SEQUENCE OF STATES: PSYCHOLOGISTS ADVOCATE FOR A SHIFT IN TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

Thanks to grassroots efforts, the postdoc is optional for licensed psychologists in 17 states. Are more to follow?

By Hannah Calkins

“It was a no-brainer,” Klein says. “I haven’t heard a word of concern about the quality of our graduates’ training or the training requirements since we passed the bill.”

More flexibility for psychologists

Since 2008, 15 states have passed similar legislation, emboldened by APA’s adoption of the revised Model Act in 2010. Missouri is the most recent addition to this list of states, having passed a new sequence of training law in July 2017.

Supporters say that the postdoc requirement is outdated and unrealistic. Postdoctoral training opportunities are hard to come by, they argue, because employers have few incentives to offer them. Insurers generally don’t reimburse unlicensed providers, and so employers, particularly independent practices, have limited ways to bill for services provided by postdoctoral trainees. Employers also have to pay a supervisor, often making postdocs, in Klein’s words, “a cash drain.”

With limited postdoctoral prospects, many graduates are in a difficult position: unable to clear the last hurdle to licensure and therefore unable to earn an income—or to begin paying down their hefty student debts.

But economic arguments aren’t the only compelling ones, says David Lutz, PhD, professor of psychology at Missouri State University and former president of the Missouri Psychological Association (MOPA).

“In Missouri, we had psychology interns in rural areas who wanted to remain there but weren’t able to because they had to seek out postdoctoral experiences,” he says. In areas already suffering from provider shortages, this didn’t make any sense.

Jess Luzier, PhD, ABPP, who is president of the West Virginia Psychological Association,
observed similar problems there. West Virginia made the postdoc optional in 2016. “We saw changing the requirements as a way to pull in more well-trained, doctoral-level providers where there was a dearth of them,” she says.

Luzier, Lutz, Klein and other supporters are confident that changing the sequence of training requirement has virtually no effect on the quality of licensees’ training.

“We wanted to make adamantly clear that we were in no way diluting the requirements,” says Lutz, who worked on the issue for years in Missouri with colleagues and students. “The required number of hours of supervised training is the same. Those hours are just in a different place.”

In 2014, Lutz coauthored an article on the perceptions and anticipated impacts of eliminating the postdoc requirement. He and his coauthors found that some of the psychologists and students surveyed had significant concerns, mostly related to license mobility and to the possibility of inconsistencies in the quality of training programs. However, they also found that the more well-informed respondents were about APA’s Model Act, the more likely they were to support making the postdoc optional.

“We used the data in the article to gain the support of our colleagues at MOPA, the state psychology board, and finally, the state legislature,” Lutz says. Like Lutz, Luzier has a long history of engagement on the issue. As a graduate student in Ohio, she was involved in changing the requirements there in 2010, and she drew on that experience a few years later as a licensed psychologist in West Virginia. Also like Lutz, she knew what she needed to do in order to encourage her colleagues.

“I did what a psychologist does best: gather data,” she says.

Luzier contacted the psychology boards of nearby states that had made the postdoc optional, and talked with them about the effects of the change. One thing was clear: more flexible sequence of training requirements drew psychologists to the state.

“It was a dramatic increase,” she says. “At the same time, there were no increases in ethics complaints or disciplinary actions against newly licensed psychologists due to this change. So, from a public safety perspective, there’s no compelling reason to argue against changing the law.”

Others urge caution—and await hard data.

But some psychologists see it differently, particularly those associated with state licensure boards.

“There has been no empirical data to demonstrate that psychologists don’t need to complete a postdoc,” says Alex Siegel, JD, PhD, the director of professional affairs at the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB).

However, he said that Part Two of the Examination for Professional Practice of Psychology (known as EPPP Part Two), which tests skills, may
provide that data after ASPPB launches it in January 2020.

“The EPPP Part Two may give us a more objective way to measure whether graduates have the requisite skills for entry into practice,” he says. “But until we have that data, ASPPB’s position is that the postdoc requirement is in place for the protection of the public.”

Mardi F. Allen, PhD, former ASPPB president and current consultant to the Mississippi Board of Psychology, shares Siegel’s view. “The comparative study of candidate scores on the EPPP Part Two will provide statistical data for making a more informed decision,” she says.

Another major concern with changing the requirements, as noted in Lutz’s 2014 article, is mobility. Psychologists who haven’t completed a postdoc will face challenges getting licensed in states that require it, said Siegel.

He advises graduates with the option of forgoing a postdoc to weigh immediate flexibility versus future mobility. “If there is even a one percent chance you might one day move to a state that requires it, it’s in your best interests to complete postdoc before licensure, if you can,” he says.

Siegel and Allen’s views reflect the generally more cautious approach taken by state licensure boards compared to that of state associations.

“Board members understand the outside pressures on the profession and daunting encroachments by other providers as they compete in the marketplace,” Allen says. “However, upon appointment, they must distance themselves from a professional enhancement agenda and focus explicitly on the sole priority of the protection of the public being served.”

While applicants weigh whether postdoctoral hours will be important to their current and future practices, many states have a choice to make, too, relative to licensure laws. APA’s Office on Early Career Psychologists is supporting changemakers with a toolkit and a grant for state psychological associations willing to work on this issue.

Says Eddy Ameen, PhD, director of that office: “We believe the postdoc is important for specialization, but not entry to independent practice. There’s no logical reason why specialty trainees cannot be licensed.”