

The Comprehensive Evaluation of Student-Trainee Competence in Professional Psychology Programs

I. Overview and Rationale

Professional psychologists are expected to demonstrate competence within and across a number of different but interrelated dimensions. Programs that educate and train professional psychologists also strive to protect the public and profession. Therefore, faculty, training staff, supervisors, and administrators in such programs have a duty and responsibility to evaluate the competence of students and trainees across multiple aspects of performance, development, and functioning.

It is important for students and trainees to understand and appreciate that academic competence in professional psychology programs (e.g., doctoral, internship, postdoctoral) is defined and evaluated comprehensively. Specifically, in addition to performance in coursework, seminars, scholarship, comprehensive examinations, and related program requirements, other aspects of professional development and functioning (e.g., cognitive, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, technical, and ethical) will also be evaluated. Such comprehensive evaluation is necessary in order for faculty, training staff, and supervisors to appraise the entire range of academic performance, development, and functioning of their student-trainees. This model policy attempts to disclose and make these expectations explicit for student-trainees prior to program entry and at the outset of education and training.

In response to these issues, the Council of Chairs of Training Councils (CCTC) has developed the following model policy that doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral training programs in psychology may use in their respective program handbooks and other written materials (see <http://www.apa.org/ed/graduate/cctc.html>). This policy was developed in consultation with CCTC member organizations, and is consistent with a range of oversight, professional, ethical, and licensure guidelines and procedures that are relevant to processes of training, practice, and the assessment of competence within professional psychology (e.g., the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards, 2004; Competencies 2002: Future Directions in Education and Credentialing in Professional Psychology; Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, 2002; Guidelines and Principles for Accreditation of Programs in Professional

This document was developed by the Student Competence Task Force of the Council of Chairs of Training Councils (CCTC) (<http://www.apa.org/ed/graduate/cctc.html>) and approved by the CCTC on March 25, 2004. Impetus for this document arose from the need, identified by a number of CCTC members that programs in professional psychology needed to clarify for themselves and their student-trainees that the comprehensive academic evaluation of student-trainee competence includes the evaluation of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and professional development and functioning. Because this crucial aspect of academic competency had not heretofore been well addressed by the profession of psychology, CCTC approved the establishment of a "Student Competence Task Force" to examine these issues and develop proposed language. This document was developed during 2003 and 2004 by a 17-member task force comprised of representatives from the various CCTC training councils. Individuals with particular knowledge of scholarship related to the evaluation of competency as well as relevant ethical and legal expertise were represented on this task force. The initial draft of this document was developed by the task force and distributed to all of the training councils represented on CCTC. Feedback was subsequently received from multiple perspectives and constituencies (e.g., student, doctoral, internship), and incorporated into this document, which was edited a final time by the task force and distributed to the CCTC for discussion. This document was approved by consensus at the 3/25/04 meeting of the CCTC with the following clarifications: (a) training councils or programs that adopt this "model policy" do so on a voluntary basis (i.e., it is not a "mandated" policy from CCTC); (b) should a training council or program choose to adopt this "model policy" in whole or in part, an opportunity should be provided to student-trainees to consent to this policy prior to entering a training program; (c) student-trainees should know that information relevant to the evaluation of competence as specified in this document may not be privileged information between the student-trainee and the program and/or appropriate representatives of the program.

Psychology, 2003; Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists, 2002).

II. Model Policy

Students and trainees in professional psychology programs (at the doctoral, internship, or postdoctoral level) should know – prior to program entry, and at the outset of training – that faculty, training staff, supervisors, and administrators have a professional, ethical, and potentially legal obligation to: (a) establish criteria and methods through which aspects of competence other than, and in addition to, a student-trainee's knowledge or skills may be assessed (including, but not limited to, emotional stability and well being, interpersonal skills, professional development, and personal fitness for practice); and, (b) ensure – insofar as possible – that the student-trainees who complete their programs are competent to manage future relationships (e.g., client, collegial, professional, public, scholarly, supervisory, teaching) in an effective and appropriate manner. Because of this commitment, and within the parameters of their administrative authority, professional psychology education and training programs, faculty, training staff, supervisors, and administrators strive not to advance, recommend, or graduate students or trainees with demonstrable problems (e.g., cognitive, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, technical, and ethical) that may interfere with professional competence to other programs, the profession, employers, or the public at large.

As such, within a developmental framework, and with due regard for the inherent power difference between students and faculty, students and trainees should know that their faculty, training staff, and supervisors will evaluate their competence in areas other than, and in addition to, coursework, seminars, scholarship, comprehensive examinations, or related program requirements. These evaluative areas include, but are not limited to, demonstration of sufficient: (a) interpersonal and professional competence (e.g., the ways in which student-trainees relate to clients, peers, faculty, allied professionals, the public and individuals from diverse backgrounds or histories); (b) self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-evaluation (e.g., knowledge of the content and potential impact of one's own beliefs and values on clients, peers, faculty, allied professionals, the public, and individuals from diverse backgrounds or histories); (c) openness to processes of supervision (e.g., the ability and willingness to explore issues that either interfere with the appropriate provision of care or impede professional development or functioning); and (d) resolution of issues or problems that interfere with professional development or functioning in a satisfactory manner (e.g., by responding constructively to feedback from supervisors or program faculty; by the successful completion of remediation plans; by participating in personal therapy in order to resolve issues or problems).

This policy is applicable to settings and contexts in which evaluation would appropriately occur (e.g., coursework, practica, supervision), rather than settings and contexts that are unrelated to the formal process of education and training (e.g., non-academic, social contexts). However, irrespective of setting or context, when a student-trainee's conduct clearly and demonstrably (a) impacts the performance, development, or functioning of the student-trainee, (b) raises questions of an ethical nature, (c) represents a risk to public safety, or (d) damages the representation of psychology to the profession or public, appropriate representatives of the program may review such conduct within the context of the program's evaluation processes.

Although the purpose of this policy is to inform students and trainees that evaluation will occur in these areas, it should also be emphasized that a program's evaluation processes and content should typically include: (a) information regarding evaluation processes and standards (e.g., procedures should be consistent and content verifiable); (b) information regarding the primary purpose of evaluation (e.g., to facilitate student or trainee development; to enhance self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-assessment; to emphasize strengths as well as areas for improvement; to assist in the development of remediation plans when necessary); (c) more than one source of information regarding the evaluative area(s) in question (e.g., across supervisors and settings); and (d) opportunities for remediation, provided that faculty, training staff, or supervisors conclude that satisfactory remediation is possible for a given student-trainee. Finally, the criteria, methods, and processes through which student-trainees will be evaluated should be clearly specified in a program's handbook, which should also include information regarding due process policies and procedures (e.g., including, but not limited to, review of a program's evaluation processes and decisions).

Informed Consent Regarding Radford University Psy.D. Student Competence

The faculty of the Radford University Psy.D. Program is charged with the dual task of nurturing the development of psychologists-in-training and ensuring the standards of the profession of psychology. In order to fulfill these dual responsibilities, faculty must evaluate students based on their academic, professional, and personal qualities. The policy for this provision of the training experience is articulated in the *The Comprehensive Evaluation of Student-Trainee Competence in Professional Psychology Programs* document included in the student handbook. This document was developed by the Student Competence Task Force of the Council of Chairs of Training Councils (CCTC) (<http://www.apa.org/ed/graduate/cctc.html>) and approved by the CCTC on March 25, 2004, and subsequently adopted in principle by the Psy.D. faculty in December, 2007.

In order to ensure the promotion of human welfare and the standards of the profession, all Psy.D. students will abide by relevant ethical codes and demonstrate developmentally appropriate professional knowledge, technical and interpersonal skills, professional attitudes, and professional character. The Psy.D. faculty do their best to ensure that those persons who might compromise the standards of the profession, or who might pose a serious risk to clients, students, research participants, and others, are not allowed to train for or enter the profession. Certain types of probation, suspension, or dismissal proceedings may be initiated when a student's behavior is so inappropriate as to warrant major concern regarding whether the student is emotionally, interpersonally, or ethically unsuited for current study in the discipline of psychology and eventual entry into the profession of psychology. A student's progress in the program may be interrupted for failure to comply with academic standards or if a student's interpersonal or emotional status produces inappropriate activities along the lines of incompetence, ethical misconduct, academic misconduct, or problematic behaviors (see attached for definitions and examples of these terms).

As described in the Psy.D. Student Handbook, the overarching goal of the Psy.D. Program is to prepare counseling psychologists in the practitioner-scholar model to assume roles as responsible, competent members of the professional community. In addition to developmentally appropriate technical competence, students are expected to maintain high standards of professional and ethical behavior in their interactions with clients, students, peers, supervisors, and faculty, including confidentiality, honesty, and academic integrity. Students are expected to be familiar with the Program goals and to work with faculty toward ensuring that their academic and professional development is consistent with the achievement of these goals. Students are also expected to pay attention to the functioning of their peers and intervene (with the peer directly or by talking with Program faculty) if there is concern about the peer. Faculty will monitor student progress to assess student competence and also to identify deficiencies. Faculty will assist students in remediation of deficiencies where possible, but dismissal of the student from the program may occur when remediation is not possible, or a student is unwilling to attempt recommended remediation(s).

It is important for students to understand and appreciate that academic competence in professional psychology training activities (e.g., doctoral and internship programs) is defined and evaluated comprehensively. Specifically, in addition to performance in coursework, seminars, scholarship, comprehensive examinations and related program requirements, other aspects of professional development and functioning (e.g., cognitive, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, technical, and ethical) are also evaluated. Such comprehensive evaluation is

necessary in order for faculty to appraise the entire range of academic and professional performance, development, and functioning of students.

Consistent with this policy, students should know that faculty and supervisors evaluate, within a developmental framework, their competence in areas other than, and in addition to, coursework, seminars, scholarship, comprehensive examinations, and related program requirements. These evaluative areas include, but are not limited to, demonstration of sufficient: (a) interpersonal and professional competence (e.g., the ways in which student-trainees relate to clients, peers, students they teach, faculty, allied professionals, the public, and individuals from diverse backgrounds or histories), (b) self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-evaluation (e.g., knowledge of the content and potential impact of one's own beliefs and values on clients, peers, students, faculty, allied professionals, the public, and individuals from diverse backgrounds or histories), (c) openness to processes of supervision (e.g., the ability and willingness to explore issues that either interfere with the appropriate provision of care or impede professional development or functioning), and (d) resolution of issues or problems that interfere with professional development or functioning in a satisfactory manner.

This policy applies to settings and contexts in which evaluation would appropriately occur (e.g., coursework, practica, supervision, research collaboration), rather than settings and contexts that are unrelated to the formal process of education and training (e.g., non-academic, social contexts). However, regardless of setting or context, when a student's conduct (in person, through writing, on the Internet, or in other ways) clearly and demonstrably (a) impacts the performance, development, or functioning of the student or other program members, (b) raises questions of an ethical nature, (c) represents a risk to public safety, or (d) damages the representation of psychology to the profession or public, appropriate representatives of the program may review such conduct within the context of the program's evaluation processes.

The purpose of this statement is to inform students that evaluation occurs as stated previously, but it also serves to emphasize that the program's evaluation processes and content have as their primary goals: (a) facilitating student development; (b) enhancing student self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-assessment; (c) emphasizing strengths as well as areas for improvement; and (d) assisting in the development of remediation plans when necessary. Students should also know that the program's evaluation process involves more than one source of information regarding the evaluative area(s) in question (e.g., across supervisors and settings). Finally, negative evaluations always include opportunities for remediation--provided that the faculty and supervisors conclude that satisfactory remediation is possible for a given student.

In conclusion, by signing this document you are entering into an agreement to allow the Radford University Psy.D. faculty to assess your academic and professional development in relation to the goals of the Psy.D. Program and the standards of the profession of psychology, in accord with the explanations herein. You have the right to not enter into this agreement, which would result in your not being admitted into the Radford University Psy.D. Program. This agreement will be in effect during the complete time when a student is enrolled in the Psy.D. Program (e.g., from admission to graduation).

Student Signature

Date

Competence Definitions

Because there has been significant discussion in the literature about terminology (see, e.g., the October 2007 issue of *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*), below we provide operational definitions for key terms related to student evaluation. The examples provided are meant to be illustrative and not all-encompassing. We begin with the term “impairment” because there has been some concern about its use (see Elman & Forrest, 2007); however, in the context of student evaluation we are specifically **NOT** using the term as it is defined in the Americans with Disabilities Act but rather as defined below.

Impairment is defined as an interference in professional functioning. Impairment is typically reflected in an inability to control personal stress, psychological dysfunction, or emotional reactions that may affect professional functioning. Impairment typically involves a decrease in level of skill or functioning. Problems typically become identified as impairments:

when they include most of the following characteristics: (a) The [student] does not acknowledge, understand, or address the problem when it is identified, (b) the problem is not merely a reflection of a skill deficit that can be rectified by academic or didactic training, (c) the quality of services delivered by the [student] is consistently negatively affected, (d) the problem is not restricted to one area of professional functioning, (e) a disproportionate amount of attention by training personnel is required, and/or (f) the [student’s] behavior does not change as a function of feedback, remediation efforts, and/or time. (Lamb et al., 1987, p. 599).

When addressing impairment issues, faculty will assess the themes identified in Gizara and Forrest (2004), regarding whether: “(a) the [student’s] behavior was either professionally harmful or deficient, (b) the behavior was a clear pattern, and (c) the behavior was not resolving” and “a ‘noticeable shift’ in the [student’s] level of performance.

Examples:

A student demonstrates consistently angry interactions with clients and shows no ability to refrain from these non-constructive activities even after remediation has been attempted.

A student has a substance abuse problem which cannot be brought under control.

Incompetence. As a program we recognize that competence “depends on habits of mind, including attentiveness, critical curiosity, self-awareness, and presence. Professional competence is developmental, impermanent, and context-dependent” (Epstein & Hundert, 2002, p. 228). In general, “professional competence” involves: “the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served” (p. 227). Incompetence is defined as a lack of achievement of developmentally appropriate competence, which may include either professional or interpersonal skill, or academic deficiency. Overholser and Fine (1990) also state that “incompetence occurs when professionals continue to provide services that they are not fully capable of performing” (p. 462).

Examples:

A student provides psychological services (e.g. teaching, research, counseling) without appropriate professional supervision.

A student is unable to learn and exercise appropriate counseling skills.

A student demonstrates multiple instances of gross inappropriate interpersonal conduct.

Ethical Misconduct is when the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct produced by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2002) are not followed. This code is intended to provide both the general principles and the decision rules to cover situations often encountered by psychologists and trainees in their professional activities. It has as its primary goal the welfare and protection of the individuals and groups with whom psychologists and trainees work. It is the individual responsibility of each psychologist and trainee to aspire to the highest possible standards of conduct. Psychologists and trainees respect and protect human and civil rights so that they do not knowingly participate in or condone unfair discriminatory practices.

Examples:

A student engages in an exploitive dual relationship with a client or research participant.

A student misrepresents her or his professional credentials or training in order to increase personal gain (e.g., secure an internship).

Academic Misconduct is an act in which a student seeks to claim credit for the work or efforts of another without authorization or citation, uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise, forges or falsifies academic documents or records, intentionally impedes or damages the academic work of others, engages in conduct aimed at making false representation of a student's academic performance, or assists other students in any of these acts. For further information about Radford University's Standards of Student Conduct, go to <http://www.radford.edu/dos-web/Standards07.pdf>

Examples:

A student cheats on an examination.

A student collaborates with others on a course assignment that has been designated as a project to be completed by each student independent from others.

A student submits a paper or assignment that contains ideas or research of others without appropriately identifying the sources of those ideas.

Problematic Behaviors refer to a student's behaviors, attitudes, or characteristics that may require remediation, but are perceived as not excessive or unexpected for professionals in training. Performance anxiety, discomfort with other persons' diverse life-styles and ethnic backgrounds, and lack of appreciation of agency norms are examples of problematic behaviors that are usually remedied and not likely to progress into impairment or incompetence status [c.f., Lamb, Cochran, & Jackson (1991). *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 22, 291-296].

Examples:

A student has strong negative emotional reactions to client concerns and is willing to examine these conflicts in personal psychotherapy.

A student consistently doesn't follow the guidelines specified within departmental or program guidelines.