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Session #1: How to Plan & Develop a VA HSR&D Career Development Application

Elizabeth M. Yano, PhD, MSPH

Director, VA HSR&D Center for the Study of Healthcare Innovation, Implementation & Policy; Director, VA Women's Health CREATE and Director, VA Women's Health Research Network (Consortium); Professor of Health Policy & Management, UCLA Fielding School of Public Health

VA HSR&D CDA Enhancement Program Cyberseminar

February 2016

Poll Question #1

- What is your interest in the CDA program?
 - Planning a CDA submission as an applicant in the next year
 - Planning a CDA submission as an applicant in the next 2-3 years
 - Planning a CDA submission as a mentor
 - Other role



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Purpose of Session #1

- Briefly review history of VA HSR&D CDA program, its purpose and expectations
- Describe the personal and intellectual processes underlying the planning and development of a successful CDA application



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History of VA CDA Program

- Over 25 year history of funding junior investigators to pursue a VA career
- Historical emphasis on basic science
 - Important differences → one merit = 100% coverage for PI (not true for HSR&D)
- Emphasis was on MDs (PhDs added ~2003)
- CDAs funded in each Research Service
 - Biomedical/Laboratory, Clinical Sciences, Rehabilitation R&D, HSR&D
 - You are part of a larger community and investment



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CDA Program Purpose & Goals

- Designed to attract, develop and retain talented VA investigators
 - Develop local investigators OR outside recruit
- Focus on capacity building
 - HSR&D focus has been shifting to implementation and impacts in partnered research priority areas
- Emphasis is on recent trainees
 - with exception of CDEA, which is mid-career
- Builds the next generation of researchers with mentorship and resources



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CDA Program Purpose & Goals

- Salary-based awards designed to facilitate full or nearly full-time research activities under mentored supervision
- Activities should lead to expertise in awardee's interest area, papers, and scientific proposals as PI
- Candidate, mentors, local research and institutional environment under as much review as research plan



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CDA Expectations*

- Work in area of particular VA importance
- Candidate envisions a VA-based career
- Candidate will become “independent”
 - Obtain VA and non-VA funding as PI
 - Publish peer-reviewed papers
 - Eventually mentor other investigators
- An academic life in addition to VA service



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* Applicants for all VA CDA types must be U.S. citizens

VA CDA vs. NIH K Awards

- CDAs used to be 3-year awards (NIH K 5-yr)
 - To better compete with NIH, VA changed program to accommodate 5-year awards
- Choice of award depends on career plans
 - Is area of interest sufficiently important to VA?
 - VA or university as main academic “home”?
 - BUT some investigators have been successful at getting K awards at VA (e.g., Curran in LR)
 - AND VA funding levels MUCH better than NIH



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Types of CD Awards: CDA-2

- Mentored research experience with goal of becoming independently funded VA researcher
- 3-5 years of salary support
 - GS13 for non-clinicians (waiver no longer required)
 - Clinician GS determined by local compensation panel
- Must be minimum 5/8ths VA at time of award
 - Non-clinicians 100% research (some service)
 - Clinicians 75% research (25% devoted to clinical care)
- Review RFA to verify level of project funds you may request (has changed over time)



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*For clinicians, VAMC must commit to clinical appointment at conclusion of award and now pay for 25% clinical time during CDA-2

CDA-2 Eligibility*

- <5 years beyond completion of training
- Cannot be above Assistant Professor
- Should have some research accomplishments (e.g., \$100K HSR&D pilot and/or QUERI RRP or smaller grants okay) but not PI on large, peer-reviewed independent study.
- One or more 1st-authored research papers pertinent to proposed area of research
 - **Reality** is that applicants have many more papers
 - Growing expectation that you have paper track w/mentor(s)



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*Also see CDA Proposal Workshop (Oct 2014)

CDA-2 Expected Trajectory

- All awardees should have submitted a VA merit* proposal by the end of award
 - **Reality check** → review committee expects to see at least one submission planned by year 3, others so post-CDA track is clear
- Evidence of productivity
 - Papers (in press or submitted), abstracts, poster and/or oral presentations at national meetings
 - **Reality check** → expectation that you will NOT take on major service functions (no IRB/R&D committee roles, no major teaching commitments)
 - **Reality check** → recommend that you generally NOT take on Co-Investigator roles during CDA



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* Merit = Investigator Initiated Research (IIR)

What Does *Independence* Mean?

- Different things to different people but some things *constant*:
 - Independently funded as PI on one or more VA and/or non-VA grants
 - 1st-authoring papers in your research area
 - Increasing visibility and service (e.g., SMRB and/or national work groups) post-CDA
 - Some exceptions → may serve on national work group during CDA if appropriate to CDA work
 - Begin mentorship of fellows, others
 - Building portfolio and team



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What Does *Independence* Mean?

- For non-clinicians, “independence” can be more difficult
 - Seeking salary coverage by end of 3-5 years
 - In HSR&D, will require >1 grant
 - HSR&D does NOT fund PI’s at 100% (max 30-40%)
 - Hard to manage multiple grants
 - Not advisable to submit >1 grant in any one cycle
 - Need to be strategic without losing focus
 - Selected co-PI or co-I roles, technical consultation projects, build relevant collaborations



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Planning for a CDA

- What am I getting myself into?
 - At least a year’s effort → **why?**
 - Need to figure out area of research to pursue
 - Need to think about your path (what got you where you are now, how does that relate to where you want to go)
 - Need to pick people you want to work with, be mentored by (“*pick your parents*”)
 - Need to be a strong writer, have thick skin (or develop one quickly)
 - This is not a sprint → gear up for *long-haul marathon*
 - Iterative drafts, reviews, WIPS*, more drafts



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*Many Centers hold “work-in-progress” seminars or WIPs to help investigators brainstorm/prepare proposals

Planning for a CDA

- Why do you want a CDA?
- Are you prepared to stay where you are for a while?
 - Not always able to transfer CDAs c/o award is not just to you → it's a reflection of your mentors and environment
- Are there fundamental skills you need before you even apply?
 - Writing help, theoretical help, meeting mentors and other investigators



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Planning for a CDA

- Topic development
 - Area(s) of interest (topic you'd want to spend 5+ years studying)
 - Disease focus? (e.g., diabetes, cancer)
 - Public health angle? (e.g., screening, health habits/risk behaviors)
 - Access to and use of care?
 - Quality of care?
 - Costs, cost-effectiveness, budget impact?



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Planning for a CDA

- **Have to be able to *tell a story***
 - About yourself...
 - Not just training, research and/or clinical experience but also life changing occurrences, experiences that led you to where you are today
 - About your topic/interests → why do you care? why should we care? (be compelling)
 - About what's known so far → how does what you want to do (research plan) fill important gaps?
 - How does your training (and career plan) prepare you? (be explicit)



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Your Path...

“At the center of your being you have the answer; you know who you are and you know what you want.”

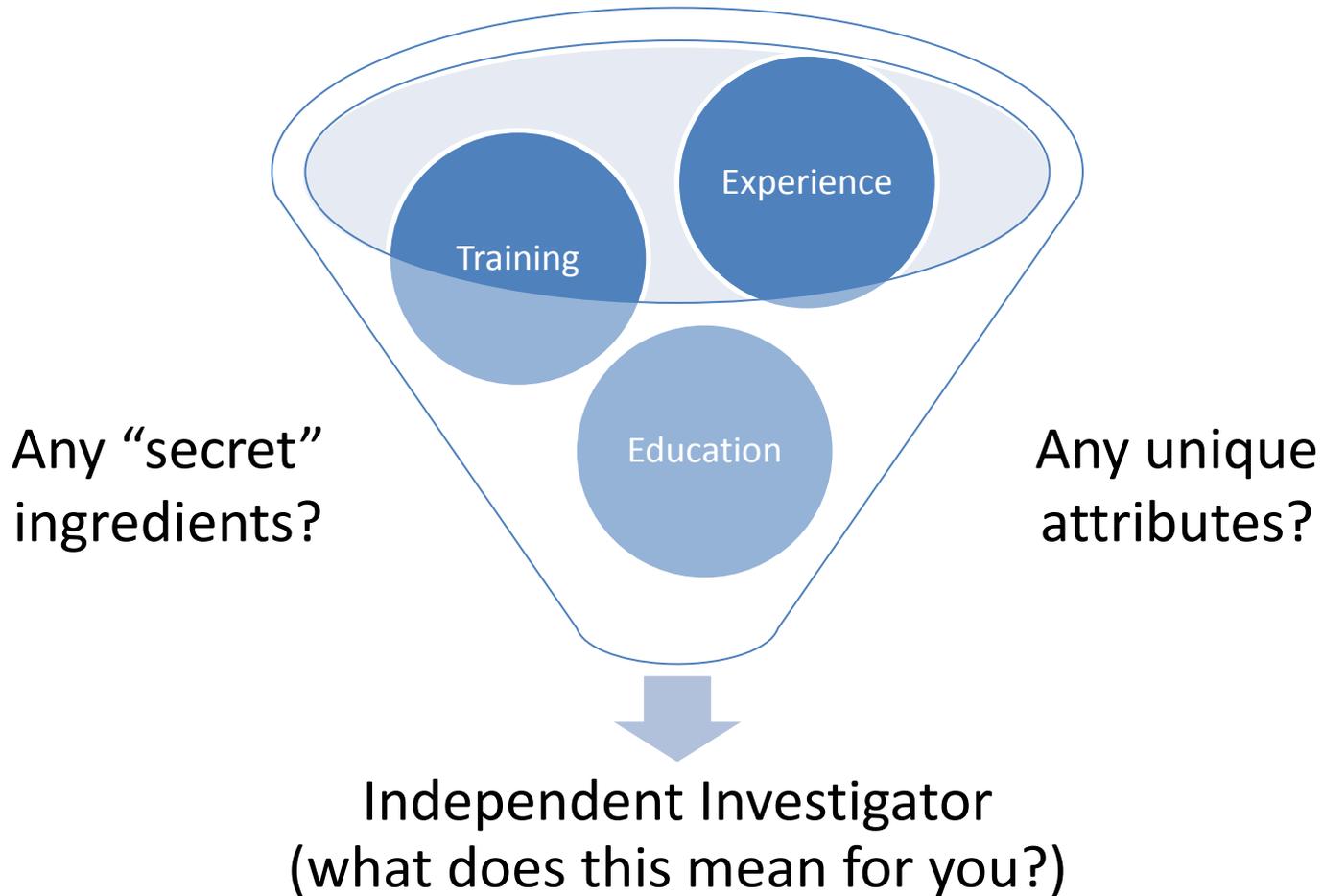
--Lao Tzu-Tao Te Ching



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What are your “key ingredients”?



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CDA Topic Development

- What are your interests?
- How do they relate to VA priorities? Who are possible policy/operations partners?
- What's known about your topic/interests?
- How well does your topic/interest area fit with local Center's and/or other investigators' expertise? With academic affiliates?



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What is known?

- Nothing worse than a CDA application where the applicant doesn't know his/her own literature
 - Reason you need focus is so that you really become an expert in a particular area
 - This is not a jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none game
 - Committee wants to know what it's "buying" by funding you (more or less)
 - Focus also frames/puts limits on literature you need to know



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What is in process?

- Need to know what others are doing in the field
 - Not great if you're proposing something VA HSR&D has already funded
 - Review HSR&D website, CONQUEST, other
- Need to know what VA is doing in your area (e.g., VA Central Office, Blueprint for Excellence, Program Office initiatives, etc.)
 - Best to know about state of play outside VA too (context, ability for VA to inform)
 - Not enough to replicate a non-VA agenda inside VA



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Problem Statement(s)

- What problem(s) are you trying to fix?
- What gaps need to be filled?
- What are the implications of not filling them? (for Veterans, for the VA)?
- Like a persuasive essay – want reviewers to walk away saying “Wow, this is really important and we have to have this person do this work asap!” (no kidding)



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Career and Research Plan Links

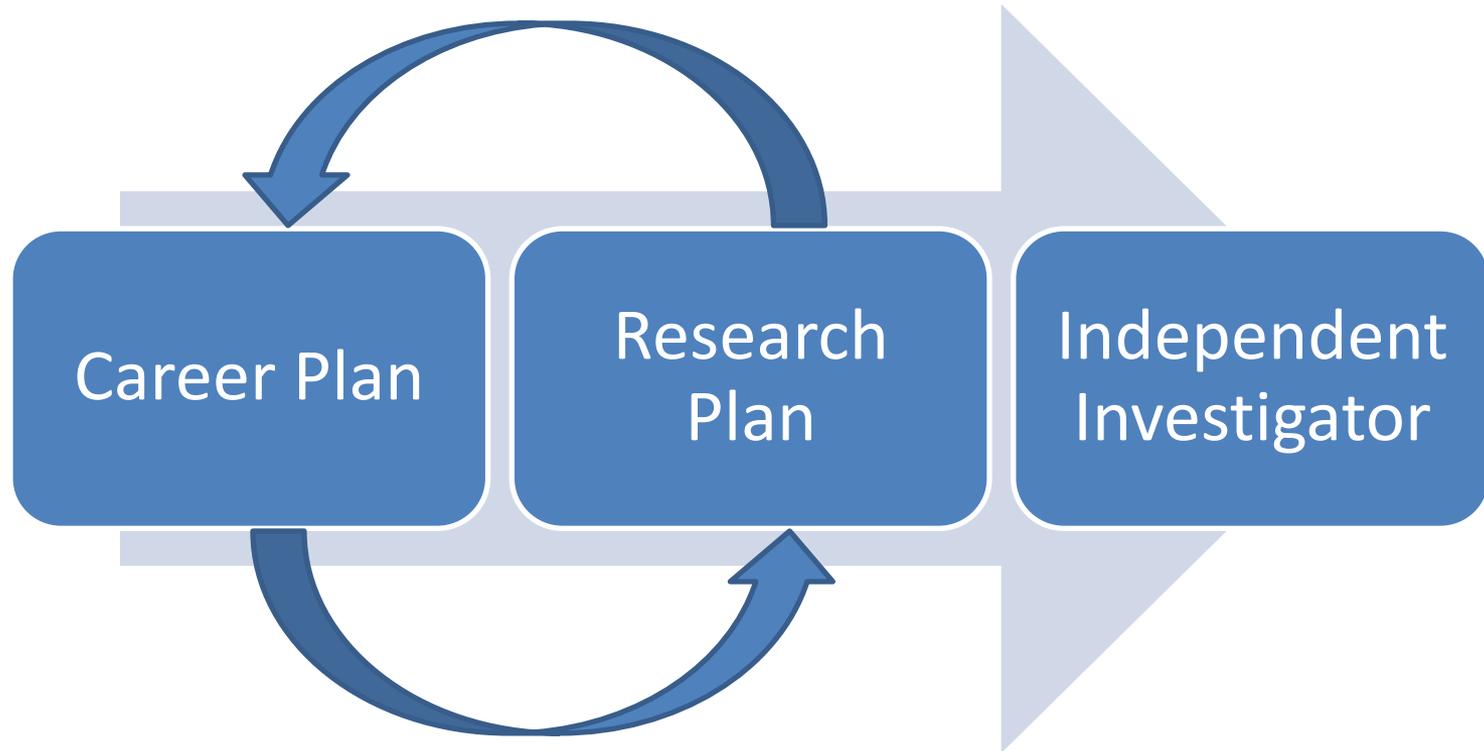
- How does your career plan fit with your research plan?
 - Your training prepared you to get this far
 - Now what other training is needed to get you the rest of the way?
 - Methodological training (qualitative methods, study design, statistical analysis, specialized methods)
 - Leadership training?
 - Clinical experience/exposure needed?
 - → All about honest self-appraisal and edgy balance between “I’m all that” and “I’m missing X and Y”



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Career and Research Plan Links



Not a linear process...



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What is a Mentor?

- The character, Mentor, in Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, is widely accepted as the namesake of the term *mentor*
 - Before leaving for the Trojan War, Odysseus entrusted guardianship of his household and his son, Telemachus, his faithful friend, **Mentor**
 - In Homer's original text, Mentor *did not* naturally exhibit the wise and nurturing behavior historically attributed to him; in fact, he was inept...



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What is a Mentor? (cont'd)

- Rather, it was the goddess, Athena, known in Greek mythology for her wisdom and compassion who took Mentor's form to guide and protect both Telemachus and Odysseus on their journeys
- Few of us will be guided by a “goddess”
 - Most of us will require many mentors
 - Mentors needed to meet different functions



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Mentoring Functions

CAREER FUNCTIONS

- Sponsorship
- Exposure and visibility
- Coaching
- Protection
- Challenging assignments

PSYCHOSOCIAL FUNCTIONS

- Role modeling
- Acceptance and confirmation
- Counseling
- Friendship

You are *unlikely* to find a single person who can support all of these functions...

And it's *not even good* to rely on a single person this much!



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Picking a Mentor(s)

- What kind of attributes would you want?
- What kinds of attributes does the Committee look for?
- How do these compare?



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Picking a Mentor(s)

- What is the right mentor mix?
 - One primary mentor
 - One primary and one secondary mentor
 - Two co-primary mentors
 - Consulting mentors
 - Advisory board (still need identifiable primary mentor)



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Picking the Right Mentor(s)

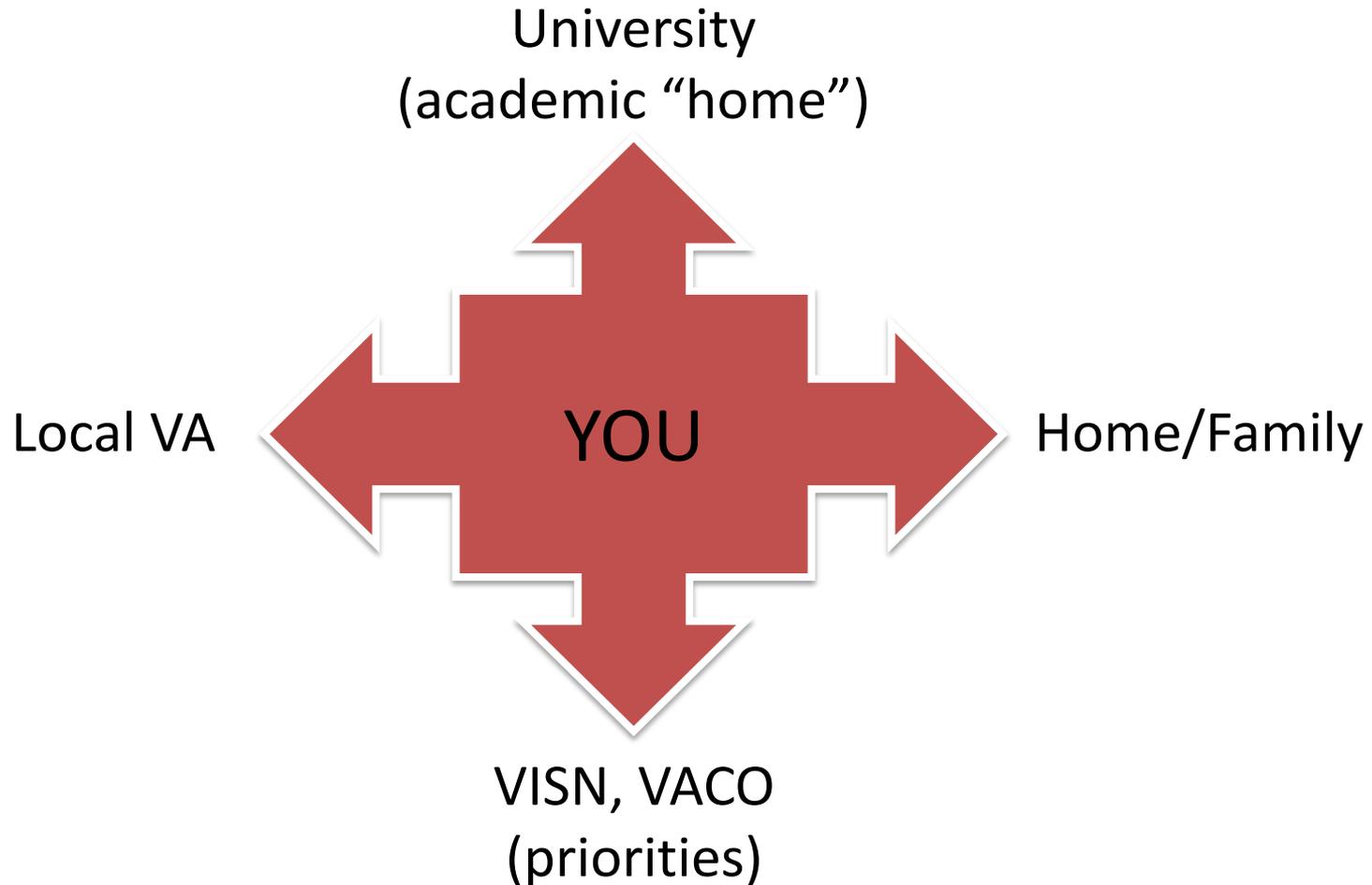
- Identify roles of each mentor (what will you get out of each relationship?)
 - Institutional “protection”/support
 - Content and/or methods expertise
 - Seniority/authority; track record
 - History of investment in you and your work



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Putting the Pieces Together...



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You and Your Research Environment

- Are you a “one and only”?
 - If so, identify colleagues and community outside your locale
- Are you “lost in the mix”?
 - If so, work with mentors within and outside your locale to identify new approaches or niches



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The “Total Package”

- Give ample time for all parts of application
 - Cover sheet, budget pages, biosketches
 - Abstract (1st thing most reviewers read)
 - Picking a manuscript(s) to include
 - References (there are page limits, take time)
 - Timeline/Gantt (level of detail, milestones)
 - IRB considerations → signals knowledge, detail
 - How will you get your proposed research funded?
When?



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The “Total Package” (cont’d)

- Letters are absolutely critical!!! And take a LOT of time...
 - Mentor(s) letters
 - Letters of recommendation
 - Whom might you ask? What can they say? What will they say?
 - Letters from institution
 - For clinicians, MUST have a Director’s letter promising minimum 5/8ths appointment post-CDA
 - No form letters please...



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Future Sessions

- Will focus on:
 - Career plan development
 - Research plan development
 - Mentoring and environment
 - Digging into the details of all those administrative forms and packaging



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