

Enhancing and Improving Mental Health

Workforce Shortages in Tarrant County Texas

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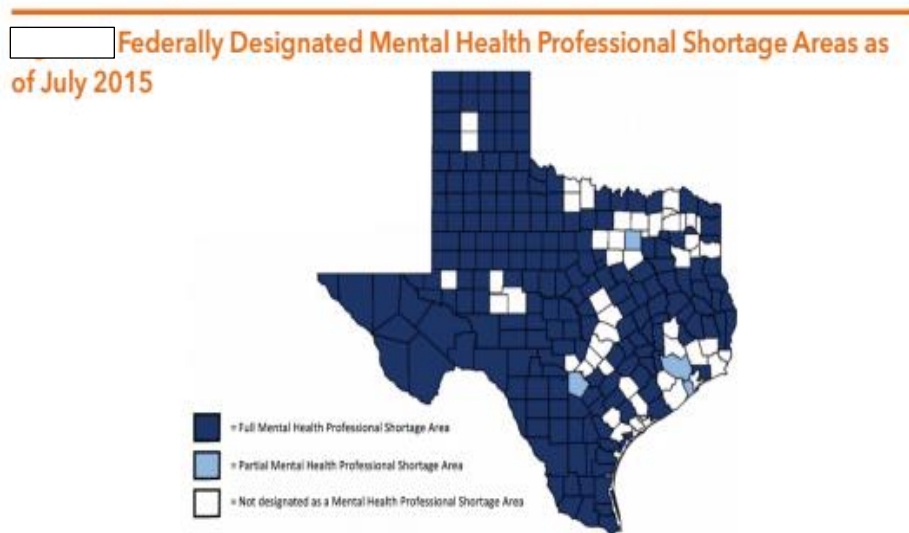
Abstract

In 2015, it was estimated that 80% of Texas counties were designated as full or partial Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas. The focus of this qualitative study was to use Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones' social theory of career selection to explore factors that encourage or influence students to join the mental health field. Using data collected from the Improving Internships in Mental Health Agencies to Reduce Workforce Shortages in Tarrant County study, 50 Field Instructors and Bachelor and Master level mental health interns were surveyed using semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The sample included (n=24) mental health interns in social work, counseling, and psychiatric nursing; and (n=26) mental health professionals. After completing the telephone interviews with study participants, transcripts were coded and analyzed utilizing a content analysis approach for qualitative data. Five themes emerged from the interviews: developing new skills; gaining relevant professional experience, intern preparedness, impact capacity, and attraction to mental health. Overall, most students felt personal life experiences served as catalysts to joining the mental health field, the internship provided greater career clarity and skill development, resulting in better informed decisions on career selection, and provided an advantage in securing employment post-graduation.

Keywords: internships, mental health, recruitment, retention, workforce

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As of July 2015, 206 out of 254 (81%) Texas counties were designated as full or partial Mental Health HPSAs (Health Professional Shortage Areas); 25 counties that were not previously designated as Mental Health HPSAs in 2010 now hold the designation, and 181 other counties that were Mental Health HPSAs still held that designation in 2015 (Hogg Foundation, 2016). Additionally, partial HPSA designation areas in Texas are occurring in large metropolitan swatches, such as in Harris (Houston) and Travis (Austin) counties where access to mental health services is disproportionate in certain sections of the city (Hogg Foundation, 2016).



In context, Texas' five most populous counties (Harris, Dallas, Tarrant (Arlington/Ft. Worth), Bexar (San Antonio), and Travis) had roughly 43.4% of the population and 63.0% of the state's psychiatrists (1: 9,507 professionals to inhabitant's ratio) while the remainder of the state had a ratio of 1: 21,081 (Hogg Foundation, 2016). In 2015, 185 Texas counties out of 254 did not have a single psychiatrist, which left more than 3 million Texans without access to a psychiatrist (Hogg Foundation, 2016). In the same year, there were 149 counties without a single licensed psychologist (Turner, 2015), and 40 counties did not have a licensed social worker (Turner, 2015).

The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health (2016) found several variables have converged and contributed to the workforce shortage: 1) an aging mental health workforce; 2) the

unwillingness of mental health providers to accept patients with Medicaid; 3) inadequate reimbursement rates; 4) insufficient internship sites and residency slots; 5) insufficient retention and recruitment practices; 6) outdated education and training practices; and 7) linguistic and cultural barriers (Hogg Foundation, 2016).

Why Students Choose Social Work as a Major & Career

Marsh (1988) conducted a study that confirmed the findings of previous studies, which showed personal life experiences served as catalysts to joining mental health fields (Ellsworth et al., 1968; Golden, Pins, & Jones, 1972; Doyle, 1983). Marsh (1988) found that social work students had an average of one alcoholic for every five family members, business students had one alcoholic for every ten family members, 80% of the social work students, compared to only 59% of the business students had an alcoholic family member, and drug addiction was twice as often in the families of social work students as in the families of business students.

Rompf and Royse (1994) confirmed prior research, identifying similar factors which influenced students to choose social work as a career. Their study revealed 71% of all social work students compared to 58% of nonsocial work students experienced one or more of the seven traumatic life events; parents unhappily married, emotional problems, alcoholism or drug addiction, family break-up, serious or life-threatening illness, child abuse or neglect, death of a parent, brother, or sister. The 71% figure closely matches the Russel et al. (1993) study, which found 73% of MSW students experienced problems within their family. Rompf and Royse (1994) also found social work students were significantly more likely to experience emotional problems, alcoholism and substance abuse, or child abuse and/or neglect within their families.

Trauma and life experiences serving as catalysts for major and career choices are not germane to only social work students. Doyle (1983) found many medical students have experienced serious or potentially life-threatening illness themselves or in their families during childhood. Pope and Feldman-Summers (1992), surveying 500 clinical and counseling psychologists nationwide, found that one third experienced some form of sexual or physical abuse as a child or adolescent. Collectively, these studies conducted over the past five decades have identified personal experiences as motivating factors which led students to selecting a career in the mental health field.

Influence of Internships on Career Selection

Internships provide students with opportunities to improve their professional skills, develop a work ethic, observe and participate in the actual workings of the agency, understand the requirements of a specific profession and can make informed decisions on their career choices (Ross & Elechi, 2002). Internships have been shown to influence students' attitudes toward inmates through exposure to a structured internship in corrections (Fichter, 1987).

Neapolitan (1992) found that even short internships provided interns with greater career clarity, less anxiety about job choice and greater job-related self-confidence compared to their colleagues that lacked the internship. Taylor (1988) revealed a significant relationship between interns' reports of career clarification and initial job satisfaction and intention to remain at their new job. Stone and McLauren (1999) discovered students that completed internships gained career clarification and developed the self-assurance to pursue jobs within their field.

Research

Our study seeks to confirm or challenge the current literature, update, or further explain the influence of internship experiences on students' career selection in the mental health field. We believe this understanding will be useful as a basis for increasing the number of people in the mental health educational pipeline and the percentage of graduates who enter and remain in the field once trained. If this effort was found to be successful, similar projects on a larger scale might offer hope that the shortages of mental health workers could be overcome, and people with mental illness might receive aid. To determine this success, we address the following research questions:

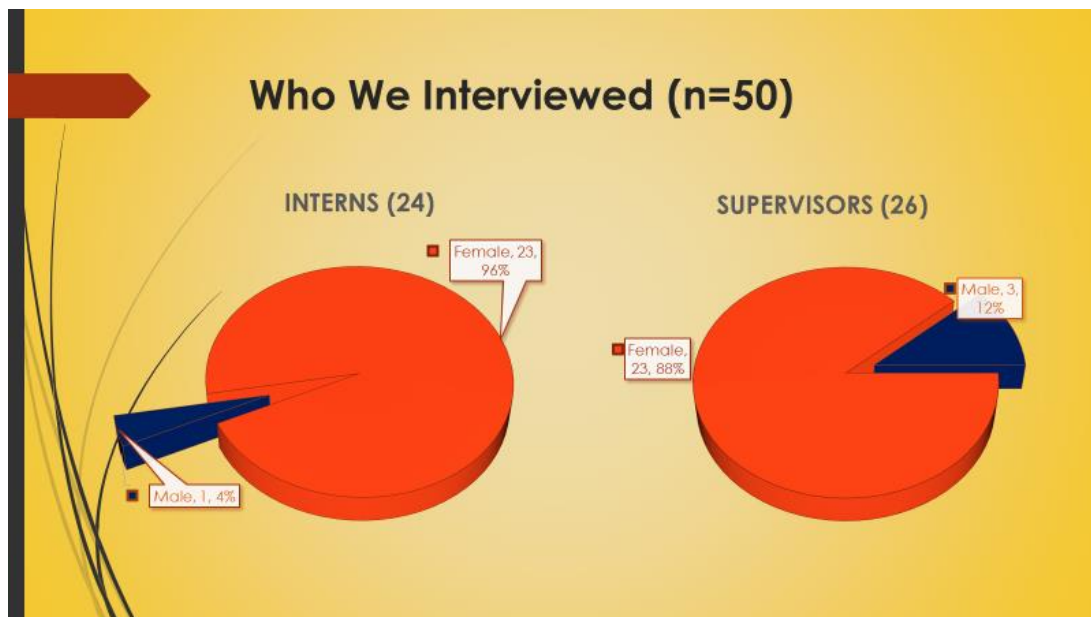
- 1) What factors motivate students to choose the mental health field as a major/career?
- 2) How does the internship experience influence students' career choice?
- 3) Does the internship experience impact students' motivation for joining the mental health field?

Methods

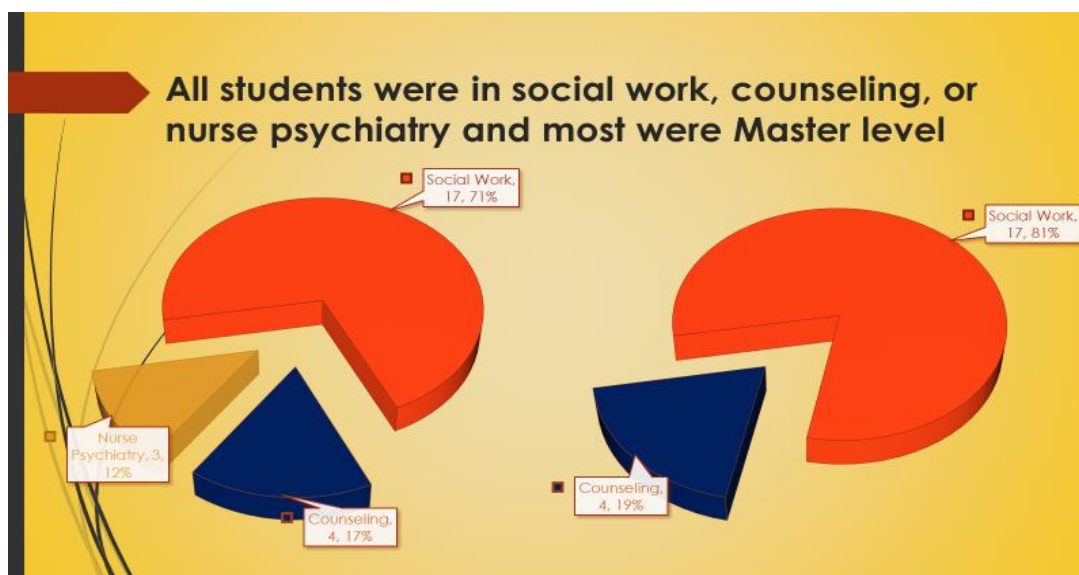
To answer the research questions, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was used for the study. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The intern and agency questionnaires were pilot tested using four MSW interns and two Supervisors at mental health agencies in a large metropolitan area in the Southwest, United States to determine the appropriateness of the interview questions.

Sampling and Participants

We interviewed Bachelor and Masters level mental health interns in the fields of social work, licensed professional counseling, and psychiatric nursing; and the mental health professionals that supervise interns in these fields. We conducted semi-structured interviews of 50 (N=26 mental health professionals; N=24 mental health interns) study participants who met the criteria.



Overall, the study participants were 84 percent female; 96 percent (N=23) of intern study participants were female and 73 percent (N=19) of supervisor study participants were female.



Instrument

The primary instruments utilized for this study were two questionnaires for the semi-structured interviews. There were separate questionnaires developed and employed for the mental health supervisors and interns. Intern participants were asked a combination of 20 convergent and evaluative questions related to their internship experiences; agency support, trainings and resources received, their enthusiasm and motivation for selecting the mental health field, etc.

Procedures

Each interview was recorded using a cellular telephone application for transcription. During the introductory portion of the interview, participants were advised of their confidentiality, steps to ensure their anonymity, and oral consent was recorded and obtained from each participant. The semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted by telephone between February and April 2017 and were guided by the Intern and Agency questionnaires described above. The interviews were 25 minutes to 40 minutes in length.

Results

The content analysis led to the identification of five themes from the intern and supervisor interviews. The five overarching themes central to the internship experience were: 1) develop social work skills; 2) professional experience; 3) intern preparedness; 4) impact capacity; and 5) attraction to mental health. Below, the themes are grouped by the research questions they support. Beginning with our first research question which was supported by Theme 5, Attraction to Mental Health.

1) What factors motivate students to choose the mental health field as a major/career?

Theme 1: Attraction to Mental Health

The final theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis was Attraction to Mental Health. Students highlighted several factors which led them to pursue a major and career in the mental health field. Most students noted life experiences and a passion for helping others as main reason for joining the mental health field.

Several students stated:

“I wanted to work with community, that was my desire”

“Pretty much just the field of children. Because I wanted to work with children one-on-one and this allowed me to do that”

“[What drew me to social work] because I find being a parole officer so fulfilling, I knew that I needed to work with people who don't necessarily make the best decisions and trying to help them in some way.”

Students also noted their desire to help people as a draw to the mental health field:

“Again, I just like helping people. I'm in a lot of places and I've experienced a lot of things and I think that it's a pleasure to be able to work with people and help people”

“Well, social work really specifically helps, I think, vulnerable and oppressed populations and that's really where my passion lies.”

One student acknowledged the interdisciplinary nature of mental health as a draw to the field:

I found myself, even in the nursing aspect, that a lot of our patients weren't really sick physically. It was more like sick mentally...I saw the need that a lot of what goes on with some of our patients is not really physical. It's more psychological.

Several students mentioned personal reasons for entering the mental health field:

"One, I have three boys...my middle one is special needs and so for the last thirteen years I've done a great deal of advocating for people with special needs. And my youngest has a possible diagnosis of ADHD so this is something that really hits home"

"I had my own experience with counseling and then just kind of ending with a passion."

"Yeah so when I was growing up my family had an adult named Tom who had Autism and Bipolar disorder"

"I was in and out of counseling from fourth grade on to until I went to college"

There were also students attracted to mental health that did not have negative life experiences:

No. I mean, most of the times people think that I was a victim and that's why I'm passionate about this, but I was never a victim...I actually had a very good life and upbringing, which makes it harder at times actually, to relate to the victims

"After studying social work in my undergraduate degree, I was very intrigued with working with people with mental illnesses. I wanted to learn more."

Our second research question was supported by Themes 2 and 4, Professional Experience and Impact Capacity, respectively. These themes captured interns' expectation of their assigned duties in relation to the duties of a new hire and whether the interns' career choice was impacted by the internship experience. Combined, these themes display the influence the internship has on students' career choice.

2) How does the internship experience influence students' career choice?

Theme 2: Professional Experience

The professional experience theme emerged from the interviews as students and supervisors expressed how closely the assumptions of the interns matched their expectations of the internship

and how closely related assigned intern activities are to the duties of a new hire/employee at the agency. This perspective of the mental health profession aids students in determining career paths.

Nearly all the students reported that their ideas, beliefs, or assumptions about what responsibilities they would have and tasks they would encounter and accomplish as an intern in a mental health setting consistently matched their actual experience.

One student stated:

I can always be doing more, or I always want to be doing more, but as of right now, I definitely think it meets what I expected to be doing as of my position within my degree right now

Another student highlighted:

I think [the internship] completely exceeded [the interview explanation]. I really didn't think I was going to walk into there, loving it. I thought it would be lame answering phone calls, attending hospital visits here and there, but I really just enjoy it so much

For one student, the agency “undersold” the internship:

The idea of walking in with patients, being involved in that process and having the doctors be able to look at us and ask us questions or [about] resources, that's something I did not expect but was a pleasant surprise for sure.

Another student mentioned:

I think I'm actually doing more than I thought I would be doing in the beginning...it actually has been way beyond my expectations. I never ever expected to receive as much training...I really appreciated that but it's so much beyond what I expected an internship to be.

Supervisors have been tasked with the responsibility of creating a robust practice experience for the intern(s), which is as close to actual work as possible. Generally, supervisors indicated the duties of an intern mirrored that of a new hire, minus those aspects that require a license. The supervisors also expressed that they are mindful of the requirements of the internship and try and protect interns from unrelated tasks and provide them with a variety of experiences.

A supervisor explained:

There's an understanding that they aren't going to be as proficient as an employed licensed and credentialed mental health professional. They also get the additional two hours of one-on-one supervision to discuss cases.

Another supervisor said:

They are doing the exact same thing [as a new employee] or just doing a lot smaller, a much smaller level and they learn what they could have in that opportunity of being with somebody, they are going to have a lot more time to learn, honesty. They do the same things, just on a smaller scale.

A supervisor commented:

Interns may be "checked off" along the way and are submerged... into the work like a new hire and follow the same processes...of course there's nothing billing wise, but we try to provide as much of an environment that they feel like they are participating in the agency instead of being an observer.

Theme 3: Internship's Impact on Choice and Motivation for Long-term Career in Mental Health

Our third research question was supported by Theme 3. Interns and supervisors discussed whether the interns' career choice was impacted by the internship experience and if the internship experience impacted their motivation toward pursuing careers in the mental health field.

When students were asked about their career choice, one of the students reported:

Yeah. This is something definitely that I want to continue to do. It's fascinating. It's encouraging on both ends, for me and for the clients. I feel like I'm making a difference.

A student noted:

I definitely developed more of an interest in mental health than I had before. I think that the skills that I've learned so far in this internship are very marketable.

One student said:

Well, I don't think I thought I would ever work in a hospital setting, so having the experience now kind of makes it more attainable. Before, I didn't even think of it.

Another student mentioned the impact the internship experience has had on her educational goals:

It's given me a lot of things to think about... it's added on to my plate different demographics that I might want to continue to pursue and do research in. Maybe I go forward... and go for my Doctorate

3) Does the internship experience impact students' motivation for joining the mental health field?

Interns discussed whether the internship experience impacted their motivation toward pursuing careers in the mental health field. Students also reported their motivation toward obtaining a career in the mental health field had been impacted by their internship experience.

One student said:

It's definitely grown. This internship has confirmed that this is what I want to do with my career path. I'm very excited about that.

A student mentioned:

I think my motivation has increased. Just what I'm seeing makes me want to just dive in a little further.

Another student stated:

I think I gained enthusiasm and motivation in the mental health field. And it actually made me want to go pursue my master's and specialize in mental health.

The two remaining themes that emerged were Develop Social Work Skills and Intern Preparedness. These themes did not directly support our research questions, but offered a glimpse into interns and supervisors perspective on skill building and the readiness of interns to join the mental health field when they begin their internships.

Theme 4: Develop social work skills

This theme emerged from students and supervisors assigning significant emphasis on providing opportunities for the development, application, and practice of social work skills. New skills ranged from conducting proper assessments including self-harm, suicidal ideations, and child maltreatment reports to various forms of counseling and public speaking through presentations to communities, board, and consumers.

One of the students said:

We were given opportunities to observe our supervisors conducting groups and conducting individual sessions.... given ample supervision when we started doing those things ourselves as interns

Another student noted:

Shadowing was one, so that was really good, and then also shadowing different professionals unrelated to social work and experiencing a multidisciplinary team

One student recognized their personal growth through the internship and noted:

I got a lot of new skills from doing assessments. I really was able to fine tune my active listening skills and I was really able to develop more of a probing skill I had never facilitated a therapeutic group so all of those skills involved with leading, and directing and clarifying, setting boundaries and things like that. I definitely, definitely saw an improvement in myself.

A student explained the immersive and progressive process of learning new skills with supportive supervision stating:

She's a throw you in the pool and let you figure out how to swim type of person. But also, she stands at the side and we just very much understand what we both need from each other...So she definitely kind of threw me into the mix, which for me is very helpful because otherwise I'll kind of just hang out until I'm forced to.

A supervisor supported students' reports of opportunities that have been provided for interns to develop and practice new skills:

Once out of training we try to get them to have either a caseload or project that...we provide them the opportunity to get that experience... we meet each one of them where

they are in terms if they have skills or are lacking skills, like those that come in and have never had a chance to write notes...same thing if we've got students that are having a difficult time building rapport or that are nervous. I think we kind of meet their needs where they're at because every student seems a little different.

Another supervisor further explained how interns develop new skills:

They're day to day. They're face to face with the individuals that we serve. Those new skills are going to develop through that, whether that's going to be individual sessions or that's going to be group managing a certain amount of individuals on that they see on a recurring basis. All the skills are acquired through the actual internship of seeing [clients].

One supervisor highlighted the importance of gaining new skills within a secure, structured support of supervision during the internship:

[The students] know that they have support whether it's through supervisor or the clinician that's with them during that time maybe they're doing that assessment so whoever they get, says something like, "Oh I don't know what to do with this." That supervisor or clinician is there to step in as well.

A supervisor stated their perceived responsibility in assisting their interns with skill development:

Offering precision feedback and an individualized approach to learning new skills are critical components to the students' overall success. Basically, a lot of just one-on-one...a lot of them have to do videos so we'll sit and we'll watch the videos and I'll give them feedback on what they might do better

Theme 5: Intern Preparedness

The majority of the interns felt prepared to well-prepared based on one or a combination of three factors: 1) age and previous life experience or career, 2) academic foundation, 3) comfort with population and/or initial training and orientation by the agency.

A student reported:

I was very prepared. My school sets us up for success and we went through a lot of training prior to being released...So going in, I felt like I was very well prepared.

Another student reported:

I was very prepared because I have had a previous internship within the [agency]. I kind of had an understanding of what was going to be expected of me. Also through the [university] program.

Some students did acknowledge initially having mixed emotions primarily related to the uncertainty of their new role, but the apprehension usually subsided based on the transition of the student to well-trained intern. Generally, if students voiced concern over their preparation, the issues were centered around 1) agency expectations, 2) unfamiliarity with the agency's or culture's nomenclature, 3) target population, or 4) inexperience.

A student added:

Day one, I absolutely didn't do anything but sit there. It was amazing that I was able to shadow because it's honestly really scary.

One student mentioned:

My first day definitely, no. I did not want to answer any crisis calls. I would say I was a little unprepared, yeah, but it's mainly because our training didn't start for two to three weeks.

The supervisors shared a mutual viewpoint that the preparedness of interns is predominantly dependent upon one of three aspects: 1) the education and maturity level of the intern, 2) previous employment experience or age, and 3) quality of educational experience.

One supervisor noted:

For bachelor's level, I think they aren't. We probably place them in some specific locations where we feel like they can get a broader taste of mental health or behavioral health services and I really want to stress its behavioral health, I think mental health limits the team

Another supervisor added:

It really depends...if they're an older student and they've got previous work experience, then they're bringing that experience to the table. If they're straight out of a bachelor's program, they're currently in a master's program, then they have little to none.

One supervisor added a helpful reminder:

Well, they're college students...some of them have worked in the field before, ... so perhaps they have a little more skill than others. But for the most part, everybody's pretty green.

Another supervisor concurred:

Green! A lot of them have never worked before and so that's a whole new thing for them. But I do think their schooling has prepared them So, they're almost there when they get here.

Discussion

The results of this study have furthered the understanding internship experiences has on interns' learning and developing new skills, gaining industry specific experience, readiness to enter the field, career selection, and factors that motivate students to select a major and career in the mental health field. In general, the findings of this study, factors that influence students to choose a career in the mental health field, supports previous research (Doyle, 1983; Ellsworth et al., 1968; Golden, Pins, & Jones, 1972; Marsh, 1988; Rompf & Royse (1994). Overall, most students felt personal life experiences served as catalysts to joining the mental health field, the internships provided greater career clarity and skill development, resulting in better informed decisions on career selection, and provided an advantage in securing employment post-graduation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study and the literature support the need to increase the number of students in the mental health pipeline, thus increasing the mental health workforce of Texas. The themes were developed and based in student responses; they show the importance of internship and personal experiences as influential factors for joining the mental health field. There were several similarities between the results of this study with other reported studies, and confirmed factors that serve as catalysts to joining the mental health field. In conclusion, our findings coupled with prior research, confirm students that have a favorable view of their internship experience will lead to better job satisfaction, improved job clarity, and have an advantage with obtaining employment.

Appendix A

Intern Questions

1. How would you describe the agency you have been placed for your internship? What population does it serve and how?
2. What will your degree be in? Why did you choose that field?
3. Please describe the duties you have performed as an intern.
4. What resources (trainings, webinars, etc.) were you provided with to assist you in your internship?
5. Describe the quality of the resources you received during your internship.
6. What drew you to working with the mental health population?
7. Does your internship match your idea of mental health work (what you would be doing as a mental health professional)?
8. How did your internship experience match with your expectations from the initial interview/introduction to the agency?
9. What (additional) trainings or information might be helpful?
10. What were your opportunities during your internship to learn new or develop new skills?
(Describe)
11. How prepared did you feel at the beginning of your internship?
12. What challenges or barriers (if any) have you encountered while an intern?
13. Describe the quality of the supervision or guidance you received from supervisors/faculty.
14. Do you feel you have support from employees in the agency (co-workers)?
15. How has this internship impacted your future career choice? In what way?

16. In what ways have the experiences gained during your internship helped you in pursuing future career opportunities?
17. In what ways has your enthusiasm/motivation for the mental health field changed as a result of completing this internship?
18. What, if anything, do you think was missing from your internship experience that you believe would have been helpful?
19. How would you rate the overall value of your internship experience?
(0 = worthless; 10 = extremely valuable)
20. What is your entry salary expectations for the field?

Appendix B

Agency Questions

1. Are you (or have you) serving as a field instructor supervising an intern?
2. Could you state your name and position? What do you do in your job?
3. Please briefly describe your agency. What is the particular area or population served by the agency?
4. How many interns serve clients with mental health issues?
5. What resources (trainings, webinars, etc.) does your agency provide to assist interns? Please describe the quality of the resources. Are they adequate to meet the needs of the intern?
6. What (additional) trainings or information might be helpful?
7. How do you provide opportunities for interns to learn and develop skills? (Describe)
8. What duties are typically assigned to interns?
9. How do typical “intern duties” match the work of typical new-hire mental health workers in your agency?
10. Describe the quality of the supervision or guidance typically provided to interns (i.e. frequency of meetings, topics discussed, etc.).
11. How prepared do you feel interns are to be mental health workers when they begin their internship?
12. What challenges or barriers (if any) have you encountered with interns?
13. Do you feel you have support from your agency and other employees (non-Field Instructors) in the agency regarding working with interns?

14. In what ways do you feel the interns' future career choice were impacted by the internship?
15. What, if anything, do you think is missing from the internship experience that you believe would be helpful for the intern?
16. Does your agency provide information to interns on future career opportunities?
17. What is the entry salary range for your agency for people in the mental health services area?
18. What value does an intern bring to you and your agency?
(0 = worthless; 10 = extremely valuable)
19. How would you rate the overall value of the internship experience provided by your agency? (0 = worthless; 10 = extremely valuable)
20. What else should we know about interns and your agency?