External Funding and Competing Visions for Academic Counseling Psychology

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Abstract
The major contributions by Burrow-Sánchez, Martin, and Imel and Martens et al. are the first explicitly substantive, constructive statements about extramural funding and counseling psychology to appear in The Counseling Psychologist. For over 15 years, many have recognized the importance of extramural funding to the continued presence of counseling psychology training programs in research-intensive universities. In this reaction piece, I discuss several issues that may contribute to the lack of funded research appearing in counseling psychology outlets and to the apparent small number of counseling psychology faculty members with external funds. Suggestions for allocating and managing faculty resources and demands to maximally benefit a program and for pursuing current and future funding opportunities are offered.

Keywords
professional issues, external funding, academia, grants, training

More and more, I am convinced that the health of many of our counseling psychology training programs will depend on our ability to attract extramural funding. In fact, it is probably not too bold to predict that the status of our

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profession will be linked to our success as grant-seekers. There are other obvious advantages to obtaining funding—not the least of which is the way it will allow us to study the phenomena we care about, to train our students and to serve our clients.

—Bob Lent (2007, p. 4)

In a 2007 newsletter column, Robert Lent—at that time the vice president for scientific affairs for the Society of Counseling Psychology—succinctly nailed down the fundamental issues at stake for academic counseling psychology: Extramural funding is important to the health and status of our training programs and, by extension, to our profession. It can advance our scholarship. It can enrich training. It can help us better serve clients. I used this quote to open our symposium on external funding in the Division 17 convention program that summer (titled “Counseling Psychologists with Grant Funds—Principal Investigators Reveal Their Secrets”). These themes have appeared in various symposia and workshops over the years. Yet the articles by Burrow-Sánchez, Martin, and Imel (2016 [this issue]) and Martens et al. (2016 [this issue]) are the first explicitly substantive, constructive statements about extramural funding and counseling psychology to appear in The Counseling Psychologist (TCP). None of the three counseling psychology handbooks published over the past 9 years devoted any real page space to the matter of external funding and its alleged importance to the field. The topic of external funding has appeared in relevant TCP articles discussing challenges facing training programs in “Research 1” universities (e.g., Blustein, Goodyear, Perry, & Cypers, 2005).

We are long overdue for this conversation in TCP. In my reaction, I provide a brief backdrop to the Elliott and Shewchuk (1999) article that may illustrate some persistent issues in counseling psychology that complicate the successful pursuit of external funds. I conclude with some observations about allocating and managing faculty resources and demands to maximally benefit a program and, in the process, strategically take advantage of current opportunities and plan for inevitable changes and challenges.

**Demystifying the Process and Understanding the Disconnect**

As an assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, I examined the theoretical relations between social problem-solving abilities and various indicators of physical health and quality of life. The work logically progressed so that it was necessary to develop and study problem-solving interventions
for individuals with chronic health conditions. Cross-sectional work with undergraduate samples would not suffice. I needed financial resources to take my research program to the next level, and I wrote many grant proposals. In those days, I did all of the heavy lifting including writing all of the sections, calculating and preparing the budget, “walking” the proposal through the system for signatures, and making multiple copies required for submission (and collating the copies by hand). None of my proposals to federal agencies were funded. The critiques were painfully instructive: There were concerns about my access to the population. Pilot data were needed. Who would serve as the statistician? Multiple mistakes were found with the budget. This was most discouraging, and I was frustrated and disappointed by my inability to conduct the intervention research that was required.

The scenario changed dramatically once I assumed my post in the medical school at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The infrastructure was in place to conduct my work (including access to populations, colleagues from other professions to assist as co-investigators, templates for sections required for effective proposals, and experienced staff to develop and manage budgets). I had federal funding from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research upon my arrival in the summer of 1993 to conduct my first randomized controlled trial of a problem-solving intervention for persons with chronic spinal cord injury. Moreover, I was introduced to the real world of interdisciplinary and policy-relevant research, interacting with collaborators from many different disciplines (e.g., health administration, nursing, public health, various medical specialties) on campus and on review panels, and in meetings with project officers (and other agency staff and invited experts) to discuss future funding priorities and progress on existing priorities, to prepare reports to agency administrators (and later for congressional committees), and to learn about new methodologies and implications from related activities. I learned the reciprocal nature between interdisciplinary scholarship and policy making, how funding priorities were developed, and how and why funds were distributed.

Excited to share my experience with the counseling psychology community, I developed a “big picture” overview of external funding and policy-relevant research for my invited fellow’s address for Division 17 at the annual convention in 1998 (this address was the basis for the Elliott and Shewchuk, 1999, article). Informally, a few peers and senior colleagues in training programs kept me up to date about the increasing pressure from administration to obtain external funding to support students, research projects, and faculty time. I suspected some might find my presentation somewhat controversial, and others would find it helpful. Nevertheless, I was caught off-guard when one senior colleague from a prominent program in the field told me after my
talk that my comments were quite “clinical” (and this was not meant as a complement). I submitted the paper to TCP (initially examining articles published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* [JCP] and the *Journal of Counseling and Development* [JCD] as indicators of the counseling psychology literature). Reviewer critiques conveyed a lack of experience and familiarity with funding priorities and policy-relevant work (e.g., “the authors do not present any empirical evidence for the idea that the ‘...resolution of societal problems are articulated in federal and state funding priorities’”; “Why doesn’t NIMH [the National Institute of Mental Health] fund the kind of counseling process research that *JCP* is so highly regarded for publishing?”). Some reviewers relied on old talking points from a time and place that was quickly fading (e.g., “…the job task expectations for faculty in education are different than those for faculty in psychology or medicine or public health or business”), and others were dismissive (e.g., “why should we care that *JCP* or *JCD* does not publish more funded research?”; “I... for one, would be quite sorry to see the scope of either *JCP* or *JCD* change solely to make the journal more attractive to researchers with externally funded research programs”). In light of these issues and nagging concerns that I was extrapolating shamelessly beyond my data, and suspicious that counseling psychologists with grants were publishing their work in “specialty” journals, TCP declined the paper. It was fortunate that *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* was more receptive to the manuscript.

I hope that my account illustrates how grant funds can be vital to a research program that is congruent with counseling psychology values, principles, and heritage. The support and benefits of that initial grant in 1993 led directly to subsequent randomized controlled trials of problem solving interventions for family caregivers funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1996 and the National Institute of Child Health and Development in 2002. This was not a matter of “chasing after dollars” in pursuit of some “fad.” Funded research reflects the degree to which a proposed project is responsive to stated national priorities identified by policy makers and stakeholders who have a clear interest in addressing those priorities. I had a theory-driven research program, and these agencies had identified the need to test interventions that could address the social and behavioral issues experienced by these individuals. My interdisciplinary team proposed solutions.

The TCP reviewer critiques of the 1999 article and the ad hominem from a respected colleague in reaction to my fellow’s address merit further scrutiny. It is true that I publish much of my grant-supported research in outlets that would be labeled “specialized” (depending on your perspective). The decline in the number of studies featuring samples from clinical settings, generally (Buboltz, Miller, & Williams, 1999) and with persons with disabling
conditions specifically (Foley-Nicpon & Lee, 2012), in mainstream counseling psychology outlets is well documented. Like any other productive scholar, I know my audience. Moreover, my funded work has always been interdisciplinary. These projects require a mutual respect, sensitivity, and reciprocity among collaborators. Consequently, decisions about target audiences and outlets require consent from all authors, and there is a responsibility to work in the best interest of all involved, including the issues and expectations collaborators face in their own careers and home departments.

Interdisciplinary research is incongruent with a professional disposition that is “above the fray” of federal, state, and private funding priorities, but is “entirely aligned with those… contemporary scientific sensibilities” (Niemeyer & Goodyear, 2005, p. 705) of universities designated as “highest research activity” in the Carnegie classification framework. There is nothing elitist about this fact. Publicly funded universities with this designation have a great responsibility to operate as the “taxpayer’s think tank” (a phrase I attribute to Marty Heesacker), and as such, it is our mission as an applied science to assist in finding effective, sustainable solutions to the complex problems with multiple causes that our society and our communities face. Interdisciplinary research is essential in this enterprise: Ideally, it merges knowledge and expertise across traditional professional boundaries to generate and examine potential solutions. Federal funding agencies place a high premium on interdisciplinary research, and there is no interest in supporting a circumscribed research project that serves only a single discipline. Initiatives in the wake of the Affordable Care Act also ensure that team science will be a vital component of future health care professions, including psychology (Rozensky, 2014). The potential benefits of interprofessional connections to counseling psychology programs in research-intensive universities have been recognized for some time (Blustein et al., 2005).

Interdisciplinary research and activities are essential for faculty who envision a future for counseling psychology training programs in the “highest research activity” university environment. However, this vision competes against norms and credentials explicitly and implicitly expected by the discipline. Even under ideal circumstances, interdisciplinary research is time-consuming, and although the resulting scholarly products may be consistent with institutional priorities, these may be seen as tangential to the discipline. Even a theory-driven research program can be regarded as “fringe” if it relies on samples uncommon in our mainstream outlets (Buboltz et al., 1999), inadvertently undermines program rankings valued by the discipline (reflected in author institutional affiliations), or strays into the definitional boundaries of the identity struggle with things clinical.
Strategically Meeting the Mission of the Tier 1 Research-Intensive University

Counseling psychology faculty in the “highest research activity” universities must pursue external funding to support its teaching, research, and service missions. This is an expectation for all of the sciences and applied fields. Over 10 years ago my home department formalized these expectations in our annual faculty evaluation, completed at the end of each calendar year. Authorship of a grant proposal or contract (for research, teaching/program development, or service activity) over a 3-year period constitutes “expected activity” for every tenured and tenure-track faculty member. Funded grants constitute “meritorious” productivity. Faculty also report management of multiyear research grants or contracts. Collectively, we have considerable experience with external awards, and we appreciate the pursuit of any substantive award for teaching, research, and service, unlike other departments that may only value research grants from federal agencies. In the current funding climate, we appreciate awards that support our students with assistantships or initiate innovative service programs (because these usually support students and research projects). Federal grants that bring indirect dollars to the college and the department and that support high-profile research projects are certainly prized. At present, indirect dollars that stream back to our department are often used for professional development funds (available to all faculty), staff support, and departmental operational expenses. However, institutional policies about indirect funds vary tremendously across universities (I never received any indirect dollars into my professional accounts at my previous institution). Our current policies are vulnerable to change.

When we evaluate applicants for tenure-track faculty positions in my department, we discuss the potential “fundability” of the colleague’s research. We provide assistant professors with course releases to support proposal development or to participate in unique training opportunities (e.g., workshops for junior faculty conducted by the National Institutes of Health). Indeed, I have never seen a more generous, supportive system for junior colleagues. All graduate programs in our department need assistantship funds, so we try to work fairly and collaboratively with our departmental colleagues to share responsibility for these funds. Among my faculty colleagues, Linda Castillo’s federal awards for her projects (http://gearup.tamu.edu/) have funded more students (and research projects) in our program over the past decade than any other single source of support. My projects required many hours “off the side of my desk” with colleagues in public health to develop proposals and write manuscripts, meet with community stakeholders, and supervise graduate students on project assistantships. This “sweat equity”
was necessary for us to be well positioned for funding opportunities, including the 1115 Medicaid Waiver program that now supports our telepsychology clinic (http://telehealthcounseling.org/).

Our program values high-quality work but does not have a policy micro-managing where a colleague should publish it. Articles in mainstream counseling psychology publications are appreciated and recognized, but we know our success in this university environment is not contingent on that activity. Currently, our administration examines metrics that compare our department to other “peer departments” at other “peer institutions” (i.e., those designated as “highest research activity”). Those scorecards place a considerable beta weight on extramural funds. Service activities that address regional, state, and local needs can be valuable, considering our large alumni base and the profile of the university throughout the state. When we buy out of a course to devote time to our projects, we usually discuss what courses we need to reserve for ourselves (to ensure our “brand,” if you will) and which ones can be taught well by adjunct faculty. The time commitment for practicum training and supervision can be immense and unpredictable, so that is usually my course buy-out.

There are other concerns about institutional, departmental, and collegial support mentioned in the two lead articles and in Elliott and Shewchuk (1999) that are critical to success in obtaining and managing awards. A healthy program will find ways to reward and encourage colleagues who receive external funding. This includes advocating for space, salary increases, and for course buy-outs. Senior, established colleagues must provide leadership in a fair and equitable fashion. However, there are also many informal, unwritten issues that can be associated with extramural funding, particularly in settings in which colleagues have contracted to annually provide for a percentage of their salary. For example, in a previous position in a psychology department, I was responsible for 60% of my base 9-month salary. That kind of environment fosters unhealthy competition among colleagues, erodes morale, and undermines interest in, and time devoted to, departmental and university governance and advocacy as faculty begin to operate as “intellectual sharecroppers” in positions that are only as secure as their next grant.

In my experience, it is very difficult to navigate the unanticipated interpersonal issues that occur under these circumstances (e.g., a senior mentor used the ideas of a junior colleague to obtain a much larger grant, a junior colleague wrote significant sections of a proposal and contributed to the design but was dismissed from the project once the funds were awarded to the principal investigator, a statistician refused to conduct the analyses requested by the principal investigator, and another team member simply refused to return calls and effectively held the data hostage from the team). Colleagues may be
surprised upon accepting a position at another university that their grants are not necessarily portable, as this may depend on the current administration at the home institution. Inexperienced colleagues may need sensitive guidance about past experiences with potential collaborators. Senior colleagues who move into administrative roles can provide an immeasurable service by finding ways to appropriately reward and protect faculty, facilitate faculty involvement in governance and decision making about infrastructure needs and prudent use of indirect dollars, and promote policies that facilitate collaboration, trust, and accountability.

**Anticipating Change and Planning for the Future**

Funding priorities change in response to current issues, new information, and administrative initiatives. Many changes recently occurred at the federal level in response to international conflicts (and as veterans returned home). Other changes occurred in response to new policies that promote accountability in health care (including mental health), and stimulate greater attention from health care systems to quality of life, community adjustment, and personal functioning. In 2014, in response to health care initiatives, the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research was moved out of Department of Education and into the Department of Health and Human Services. It now incorporates independent living into its name: the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research. Some psychologists may find new opportunities in these changes. An agency that funded my intervention research for over a decade—the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—was restructured, dropping most physical disabilities from its funding portfolio (keeping traumatic brain injury as a public health issue), and it discontinued most of its caregiver research program. However, its priorities are consonant with many issues familiar to other counseling psychologists, and Dorothy Espelage (www.dorothyespelage.com) has funds from this agency to conduct her large-scale randomized clinical trials of school-based bullying prevention and intervention. She has also obtained funds from the National Institute of Justice, as it expanded its portfolio to address similar issues of interpersonal violence and aggressive behavior.

The federal agencies with the most funding opportunities (and the largest budgets) of interest to counseling psychology are in the Veterans Health Administration and the Department of Defense. Much of this work is interdisciplinary by necessity. In recent years the late Sunil Sen-Gupta—a graduate of our counseling psychology doctoral program—served as the science program manager for the Mental Health/Social Reintegration/Vocational-Employment
portfolio in the Veterans Administration Rehabilitation Research and Development Service. We often discussed the ways in which counseling psychology principles, values, and research expertise were well suited to the existing priorities and grant announcements that emanated from his office. He was also keenly aware of the issues of diversity that needed to be addressed among veterans in terms of frontline service provision and in terms of research priorities and funding. In many ways, he exemplified a role I envisioned for counseling psychology in our 1999 article.

As competition for external funds intensifies, colleagues should consider local opportunities. Many years ago a departmental colleague, Josh Klapow, challenged me to consider how the long-distance technologies used in my caregiver projects could be used to provide mental health services, generally. He advised me that mental health service delivery was rapidly becoming a public health issue, as disparities in access to care and to qualified providers were exacerbating. During my first visit to Texas A&M University, I met colleagues in public health who discussed applications of telemental health. Over time we developed our telepsychology clinic that provides mental health services to five counties in the Brazos Valley designated as mental health provider shortage areas. This town-and-gown partnership meets our service, teaching, and research mission (McCord, Saenz, Armstrong, & Elliott, 2015). There are several federal agencies funding research to address health disparities (Buki & Selem, 2012), but in the wake of the Affordable Care Act, it is likely that innovative programs will be funded at the local level to evaluate community-based solutions to alleviate disparities in mental health care.

**Concluding Observations**

The two major contributions in this issue should be required reading for faculty in research-intensive universities, for those in universities that aspire to obtain this designation, and for anyone who plans to work in this environment. My comments reflect my career in “Tier 1” institutions. Obviously, I believe extramural funding is essential to the health and status of counseling psychology programs in these institutions. I also believe that the continued presence of counseling programs in research-intensive universities is critical to the status of the profession.

**Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to Daniel L. Clay, Dorothy L. Espelage, Paul B. Perrin, and Charles R. Ridley for their constructive comments to an earlier draft of this article.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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