

Federal Support for Psych Research Climbing, Multidisciplinary Trend Emerges

January 12, 2003

For psychologists at the nation's colleges and universities, a steady increase in federal monies has produced valuable research and interesting trends. At the University of Wisconsin, Madison, the high level of funding has enabled the school to establish a first-rate psychology department in which investigators are motivated to undertake research.

According to Charles Snowden, chair of the department, the boost in funding is a direct result of APS efforts in the nation's capital.

"APS has been pushing federal funding for years," said Snowden. "I think the work Alan Kraut has been doing has paid off."

Ranked as the highest recipient of federal support for R&D expenditures in 2000, UW-Madison also received the largest amount of R&D support among the nation's psychology departments. In that year, federal agencies gave the psychology department \$17.7 million of the \$278 million federal support package for the school.

According to Snowden, faculty members use federal funds for research in five main areas: biological, clinical, cognitive and perceptual, developmental, and social and personality. Within those areas, the researchers conduct studies on a range of issues, including brain imaging and human psychophysiology, auditory sensation and perception, memory and vision, language, longitudinal studies on children, infant development, developmental psychopathology, depression, and emotion.

Snowden attributes his department's success in securing more federal support each year to two factors: the high level of mentoring by senior researchers, who guide novice investigators in learning how to write federal grants; and the skill of the faculty members.

"We have no deadwood on our staff," he added. "Everyone is engaged in scholarly research."

University-wide, federal support and gifts account for 50 percent of the UW-Madison budget, while state funding and tuition represent the remainder.

But the university has also developed a backup plan in case investigators don't win a grant. If their applications are rejected, they are eligible to apply to the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF). This \$20 million-a-year trust was established with royalties the University receives from its patent on Vitamin A, which a UW-Madison biochemist discovered in the 1920s.

The foundation issues grants to new investigators or backup funding to established researchers for ongoing projects. Snowden said the only condition is that investigators must also have applied for outside funds in order to qualify for a WARF grant.

BIOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY UNITE

Despite the steady growth in federal support, some say that securing a federal grant for traditional psychology research is becoming less common. To obtain funding, many investigators are taking a cross-disciplinary approach to their research.

Snowdon believes increased collaboration with applied disciplines is on the rise in general. At UW-Madison, biology is a common element in many federally funded studies such as research on hormones and behavior, or the effect of social behavior and the environment on the immune system and psychoneuroimmunology. Half of the psychology department staffers at UW-Madison conduct some type of biological-related study.