Caldwell University's Department of Applied Behavior Analysis

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Abstract Since 2004, faculty members at Caldwell University have developed three successful graduate programs in Applied Behavior Analysis (i.e., PhD, MA, non-degree programs), increased program faculty from two to six members, developed and operated an on-campus autism center, and begun a stand-alone Applied Behavior Analysis Department. This paper outlines a number of strategies used to advance these initiatives, including those associated with an extensive public relations campaign. We also outline challenges that have limited our programs' growth. These strategies, along with a consideration of potential challenges, might prove useful in guiding academicians who are interested in starting their own programs in behavior analysis.

Keywords Behavior analysis · Caldwell University · Graduate education · Public relations

In 2014, the Master of Arts (MA) program in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) at Caldwell University earned accreditation from the Association for Behavior Analysis International. In that same year, the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (NJCHE) granted university status to Caldwell (previously Caldwell College), based in part to its development of a number of highly successful graduate programs, including the state's first ABA masters (MA; established in 2005) and doctoral (PhD; established in 2009) programs. In this article, we describe the strategies we employed to reach these outcomes with the hope that they might provide guidance for academicians in our field who are interested in starting their own programs.

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Background and History

When we were fortunate to land tenure-track faculty positions in the Psychology (first author) and Education (second author) departments at Caldwell in 2001, behavior-analytic content in both the graduate and undergraduate programs within each department was minimal at best. At the time of our hire, we were managing our own ABA consulting business that provided home- and school-based services. With the launch of the then-new BCBA credential, many of the teachers and staff we encountered in our consulting work expressed an interest in becoming certified. After directing many of them to enroll in BCBA-approved coursework at other institutions, we started conceptualizing the development of such a course sequence at Caldwell to capitalize on this demand. Having worked with the son of Mary Beth Walsh¹, then a faculty member in the Theology Department at Caldwell (and a strong supporter of ABA; Walsh, 2011), we asked her to help us pitch the course-sequence plan to Caldwell's administration. Given that Caldwell is a small liberal arts Catholic institution, Walsh's background as a religious scholar was helpful in providing an effective rationale based on the program's alignment with the Caldwell mission of contributing to a "just society." Although it was not our initial plan to pitch the program as primarily focusing on autism intervention, the high demand for professionals in that area was a way to leverage the program's startup approval (currently, and at the time, New Jersey has the highest reported incidence of autism in the USA; Centers for Disease Control, 2014).

After receiving support for the non-degree program in ABA from Caldwell, we then applied for and received approval from the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) for our course sequence. With the two of us teaching the courses across both our departments, we launched the non-degree program in ABA in 2004 with 33 students enrolled (triple the number we had projected). The success of the BACB-approved course-sequence program and requests from the students encouraged us to next seek a fast-track approval of an MA degree program in ABA, along with a new faculty line in Psychology (resulting in the hire of Patrick R. Progar, with a specialization in functional analysis and problem behavior, in 2005). Caldwell strongly encouraged us to develop an MA program without a research-thesis capstone component, given the faculty workload increase it would entail; however, we successfully convinced them otherwise by (1) emphasizing the importance of the scientist-practitioner model (Heward, Cooper, Heron, Gardner, & Sainato, 1995; Heward, Heron, & Cooper, 1990) and (2) highlighting the potential, positive reputation the program would receive as a result of publishing articles based on research theses. After receiving approval from NJCHE, we launched New Jersey's first master's program in ABA in 2005 with 12 students (plus an additional 53 in the non-degree program). This success allowed us to hire another faculty member in Psychology (Tina M. Sidener, with a specialization in verbal behavior and stereotypy) in 2006, bringing the total to four full-time faculty, all teaching predominantly in the ABA graduate programs. From 2006 to 2009, enrollment in the MA program increased to 34, 46, 74, and 83 students, respectively. In that same period, the number of non-degree students decreased from 42, 49, 36, to 18, reflecting a greater interest in advanced study beyond the stand-alone

¹ Dr. Walsh provided permission for us to share this information (personal correspondence, March 7, 2016).

BACB-approved course sequence. In fact, many of the students who were enrolled in the non-degree program continued in the MA program.

Given the MA program's success, it seemed that we were poised to consider a PhD program, but Caldwell's administration initially denied it because the institution was not yet approved to offer a doctoral degree. Despite this, many of our own students and ABA professionals in the community launched a successful letter-writing campaign resulting in Caldwell's administration asking the ABA faculty to develop a PhD program proposal. To permit Caldwell to offer a doctoral degree (which it had never done before), the NJCHE required the hiring of an external higher education marketing firm to determine whether there was a demand for PhD-level professionals in behavior analysis. The firm found that demand was high and Caldwell received approval in 2009 from the NJCHE to grant doctoral degrees and to offer the PhD in ABA. The initial PhD cohort was 11, for a total of 112 students across the three ABA graduate programs.

Our proposal for the PhD program included space on campus to develop a center to provide (1) training and research opportunities for our graduate students and (2) intervention services to the community. With little funding available for the design and construction of the center, Caldwell hired a lobbyist to help us apply for congressional earmark funding. After lobbying various New Jersey state senators and congressmen, a US\$1.2 million congressionally directed grant was awarded to Caldwell to support the development of the center and the PhD program. To design the center, members of the ABA faculty and an external architect visited some of the renowned autism centers in the USA to identify the most functional design characteristics. After completing construction in an underused recreation space at Caldwell in 2010, the faculty members moved into the new Center for Autism and Applied Behavior Analysis ("Center"), a 3000-square foot space with six intervention rooms, faculty and graduate student offices, lab space, and a classroom equipped with video-conferencing technology. Soon after the opening, we applied for and received approval from the BACB to offer the experiential requirements for BCBA certification at the Center. For those students who have completed their experiential requirements, the Center now offers a number of paid supervisor and provider positions to financially support the students as they complete their degree requirements.

Our proposal for the PhD program also included requests for two additional faculty lines. Anticipating the opening of the Center, we proposed that the faculty members would form a new Department of Applied Behavior Analysis beginning in 2010. The new department allowed us to invest all our energies into the ABA programs while also providing us with an independent professional identity. Ruth M. DeBar, with a specialization in preference and assessing social validity, was hired in 2010 but Patrick Progar left the department to assume the position of vice-president for academic affairs at Caldwell. Due to budget constraints, additional hires were postponed, but eventually filled in 2011 (Jason C. Vladescu, specializing in staff training and increasing instructional efficiency) and 2012 (April N. Kisamore, specializing in problem-solving strategies and verbal behavior) to bring the number of full-time faculty members in the department to six. Since the launch of the PhD program in 2009, we have held yearly student enrollments to approximately 75 MA, 15 PhD, and 20 non-degree program students.

Public Relations Initiatives

When we began to plan our ABA graduate programs, we knew that they would be unlikely to succeed without promoting them beyond our own institution's walls. To that end, we set out to develop an extensive public relations initiative to inform people in the professional and lay communities about what we were doing (we described many of these tactics in a media relations chapter in Bailey & Burch, 2010). Having little experience in marketing, we met with the Caldwell media relations director to outline strategies for promoting the program through television, radio, Internet, and print. We practiced interviewing for TV and radio and learned to explain our field in "sound bites" that were more easily understood by lay people (e.g., "in ABA, we break down skills into easier to learn parts and give a lot of support and feedback to the students to help them learn"). One important resource we used and continue to recommend is a book outlining how scientists can more effectively interact with the media (Hayes & Grossman, 2006). We learned that without a "human interest" slant, informational pieces alone (e.g., technical definitions of behavior analysis; descriptions of research findings) generally do not generate interest from media sources. Although this was initially difficult to achieve given our training as behavior analysts to "just report the facts," collaboration with Caldwell's media relations director helped us to identify relevant media topics to emphasize (e.g., teaching children with autism to attend religious services with their families).

The following sub-sections describe our public relations efforts.

Media To locate receptive media outlets, we searched online for popular press stories related to autism in major magazines and newspapers and pitched our stories to the authors. One of these efforts led to a story in the *New York Times* (Gross, 2008) that focused on graduate students in our program who were also parents of children on the autism spectrum. Another article in a local magazine focused on a husband-and-wife team (the authors) working to increase the number of autism professionals (Pfaff, 2009). In addition, we wrote articles describing the ABA programs' development and submitted them to our graduate school alumni magazines. Every year, we submitted press releases to media outlets to promote our work during Autism Awareness Month. Despite the time and energy sacrificed (e.g., reduced time for scholarly endeavors) to promote our programs, their growth is likely due, at least in part, to these efforts.

Government To reach out to governmental agencies, we conducted online searches for elected officials who were interested in autism intervention and asked to be invited to their town meetings and roundtables. In addition, we invited government officials to attend our events at Caldwell (e.g., the opening of our Center). These relationships were instrumental in our successful lobbying for congressional earmark money for the Center.

Local Community To reach the local community, the faculty members volunteered to give talks about autism and ABA at local libraries for community members and autism parent support groups. The department also held two highly successful 5 K runs (in April 2010 and 2011) at Caldwell with local news personalities serving as master of ceremonies to promote autism awareness. A collaboration with Caldwell's

Communication Arts and Sciences Department helped us develop informational videos and public service announcements to post on video-sharing websites.

Professional Community To reach the professional community, we served on the development committee to launch the New Jersey Association for Behavior Analysis (NJABA) and continued to serve on the NJABA board for a number of years. As a result of this service, we were able to promote our programs at NJABA conventions and in the NJABA newsletter.

At Caldwell, we invite one to two prominent professionals in behavior analysis each year to conduct full-day workshops for our students, local professionals, and parents in the community. To announce the launch of the PhD program in 2009, we held two full-day conferences attended by over 500 parents, students, and professionals. Lastly, both our faculty and students are active presenters at local conferences (e.g., Autism New Jersey, NJABA).

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the success of our programs, a number of continuing challenges need to be addressed for continued growth and diversification. First, Caldwell is a small, private liberal arts university that continues to be largely tuition driven. As a result, revenue from student enrollment remains a high priority for the institution, resulting in a less-than-ideal student-to-faculty ratio in our graduate programs. A second challenge is that the teaching load for graduate faculty at Caldwell has been high relative to our scholarly and training responsibilities. Although we successfully petitioned Caldwell to reduce our teaching load to three courses in the fall and three courses in the spring starting in 2014, further load reductions would allow us to increase our research output and grant applications. Caldwell's history has traditionally been that of a teaching college; however, new funding sources remain a high priority to promote growth. Thus, with Caldwell's new status as a university, we have requested additional staffing in the grants office to assist with grant applications.

A final challenge is that the major emphasis of our programs (and many other recent academic programs in behavior analysis) continues to be concentrated in research and practice related to autism. Our discipline, and our programs, depends on increased applicability of behavior analysis in other areas of human behavior (Friman, 2010). Although we do conduct training and research in other areas of behavior analysis in our department, we will be proposing additional faculty lines in more diverse areas (e.g., organizational behavior management, precision teaching, direct instruction, animal research, behavioral gerontology). Despite the importance of these areas in our field, we remain concerned about institutional approval and market demand for faculty positions in these areas.

Comments on Building a Successful Program

Although not exhaustive, many of the strategies we have outlined in this paper and elsewhere (e.g., Bailey & Burch, 2010), along with those by colleagues (e.g., Martinez-

Diaz, 2007), will hopefully spur the growth of additional academic programs in behavior analysis. In general, our advice is threefold. First, begin small by proposing new behavior-analytic coursework for your institution. Then, make the content exciting to students by teaching it well. Second, highlight areas where behavior analysts are in high demand, such as autism, as a means to attract new students. This high demand might also provide a sound rationale to approach university administrators for additional program development and resources. Third, point out recent successful programs, such as ours, to your institution's administrators. In his talk, "We happy few, but why so few?", B. F. Skinner (1981) questioned why there was such a relatively small number of behavior analysts and why behavior analysis had had such a limited influence in the world to that point. Our hope is that some of the strategies outlined in this paper may lead to growth in academic training opportunities to increase the ranks of "we happy few."

Compliance with Ethical Standards We, the authors of this manuscript, have no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript. In addition, human or animal participants were not employed for this manuscript, so informed consent was not necessary.

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