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Research Training in the Wheaton College Psy.D. Program in Clinical Psychology

Robert J. Gregory

Mark R. McMinn

Wheaton College

This article describes research and scholarship training in the Wheaton College Psy.D. program. Essential elements include faculty members as strong role models, relevant coursework, collaborative research opportunities, and a significant clinical dissertation research project. The authors' personal views on strengths and weaknesses in training are provided.

The Wheaton College Psy.D. program began in 1993, with a mission to educate students in a manner informed and shaped by the Christian faith, to produce practitioner-scholars who will both learn from and contribute to the scholarly literature, to emphasize professional practice as service, especially to underserved and marginalized populations, and to conduct training in an intentional community of faith that emphasizes a balanced approach to spiritual, personal, professional, and interpersonal growth and development. Two aspects of this mission statement are particularly relevant for this article. First, we subscribe to a practitioner-scholar model of training. Most students coming to our program want careers as professional psychologists, working as practitioners and consultants. Second, part of our mission statement is that students should be capable of contributing to the theoretical and applied empirical scholarly literatures—a guiding philosophy that we take seriously. Thus, we likely place somewhat of a greater emphasis upon the scholar aspect of training than is typical for many programs pursuing the practitioner-scholar model. This translates to a desire that students will be competent in conducting research, analyzing it, and writing about it—objectives that we approach through specific coursework and program requirements described below. Perhaps even more important, however, is that we convey our focus on scholarship through the practices and values of faculty members. Put simply, our prizing of scholarship is transmitted as a program value, in

part, through ongoing contributions by faculty members to the theoretical and empirical literatures. Many of these contributions are achieved collaboratively with students.

Science and Practice in the Curriculum

The integration of science and practice is foundational to the training of our doctoral students. For example, in all intervention training courses, students are taught to look to the empirical literatures for evidence that particular interventions work. In some courses, lists of specific empirically-based treatments are included in the syllabi. Philosophically, most faculty members respect empiricism and model a healthy skepticism about unproved methods.

Regarding coursework in research, we require two courses: a 4-credit semester course on research methods and a 4-credit semester course on advanced statistics. The first course is a relatively statistics-free introduction to research methods that surveys validity issues, research designs, clinical significance, ethical issues, and writing. This course also introduces qualitative and program evaluation approaches. Students are required to propose a research project and write the introduction and methods sections. Under ideal circumstances, this proposal ultimately becomes the student's dissertation project. This outcome is realized for perhaps half of our students.

The second required course is advanced statistics, in which students learn how to use the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for purposes of data description and inferential statistics. The inferential methods reviewed include two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and interactions, simple linear regression, multiple regression, logistic regression, and factor

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analysis. Students conduct analyses on extant data sets and develop a portfolio of methods throughout the semester.

Clinical Dissertation

In addition to coursework, students are required to pass an oral exam demonstrating a doctoral-level understanding of research methodology and to complete a significant and meaningful independent research project, the clinical dissertation. The amount of effort expected for this project is substantial—as reflected in the 10 credits of dissertation research required for the degree. We permit wide latitude as to the style of the dissertation, which can be a traditional empirical investigation, a qualitative study, or a meta-analysis. Conceptual, theoretical, and review articles also are acceptable. In all cases, the necessary criteria for a clinical dissertation are originality (embodiment of original thinking or analysis), meaningfulness (advancement of the field of psychology), and quality (overall excellence in the project).

Though permitted, relatively few pursue non-empirical investigations for a dissertation. The vast majority of our students—perhaps four of every five—incorporate some level of data collection and analysis in their dissertations. Most likely, the explanation for their preferring empirical studies is that students shrink back from the daunting challenge of developing a non-empirical investigation that is both original and meaningful.

Collaborative Research Teams

The dissertation project is the only required research engagement in our program. Even so, students are encouraged to take part in department research teams, encouraged to present papers at professional meetings, and encouraged to publish articles in professional journals. In fact, we maintain a program budget line to provide significant financial support for students who present papers at professional meetings. This has become an incentive for students to participate in research groups, and allows them opportunity to travel and experience professional conventions during their training. For example, the last Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) meeting was held in St. Petersburg, Florida in March of 2004. Fifteen of our clinical psychology graduate students (some Psy.D. students and some M.A. students) and 9 faculty took advantage of the opportunity

to escape the Midwest winter for a few days and to present their research. Some years we have had as many as 35 students and faculty traveling to professional meetings to present their collaborative research projects. Although we don't have specific data on the proportion of students who reach beyond the dissertation in their research involvement, it is probably a minority of the students who do so, perhaps two of every five.

Collaborative research is highly valued in our program, and involves both faculty-student participation and also faculty-faculty involvement. The majority of our faculty members maintain ongoing research projects in which student involvement is essential. These research teams tend to be centered upon areas of faculty expertise, and include geropsychology, church-psychology collaboration, psychological practice with Latino/Latina clients, service provision in the inner city, the feminine voice in the integration of psychology and spirituality, and other topics. This collaborative research commonly leads to student-faculty co-authored journal publications and conference presentations. For example, in academic year 2003-2004, faculty members co-authored, with one or more students, approximately seven refereed journal articles, and presented approximately fifteen papers at regional or national conferences. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice (PP:R&P)* is the journal published by the American Psychological Association that most directly fits our practitioner-scholar model of training. In recent years, 7 different faculty and 13 different graduate students have collaborated for a total of 11 articles in *PP:R&P*. Some of these publications have been based on students' dissertation research, and some have reflected the ongoing work of faculty-student research groups. Many other faculty-student publications have appeared in other refereed journals.

Faculty-faculty collaboration also occurs on a regular basis, leading to conference presentations and journal publications. For example, Wheaton faculty members recently have co-authored several papers in the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, and *PP:R&P*.

Strengths and Weaknesses

In closing, we describe the strengths and weaknesses of our training in research and scholarship, as we perceive them. But let us preface this description with an obvious caveat:

this is our personal and admittedly subjective impression, and not one that we have had the opportunity to confirm with other faculty members at Wheaton College.

An imperative strength of our training relates to the fact that we have been able to attract and retain several faculty members who are seasoned, accomplished, and highly productive scholars. It is essential to our program identity and the fulfillment of the stated mission that our faculty members include several accomplished scholars who publish books, chapters, and journal articles on a regular basis. Not all faculty members need to be luminaries in this regard, and we recognize the diversity of gifts provided by everyone, including the essential roles played by faculty members who excel mainly as practitioners and who bring a wealth of practical experience to inform their teaching. But it would be difficult for us to argue the merits of scholarship in our training if we did not, to begin with, provide good role models for this mission. Furthermore, students take notice when faculty members incorporate their own research in class lectures, or assign their own journal articles for didactic purposes, or use their own textbooks for a course. Having a critical mass of faculty members with strong credentials as researchers and scholars is foundational to training in this endeavor—and Wheaton fulfills this standard commendably.

Another strength in our training is that we provide adequate opportunities for students to engage in collaborative research. Currently, any student who desires to be part of a research team would be able to find a niche with one or more groups. As is true of many skills, competence in research methods—the ability to design, conduct, analyze, and write up research—is probably best learned in a hands-on, collaborative atmosphere. At present, we provide a sufficient number of opportunities for this to happen. But this is true mainly because fewer than half of our students seek out this kind of experience, which speaks to a weakness in our research training, discussed below.

Our training in research and scholarship clearly is effective with many of our students, who have gone on to make abundant original contributions after graduation. For example, in 2002 we surveyed all 55 of our alumni as part of an extensive self-study for accreditation. Based upon a very creditable return rate of 88% (46 of 55 alumni), we learned that, in the three year

period 1999-2001, our graduates had presented an average of 1.7 conference papers and had published an average of exactly one journal article. That's not too shabby, considering that the modal number of *lifetime* publications for Ph.D.s in clinical psychology is exactly zero. Indeed, one good journal article every three years would earn you tenure at many small colleges. True, the distribution of the data was somewhat skewed—with a handful of alumni accounting for many of the presentations and publications. Still, it speaks well of our program that some of our students have become accomplished researchers and scholars. We have been somewhat surprised to see a substantial number of our graduates getting academic positions at Christian colleges and seminaries. At last count, approximately 15% of our graduates took academic jobs upon graduation. This compares favorably with the overall rate of 5% from Christian integrative Psy.D. and Ph.D. programs reported by Johnson and McMinn (2003).

One of the great challenges to excellent research training—and one of the weaknesses in our program—pertains to obtaining funding. Historically, Wheaton College faculty have neither sought nor received grants administered through the federal government. This has been a College policy in order to keep our institution as removed as possible from governmental mandates that might compromise the identity and training mission of the College. Thus, any grant-based funding must come from private foundations or individual donors. These are difficult to obtain and tend to be smaller than many federal research grants. Two of our core faculty are currently doing research that is funded through external grants, and a third person holds an endowed chair position that allows for modest research funding during most academic years. To do top-notch research, we need to find additional funding options for faculty and students.

As to other weaknesses in our research/scholarship training, our primary problem is that not all students are convinced of its importance, and, consequently, not all of them make an effort to develop skills in this area beyond the mandatory dissertation project. Again, we do not have specific data, but perhaps two of every five students really “buy in” to the belief that being a scholar and a researcher is an essential part of their identity as psychologists-in-training. These students willingly embark on the path of research and scholarship early in their program, and learn

to value these aspects of training. They typically enjoy the dissertation experience and some of their projects are presented at conferences or later published.

But for the majority of our students, perhaps three of every five, "research and scholarship" is a vacant phrase meaning only that they will begrudgingly tack on a dissertation at the very end of their program. Then, they take this dead weight with them on their internship where, at great cost to their clinical training, they may gaspingly finish and defend what they now regard as "the beast." Worse, some ABDs need even an additional tortured year or two longer to complete the dissertation—under duress of losing their entire degree. Lest we sound unduly critical of our own program, let us add that we believe this situation is widespread in Psy.D. training, and is even found in some Ph.D. programs. Obviously, it would be highly desirable to fix this state of affairs. The mandatory, vertically-integrated research groups described by several other programs in this special issue appear to be helpful in getting students engaged in research early in their training, and we are currently engaged in planning efforts to consider how we might develop similar strategies at Wheaton College.

Summary

In summary, we see research training as an integral part of our mission. All students have some research training experiences—courses and a dissertation—and many go beyond this to

participate in optional research groups. A good number of our students are socialized into the scholarly world through professional meetings and publishing in peer-reviewed journals, and a sizeable minority go on to accept academic positions at Christian colleges and seminaries. Still, we have challenges with research funding and with promoting research as a vital part of each student's professional identity. These are top priorities as we enter into the second decade of training in the Wheaton College Psy.D. program.

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Authors

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