



Teaching Tips:

Psychology Boot Camp: Undergraduate Training Opportunities in Developmental Psychology

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Research training in psychology can be an arduous experience for even the most academically gifted undergraduate student. While it is often a challenge for a faculty member to balance their research interests and objectives against the potential educational benefit of the student, training students and helping undergraduates develop and nurture a passion for research is an even greater challenge.

Because, the research context of a traditional psychology department is not likely to address specific issues related to lifespan developmental psychology, research interests need to be cultivated through exposure to additional developmental coursework and in more unstructured ways through collaborative research projects. Informal instruction may occur through team research meetings which may allow time to further explore research questions, ideas, and issues. While research team meetings are a great way to introduce students to ideas they rarely allow individual students to fully develop an idea they may have. There are, of course, always exceptions but those are extraordinary cases. Intensive research training programs are needed to provide talented students with opportunities to develop their skills and abilities. Training and cultivating exceptional undergraduates is crucial to the continued development of our body of knowledge in Adult Development.

The current article provides information about a model training program at Buffalo State College. The purpose of this article is threefold: (a) to provide a student perspective of this type of training, (b) to provide a description of the Buffalo State program in particular, and (c) to make readers aware of other programs that may be available to their students.

The Student's Perspective: My Experience at Psychology Boot Camp

In June, I made the long trek from my home in the Chicago suburbs, to the Buffalo State College Summer Research Program. While the program expectations communicated from a previous fellow had me worried, I believed I was prepared to the best of my ability. The first day was pretty typical of most first days of school; fellows and faculty participated in an icebreaker and enjoyed some lunch together. I quickly learned that this would be no

ordinary semester. Because of the many nontraditional activities in which we participated, the program was designed to move at a very fast pace (so you really had to hit the ground running).

One word keeps popping into my mind as I write this piece, “intense!” The Buffalo State Program was an “intensive” seven-week course where students learn Developmental Research Methods, attend Research Rotations ,and participate in an Ethics seminar. The program challenged the fellows at every turn, so that we would have a taste of what a doctoral training program is like. The workload seemed as though we had a decade’s worth (oh, check that probably two decades!) of literature to read in seven weeks. Though the classes were interesting, the nontraditional activities were much more exciting and informational. One of our most exciting rotations was a visit we made to a renowned ADHD clinic at the University of Buffalo (Dr. William Pelham). At the clinic we saw applied research at its best. I was fascinated to see psychologists conducting research that helps with a major problem of childhood and adolescence (now sometimes seen in adults as well).

The Buffalo State College Summer Program is the most challenging educational experience that I have had at this point in my training. I am thankful that nine of my peers and the approximately seven or eight faculty were going through the same thing (I guess misery loves company!). The 2003 fellows’ had a strong bond with each other which I attributed to team building; we were all in this together and we could help each other through the summer. The gains that I made were enormous. Besides learning a great deal about research, I have gained nine friends/networks for the future. While it is sometimes easier to focus on your own difficulties, I also observed that faculty were also stressed. Each faculty member was a mentor to one or more fellows. The mentors were there to not only help develop our proposals, but help us through the summer as well.

Overall, the Summer Research Program prepared me for my future in psychology. I met some great people and have stayed in contact with them. I now believe that I am better prepared for graduate training and a career in psychology. Personally I like to think of this adventure as “Psychology Boot Camp”.

A View of Research Training in Experimental Developmental Psychology

Mental Health Issues in Applied Life Span Developmental Psychology Summer Institute is funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, Mental Health Education Project Grant (R25) program. It is designed for outstanding students completing their sophomore or junior year who have an interest in pursuing a career in behavioral sciences or mental health/health professions. The program theme centers on cultivating student research skills and interest in developmental and mental health issues. In its fourth year, we are happy to say that the program has been renewed until spring 2007. The program is housed in the Psychology Department at Buffalo State College. While students primarily are recruited from Western New York, students have come from as far as Western Illinois University and Mount Holyoke. The track record of the program’s alumni is impressive, with nearly all the students going on graduate programs in psychology and in the health

professions, including public health, epidemiology and social work.

Students participate as fellows in a formal Summer Institute where they take an advanced academic credit bearing (3 credit hours) course in experimental methods in life span developmental psychology, participate in research and ethics workshops, and are exposed to a variety of applied and laboratory research projects on campus and in the community. Examples of the applied research rotations include the Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Research Institute for Addictions, Monroe Community Hospital at University of Rochester Medical Center, and the Summer Treatment Program for ADHD at the University at Buffalo. Finally, over the course of the Summer Institute students develop their own research proposal that is completed under the mentorship of their faculty advisor at their home institution over the next academic year. To support these activities, students receive a stipend, tuition waiver, dormitory accommodations on campus, and travel money to a professional conference to present their research. For further information contact Dr. Jurgis Karuza, Program Director and Professor and Chair of Psychology (716-878-6215, karuzaj@buffalostate.edu).

PostScript

Undergraduate summer research training programs provide an extraordinary opportunity for students to further develop and strengthen their research skills. While the Buffalo State College program is a model program it is certainly not the only one. There have been several programs that have been developed through the Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) program funded by the National Science Foundation. Interested readers may want to search the site at <http://www.nsf.gov/home/crssprgm/reu/start.htm>. The National Institutes of Health also offer research training experiences for undergraduates through the R25 granting mechanism: these programs are cross-cutting in nature. I have a list that I would be happy to share with interested readers. Please email at mfrci@wiu.edu.

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