The Importance of Research—A Student Perspective

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Abstract As students, we will focus on the importance of an objective ranking system, research, and mentorship to an applicant. We will address points raised in the (Behavior Analysis In Practice 8(1):7–15, 2015) article as well as debate the usefulness of proposed standards of objective ranking.

Keywords Graduate school · Graduate training · Research · Graduate ranking

A Student's Perspective on Research

A little more than a year ago each of us was madly scrambling to negotiate the process of graduate program admissions. Like many people who go to graduate school, each of us had some history of viewing academic efforts through the lens of “too much is never enough,” and we applied our obsessive habits to the challenge of gathering information about graduate programs. We pored over Web sites and printed brochures. We stalked program faculty at conferences, via email and phone, and during campus visits. We talked to trusted mentors about the programs they respected. When in professional settings, we tried to find out where people who impressed us had

attended graduate school, and we sometimes eavesdropped on strangers' conversations for potentially valuable tidbits about the graduate programs they were considering.

Based on this chaotic and exhausting experience, we agree with Dixon et al. (2015) that consumers in our field need standardized information about the relative merits of graduate programs in applied behavior analysis (ABA). When we began the process of screening graduate programs, we knew that we were uninformed but we were less sure about what we needed to learn to become better consumers. We suspect that, like us, most college seniors find it difficult to know what aspects of a graduate program are crucial to the training of highly qualified ABA practitioners. To us, the most important contribution of Dixon et al. (2015) was to emphasize that our field should not abandon students to an uncertain process of self-education.

We agree with Dixon et al. (2015) that our field is better equipped than outside bodies (e.g., *U.S. News & World Report*) to determine what constitutes top-quality graduate training. We were aware that the Behavior Analysis Certification Board publishes the rates at which graduates of various programs pass its certification exam, and we considered this information during our respective searches. Even as undergraduates, however, we knew that there is more to being a capable practitioner than simply passing the certification exam, and we would have appreciated much more guidance from our field than we received.

In the absence of standardized, objective information about graduate programs, prospective graduate students have to rely heavily on hearsay. As we gathered information on program reputations from mentors and colleagues, it occurred to us that this information sometimes says as much about the person providing it as about graduate programs themselves. We learned that some people are impressed by graduate programs that have a reputation for highly selective admissions, but we were not sure how or whether this predicted the quality of

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training that we could hope to receive. We learned that certain mentors thought highly of certain programs, but different people thought highly of different programs, and it was not always obvious how these opinions related to specific features of the training offered by the programs. We weren't always sure whether the opinions were generic or had been offered with our individual needs and interests in mind.

Among the features of graduate programs that interested us was the type and degree of emphasis on research. Here, a few words of explanation will provide context for our perspective. As undergraduates, we learned to value evidence-based practices, data-based case management, and the science-based critical thinking that should guide clinical case management. But each of us decided to seek graduate training not just to apply current best practices; we also wanted to contribute to clinical innovation (e.g., Critchfield 2015). For various reasons, none of us wished to conduct research for a living, and we chose our program at Auburn University in part because its accelerated, 12-month, non-thesis curriculum would get us swiftly into the workplace where we knew, from past field experiences, our main reinforcers are to be found. Still, program research emphasis was important to us.

Unfortunately, far too much time and effort was required for us to understand that different programs have different types of research emphases. "Research training" comprises not a single repertoire but many. One involves conducting research. Another involves locating and consuming available research on a topic of interest. Yet, another involves translating from research findings in order to develop innovative interventions (Critchfield 2015; Critchfield & Reed, 2005). It is here that we would quibble with the position of Dixon et al. (2015), which suggests a one-size-fits-all approach to assessing the research climate at ABA graduate programs.

In order to gain insight about the research environment in graduate programs, undergraduates often compare their own research interests to those of faculty as described on program web sites and as illustrated in published articles. This comparison is most relevant to students who seek to become independent researchers. Our own goal is to become life-long consumers of research. It may not be the full-time job of Masters-level practitioners to conduct research, but in a field that is growing quickly it is pivotal that people like us not be limited to the state of our field's knowledge at the time we take a certification exam. We need skills for tracking scholarly developments across the full breath of our careers.

We agree with Dixon et al. (2015) that it is helpful for ABA program faculty to maintain active research programs, but our concern is with what program graduates are able to do with the

fruits of research, not how many articles a faculty member can publish. It has been suggested that the process of developing effective and transportable interventions from research findings requires a skill set that is independent of either conducting research or implementing existing interventions (e.g., Critchfield 2015; Critchfield and Reed, 2005). No skill set seems more relevant to our lifelong professional development.

Yes, we want to learn how to read and critically evaluate research, but we want to learn to do this from faculty who know how to translate and who care about helping us to become translators. Our ideal ABA program faculty member will have the time and inclination to focus on this. We want mentors who can conduct research, but more importantly who will discuss research with us on a regular basis and explore with us how research findings relate to the behavioral processes operating in practice settings. We want mentors whose skills and schedules allow them to provide on-site clinical supervision through which the connections between research and practice can be drawn explicitly.

While we applaud the efforts of Dixon et al. (2015) to rank ABA graduate programs in terms of program research climate, we stress that this climate has multiple facets. We represent a category of consumer who cares very much about our field's research foundations, but we wish to harness rather than add to those foundations. Faculty publication counts may not be the best measure of a program's ability to help us to this. Unfortunately, the program attributes that we particularly value are hard to quantify and thus will be difficult to incorporate into an objective system for ranking programs. Yet, if the purpose of rankings is to assist consumers (Dixon et al., 2015), then the needs of consumers like us should not be ignored.

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