The Benefits of Engaging in Collaborative Research Relationships

November 30, 2017

Collaborative working relationships have many benefits to offer, regardless of whether your career focuses on research, teaching, clinical practice, consultation, or any of the myriad other opportunities available to psychological scientists.

In 1969, Donald T. Campbell proposed a model of science that highlights the benefits of collaboration. This model argued that science is most effective when researchers with expert knowledge in different areas collaborate on a project of overlapping interest. The overlap allows for common ground, while the respective areas of expertise cover a greater "surface area" of the possible knowledge brought to bear on a specific question. Whether it is across labs in your program, across areas in your department, or across disciplines, there is much to be gained by bridging the divide between isolated research silos.

Because science and practice are enriched by collaboration among individuals with diverse but complementary perspectives, formal opportunities for collaboration are becoming increasingly common. For example, integrated and interdisciplinary treatment teams are now frequently seen in hospitals and health care centers. These teams feature collaboration among physicians, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and experts from various other fields. Academic institutions are also beginning to conduct "cluster hires" that draw experts from different backgrounds to collaborate on a shared research topic like autism, for example. Funding opportunities for collaborative research are also available from agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of Defense. Being able to work effectively with professionals from many different backgrounds can therefore be a very marketable skill. Additionally, such collaborations will keep your research interests fresh and give you new angles for approaching your studies. Working with others outside of your academic comfort zone can also provide you with novel skills, theories, and methods that enrich your research and make you a more unique, innovative, and marketable professional. National Research Service Award F31 predoctoral and F32 postdoctoral fellowships offer funding opportunities to support this type of collaboration and specialized training early in your career.

Another benefit of collaborating with individuals outside of your lab is the opportunity to develop as a scholarly author. Writing with different collaborators and for different audiences requires you to communicate your ideas and methods more effectively than you might when writing for your peers and close colleagues. Collaborating with others, even within your own field, is therefore an opportunity to learn alternative ways of doing things. Often in graduate school, students become miniature versions of their advisors. Over time, they internalize and anticipate the feedback they will receive from their advisors and begin to make those adjustments automatically. This is a core learning experience and enables students to benefit from advisors' years of experience in a field. However, there may be other ways to frame a question, measure a construct, and conduct the thousand other scientific tasks that are just as good or even better than what you are already doing.

Practical Advice for Finding Collaborative Opportunities

I have benefitted directly from research collaborations throughout my graduate training. Along the way, I have learned some valuable lessons that may be worth considering. First, it has been helpful to attend conference talks by authors unfamiliar to me who are doing work relevant to my area of research. Seeking out such talks may show you new ways to approach familiar questions and prompt critical evaluation of your own work. Second, I recommend going to talks from labs studying subjects unrelated to your academic comfort zone. Doing so may help you to appreciate how other areas conceptualize their questions, which methods they use to investigate these questions, and how they may approach intervention. Your exposure to these scholars may uncover opportunities for translation into your own work and represent an innovation that moves the science forward. For a personal example, as an alcohol-facilitated aggression researcher, my attendance at a talk about a mobile phone-based intervention for anxiety led me to question how something similar may be applicable to my area of study. Eventually, I pursued a predoctoral fellowship from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to investigate just that. You never know when inspiration will strike.

If you are looking for a potential collaborator, it may benefit you to invite that person to help you learn more about their work. This can range from a one-time conversation after a conference talk to their commitment as a sponsor of your project. Depending on your goals, it may be ideal to ask them for help in getting you started on the development of your own knowledge and skill within their area of expertise. As in many relationships, effective communication will be your key to success. It will be important to work together to establish the roles and responsibilities of each contributor as well as come to an agreement about how authorship will be handled for major products. I also recommend working together to identify a realistic method for monitoring progress (e.g., meeting in person, emailing, or voice/video call), as well as the frequency of these contacts. This can help to identify problems early on and make problem-solving a team effort rather than a difficult conversation later on.

Most of all, do your best, have fun, and learn from your mistakes. Give yourself permission to be a student, to not have all the answers, and to seek to improve as you develop as a psychological scientist. While we all want our projects to be successful, that is secondary to what we stand to gain at this point in our careers. Much more important is that we keep moving forward: that our future research is better than our past research, even if neither one is perfect. Adding breadth to our scope, depth to our toolkit, and span to our scientific network (while enjoying the freedom of being a student) can help us solidify our trajectory as psychological scientists.