

# Absolute Focus on Research

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In 1997 I left a position as an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the MCP Hahnemann University School of Medicine to join RAND, a private, non-profit corporation that seeks to improve policy and decision making through research and analysis. At RAND, I am a senior behavioral scientist, and I serve as co-director of the Drug Policy Research Center (DPRC) with another psychologist, M. Audrey Burnam. Much of my time is spent working on two clinical research grants that I received from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). The two grants extend work begun during my graduate training at Boston University as an experimental/behavioral psychologist, as well as my post-doctoral training at Johns Hopkins in drug abuse and behavioral pharmacology. Each of the NIDA grants examines the application of behavioral principles – specifically, the use of reinforcement to increase the occurrence of behaviors associated with abstinence.

In addition to the NIDA grants, I work with professionals from a remarkable mix of disciplines in the promotion and conduct of drug policy research and analyses. The research portfolio of the DPRC includes studies examining the relative cost effectiveness of different drug control options such as drug abuse prevention, drug treatment, criminal sanctions, supply interdiction, and source country controls.

DPRC investigators also examine the effectiveness of new drug control interventions, like mandatory minimum sanctions, drug courts, DUI court; residential and group home treatments for youthful offenders identified as drug users; treatment on demand; needle exchange; and school-based prevention programs. Scientific evaluations examine the constellation of drug use, HIV risk behaviors, and violence among women in low income housing; the cost of mental health and drug treatment “parity;” and the economic evaluation of drug abuse treatment. This research has substantial public policy implications.

As Co-Director of the DPRC, I provide leadership and support for drug abuse researchers spanning a wide-range of disciplines. DPRC researchers include psychologists, sociologists, health economists, criminologists, anthropologists, statisticians, physicians, systems analysts, mathematicians, public policy analysts, political scientists, attorneys and others.

What makes RAND’s work environment unique, however, is the absolute focus on research and public policy, the relatively flat leadership structure, and the manner in which the RAND environment promotes cross-disciplinary interaction and flexibility in developing unique interdisciplinary teams to work on each project. In academia, a great deal of time is spent teaching classes, participating in committee meetings, developing the curriculum, etc. These important pursuits are much less evident at RAND, allowing a greater focus on research.

Another attractive feature of working for a non-profit like RAND is the emphasis on maintaining a small and relatively flat administrative structure. This leads to increased autonomy and a decision-making structure that is much more responsive than the structure I experienced in academia. Finally, the academic environment that I experienced at universities and medical schools promotes separation by

discipline and programmatic isolation that is often exacerbated by physical separation. In Santa Monica, we have over 900 scientists and support staff working in two interconnected buildings. This physical proximity encourages collaboration. In many respects, the work environment is more “academic” than most positions in academia.

My message to other psychologists interested in a move to similar non-profit research organizations is that the environment is challenging and it demands strong interpersonal skills, and every day is a learning experience.