctoral listserv and the APS listing may be useful places to start, but networking may be needed as well. State psychological associations are another useful resource.

- **Interview preparation.** While the postdoctoral process may be less competitive than the internship match, it still demands a degree of preparation. Postdoctoral sites often take only a few applicants each year, and they generally are looking for issues of fit as well as general skills. Applicants should do their homework, and come prepared with critical questions.

As licensing requirements gradually decrease, and professional competition increases, many postdoctoral fellowship programs are positioning themselves for increased specialty training, with increased mentorship towards success in a variety of roles within that specialty. In the current economic climate, where professional survival may depend upon securing the right ecological niche, formal postdoctoral training in a defined area of interest may indeed help cement that niche. Both programs and applicants should attend to that mutual goal.

## References

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