

**Society Leadership Program (SLP) 2019:  
Challenges Faced by Early Career Psychologists (ECPs)**

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**Background**

Membership in professional organizations offers many benefits to psychologists, including providing a professional home; interacting with leaders in the field; finding mentoring; and accessing awards, grants, and various other resources (Dodgen, Fowler, & Williams-Nickelson, 2003). Additionally, other resources include access to specialized knowledge, such as journals and other publications; the ability to earn continuing education credits and gain other opportunities for professional development; and advocacy and public policy activities on behalf of members and their interests (Bauman, 2008).

For psychologists, the largest professional organization in the world is the American Psychological Association (APA), with approximately 117,000 members (APA, 2017). Within APA, Division 19 (Society for Military Psychology) plays a crucial role in encouraging research and the application of psychological research to military problems. Members of Division 19 are military psychologists who serve diverse functions in settings including research activities, management, providing mental health services, teaching, consulting, work with Congressional committees, and advising senior military commands. Due to the important role that Division 19 plays in the development of military psychologists, it is important for this organization to understand how to best support their members.

### **Early Career Psychologists**

For Division 19 to best support military psychologists, it is important to first examine the challenges faced by early career psychologists (ECPs). An ECP is an individual who is within 10 years of receipt of the doctorate degree. This population is important to examine because ECPs have a significant impact on how psychology will evolve and be recognized in the marketplace. Researchers indicate that ECPs have unique insights to provide to the field. For instance, psychologists who are just entering the profession have had different training experiences and likely have had different personal, cultural, and historical experiences than more established psychologists (Smith et al., 2012). According to experts, as the number of ECPs in the workforce continues to grow, psychologists' understanding of issues and barriers to advancement for ECPs is a critical need under investigation (O'Shaughnessy & Burnes, 2014).

According to the literature, the American Psychological Association (APA) and its divisions have developed various resources aimed at aiding early career psychologists; yet, very little research has been conducted to assess the actual needs of this group (Good, Keeley, Leder, Afful, & Stiegler-Balfour, 2013). In 2007, APA administered a survey to better understand the challenges of ECPs. Results showed that many participants reported financial, family, and licensure difficulties (American Psychological Association, 2008). Furthermore, Green & Hawley (2009) noted that some challenges associated with ECPs are debt-related issues, licensure requirements and developing personal identity. In a survey of 160 ECPs, Butt et al. (2011) noted that particular issues included time management, professional identity, networking and connectedness, licensing and credentialing, mentoring, personal finances,

grants/funding, skills training, practice/business, and the job-search process.

Furthermore, Good et al (2013) investigated concerns of “junior faculty” (i.e., academic ECPs) and found the top three challenges to be (a) balancing teaching and research, (b) fulfilling tenure requirements, and (c) balancing work and family. Although the issues affecting ECP’s span across the wide range of psychologists within APA, the current project specifically addresses those affecting membership in Division 19: Society for Military Psychology.

### **Purpose and Participants**

The purpose of the current study was to get feedback from early career psychologists (those within 10 years of earning their doctorate degree) about their experiences and opportunities for professional growth and development. This project examined ECPs within various settings (e.g., clinical, research, organizational consulting, etc.) to determine the most identified challenges they experience (e.g., passing the EPPP, lack of mentorship, clinical/research responsibilities, etc.).

Participants included all ECPs within APA’s Division 19: The Society for Military Psychology. As of February 2019, there were 209 ECP members within the Division.

### **Design and Participants**

This project was conducted online through Survey Gizmo, a survey program. The survey was sent out from June to July 2019 through the Division 19 ECP listserv. To participate in this survey individuals must have: 1) obtained a doctorate degree (e.g., Ph.D, Psy.D, Ed.D, etc.) within the last 10 years, 2) be a member of APA Division 19, and 3) currently work in a setting that serves military populations.

This survey included qualitative and quantitative questions. Participants were first asked demographic questions to better understand their professional and personal background (e.g., highest degree obtained, clinical work setting, primary occupational role). Using a Likert scale (from Very Strongly Disagree to Very Strongly Agree), participants were then asked about their educational experiences, opportunities for professional growth, and challenges experienced as an ECP. Participants were then asked open-ended questions regarding their involvement and experiences within Division 19. Open-ended questions were included to gather more subjective data from participants. In total, this questionnaire took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

### **Significance**

Conducting this project and investigating the needs and challenges of ECPs in Division 19 is important for several reasons. Firstly, it directly aligns with the ECP strategic objective of improving member engagement. Under initiative 2.2, which involves communicating with members, administering this survey will assist with identifying the priority issues that need to be addressed when serving the Division 19 ECP population. Second, better understanding the needs of ECPs may also assist with accomplishing the strategic goal of increasing the retention of ECPs in Division 19. Per the 2019 Early Career Psychologists' Report, Division 19 obtained 30 additional ECP members during the past quarter. To further enhance membership, it is essential to hear the voice of ECPs so they can be adequately served and satisfied within the division. Third, this project provides information regarding ECPs' perceived level of support. By understanding how ECPs are currently supported in Division 19, we may broaden the scope and outlook of how Division 19 is currently supporting their members.

## Results

Results from this survey provided interesting data regarding ECPs within Division 19. First, out of 209 ECPs within the Division, 31 individuals completed the survey (response rate ~15%). A majority of participants (40%) identified currently working within an Armed Forces Medical Center setting. Additionally, 28% identified working in “other” settings, 24% in private sector, 16% in veteran affairs, 8% in university/medical center, 4% in prison or other correctional facility, and 4% in the government sector. Furthermore, a majority of participants identified as clinicians (76%), 20% as consultants, 12% as researchers, 4% as educators, and 4% as “other”.

For the likert-scale questions, participants were asked about their awareness of resources (e.g., continuing education, professional development grants, etc.) within Division 19. Results indicated that over 50% of participants were not aware or only slight aware of resources provided by the Division for ECPs. When asked about how helpful Division 19 ECP resources are, a large majority of participants thought that resources were only slightly helpful or not helpful at all. These responses may have been due to a lack of awareness of the resources available, as the previous data showed. In regards to perceived support, data indicated that fewer than 30% of participants feel very or extremely supported by the Division. Participants were also asked about satisfaction with their membership. Results conveyed a little under 50% of participants have no strong opinions related to membership satisfaction.

Next, qualitative questions were also asked to gain a better understanding of participants’ specific challenges. Participants were asked open-ended questions to obtain more rich data regarding their experiences. The top challenges were ordered by first

finding what themes were apparent, then seeing how many participants fell within the themes.

When asked about the top challenges of transitioning from the role of a student to an early career psychologist, the major themes found were managing high case and work loads, finances, and mentorship. Other responses included state licensing board hurdles, lack of resources for military spouses, and networking opportunities.

Individuals were also asked about the most significant challenges associated with working within the field of military psychology. Some of the top challenges included government bureaucracy, balancing roles, and ethical dilemmas. Furthermore, it was also important to understand the reasons why ECP members joined Division 19.

Participants indicated that networking and support from colleagues, educational resources (e.g., journal articles), professional interests, and career development opportunities were the main reasons why they joined. The most valuable aspect of their membership included continuing education resources (e.g., webinars), networking and support from colleagues, and the Military Psychology Journal. Top obstacles interfering with ability to stay involved in Division 19 included high workload, limited time, and lack of communication. Ultimately, these data provide us with some potential recommendations for Division 19 for the future.

### **Recommendations**

To better support ECP members' personal and professional development, it is recommended that Division 19 take the following steps. First, it is important to provide additional continuing education opportunities. These may include webinars about ethics and the DHA transition. Next, improving the marketing of current resources is essential.

Many members noted they were not familiar with all of the great resources that are currently available. Therefore, through social media, email listservs, and establishing personal connections with members, communication may be further improved. Third, increasing financial support for conferences may be helpful. Currently, travel grants are \$750. Possibility increasing travel funds to \$1,500 may help with the remaining conference travel and may help members feel more supported. An alternative idea would be to increase the number of \$750 grants available to support a higher quantity of members. Ultimately, either of these routes may be helpful. Fourth, periodically conveying information regarding benefits of membership may improve communication with members while also ensuring they are aware of the current resources. Alternative routes (e.g., via social media) of sending this information should be considered so that email burden does not occur. Next, providing mentoring opportunities with mid-late career psychologists is essential. Currently, there is no set tab on the ECP website that identifies who is available to serve as a mentor. Including biographies of available mentors on the website may be beneficial when potential mentees are looking for additional support. Last, members may appreciate enhancing outreach opportunities. Opportunities may include volunteering and/or sponsoring quarterly regional community events to enhance member comradery. It is important to note that a strategic approach should be considered when implementing all or some of these recommendations. By doing so, ECPs may experience additional support and enhanced satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, from this survey we have obtained interesting data and recommendations moving forward. First, improving communication (Initiative 2.2) with

members is essential. This can be done by enhancing social media presence (e.g., via Linkdin or Group Me for ECP members) and continuing to update the ECP website. Second, improving mentor and networking opportunities is also important. This can be done by adding biographies and contact information of available mid-career psychologist mentors on the Division 19 ECP website. We should also continue to diversify continuing education topics, which may include information regarding the DHA transition, work-life balance for ECPs, and ethics in military psychology. Lastly, enhancing financial resources for members by increasing grants for regional and national conference and providing yearly monetary awards (e.g., ECP of the year) may be helpful. In all, further supporting our ECPs is essential to not only Division 19, but also the field of psychology in the future.

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## Appendix 1: Handout

### Society Leadership Program (SLP): Challenges Faced by Early Career Psychologists (ECPs)

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#### **Purpose:**

- ◆ To obtain feedback from ECPs about their experiences and opportunities for professional growth and development
- ◆ Examined ECPs within various settings (e.g., clinical, research, organizational consulting, etc.) to identify challenges they experience

#### **Design:**

- ◆ Administered online survey through Division 19 listserv (from June-July 2019)
- ◆ Consisted of qualitative and quantitative questions
- ◆ Took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete
- ◆ Approximately 31 ECPs participated in this study (out of 209)

#### **Recommended Resources to Better Support Members:**

- 1) Provide additional webinars about ethics and the DHA transition
- 2) Improve marketing of current resources by improving communication through social media, email listservs, and establishing personal connections with members
- 3) Increase financial support for conferences
- 4) Periodically convey information regarding benefits of membership
- 5) Provide mentoring opportunities with mid-late career psychologists
- 6) Enhance outreach opportunities

#### **Conclusions:**

- 1) Improve communication with members
  - ◆ Enhance social media presence (e.g., create Twitter page or GroupMe for ECP members)
  - ◆ Continue to update ECP website
- 2) Enhance mentor and networking opportunities
  - ◆ Add bios and contact information of available mid-career psychologist mentors on Division 19 website
  - ◆ Facilitate regional meet-up groups
- 3) Diversify continuing education topics
  - ◆ DHA transition, work-life balance for ECPs, ethics in military psychology
- 4) Continue to create financial resources for members
  - ◆ Increase grants for regional and national conferences
  - ◆ Yearly monetary awards (e.g., ECP of the year)