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Session #2: Strategies for the Development of Career Plans for CDA Applicants

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VA HSR&D CDA Enhancement Program Cyberseminar

March 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 #2

- **Last time...**
 - Brief history of VA HSR&D CDA program, its purpose and expectations
 - Processes underlying planning/development of a successful CDA application
- **This time...**
 - Focus on strategies for development of **Career Plans** for prospective CDA applicants
 - Career Plan as important as Research Plan



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Reminder of CDA Evaluation Criteria

- Nominee's professional background and productivity
- Appropriateness of the research and training plans presented
- Suitability of proposed mentors in relation to nominee's goals
- Relevance of planned research to VA
- Feasibility and merit of planned research
- Anticipated long-term contributions to VA



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CDA Career Plan

- “They’re funding me as a researcher, right?”
 - So why is the career plan so important?
- This is the beginning of your **story**...
- Reviewers use this section to understand:
 - Your qualifications (training, productivity)
 - Why you’re interested in your research topic, in VA
 - Can be difficult to write because not all stories are linear, comfortable, easy, easy to share or explain
 - Sometimes we’re not sure ourselves why we are where we are...reviewers want to know **who you are!**



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Overview of VA Career Plan Content

5 pages total to include 3 subsections:

- Candidate's background
- Career goals and objectives
- Training activities during award period

No specific “rule of thumb” on how much space to give each section



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VA Career Plan:

Candidate's Background

- **Instructions recommend use for adding information not otherwise in biosketch**
 - Research and/or clinical training experience
 - VA service (if in VA, chance to “brag” a little)
 - Demonstrate service on VA committees, workgroups, other functions
 - Demonstrate linkage to VA Center and other relevant groups (e.g., COIN, QUERI, MIRECC, GRECC, PADRECC, etc.; local, VISN, VHA work groups (if applicable); selected non-VA okay (if related to your interests))
 - If not in VA, demonstrate knowledge of VA and how non-VA service would translate into VA value



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Sample VA Service Description #1

- “I am currently a staff physician at BigDeal VA and an Assistant Professor of Medicine at the BigCity University. Within the VA system, I am a teaching attending physician in the inpatient ward, nursing home and post-acute care settings. Additional clinical teaching activities include teaching medical students geriatric assessment skills, and providing didactic lectures on geriatric syndromes to internal medicine residents and geriatrics fellows. In addition, for the past 3 years, I have been co-advising the medical student Geriatric Interest Group at BigCity University to provide support and encouragement to young people interested in geriatrics. In addition to these teaching roles, I provide direct primary care for a panel of outpatients one half-day per week in BigCity University’s geriatrics practice.”
- **So what do you think of Dr. X’s VA service?**



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Sample VA Service Description #2

- “As the Implementation Research Coordinator for the XX QUERI, I worked closely with researchers, VA leadership and the field on monitoring and improving XX care. An important part of this work was my involvement with Project Y. As mentioned in Section A, I am currently (1) completing data collection for a process and outcome evaluation for Project Y; (2) collaborating with my primary mentor on her XX care study; and (3) serving as a co-investigator on my secondary mentor’s HSR&D study on XX outcome measurement. In addition, I am an active member of the VA’s XX Analysis Project, which is designed to facilitate care improvement of XX nationally in VA. I am primarily responsible for overseeing all research activities. I also provide technical assistance to other researchers interested in the XX QUERI.”
- ***So what do you think of Dr. Y’s VA service?***



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Sample VA Service Description #3

- “I have been actively involved in an informal group of VA researchers interested in improving women’s health care. By attending a special breakfast session at a recent conference, I have made important connections with other women’s health researchers. I have now developed strong working relationships with Drs. G, H and I at the WOW VA and Drs. K and L at the Bigbucks University. These relationships helped me leverage two new pilot projects at Smallacademic VA, which served as preliminary data for my research plan. I have also been working with Dr. V at HERC to better understand VA cost data.”
- ***So what do you think of Dr. Z’s VA service?***



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VA Career Plan: *Candidate's Background*

- **So what's in the biosketch?**
 - Position title, education/training
 - Personal statement (including time and effort statement)
 - Positions and honors, other experience, professional memberships
 - Contribution to science (new NIH form)
 - Bibliography (selected), research support (ongoing and completed)



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VA Career Plan:

Candidate's Background

- **Biosketch is in completely different part of application so recommend summary here**
 - Reviewers *will* review your biosketch but they are likely to draw their summaries from your Candidate's Background section (narrative)
 - Biosketches also lack key information, including papers accepted but not yet in PubMed
 - Personal statements vary widely in content but also offer opportunity to provide summary



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VA Career Plan: *Candidate's Background*

- **By the time reviewers see this section, they will have read the following:**
 - Your abstract
 - An introduction (if a resubmission) (3 pg resp)
 - Your specific aims (1 page)
 - 19 pages of your research plan
 - Background and significance
 - Preliminary studies
 - Research design and methods



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VA Career Plan: *Candidate's Background*

- **Career plan needs to take that lead-in into account but also stand on its own**
 - Primary reviewers are asked to summarize your qualifications to the entire review committee
 - Each reviewer provides their own appraisal of the quality of your background for the research plan that they will have just read
 - Older CDA RFA had Career Plan 1st then Research Plan so committee decided if they loved the candidate and then if they loved the research plan, *now reverse*



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VA Career Plan:

Candidate's Background

- **Lots of ways to represent your background and qualifications** (see *Career Goals & Objectives*)
 - Often see launches with medical or graduate school, mention of key training experiences
 - Not uncommon to learn what sparked interest in research, in topical focus of research plan, in VA
 - Recommend you craft larger story of what has gotten you to today, and work with mentors to hone messages, signals of what's to come



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VA Career Plan:

Career Goals & Objectives

- **Instructions indicate you should do following:**
 - Describe past scientific history, indicating how award fits into past and future research career development
 - Important to justify award and how it will enable you to develop or expand your research career
 - Describe expected results of the experience in terms of benefit to VA and to you in terms of your research program
 - Commitment to and goals for professional advancement within VA should be discussed



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VA Career Plan: *Career Goals & Objectives*

- **Past scientific history**
 - Fellowship training and experiences, productivity during fellowship, consequences of experience
 - Example: Nice to see that someone published results of fellowship project(s), good indicator of later success
 - Example: Nice to see research collaborations that may have emerged, how experience influenced later steps
 - Highly organic process of writing! Iteration key...
 - Example: Preliminary studies in Research Plan may have signaled some of your scientific history already



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VA Career Plan:

Career Goals & Objectives

- **Begin to describe your research interests**
 - How did you arrive at this focus?
 - What about it compels you to spend 5+ years?
 - Do you have any credentials in the field?
 - Some of the credentials piece may be in Background but you may want to highlight/segue it in here to show concordance of interests and path...
 - Begin to demonstrate knowledge of how your qualifications, goals and objectives relate to field



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VA Career Plan:

Career Goals & Objectives

- **Justify award and how it will enable you to develop or expand research career**
 - Honestly ask yourself if you need the award
 - What would your life be like without it?
 - Will you basically be okay anyway?
 - If you have enough training to become an independent investigator, alternative is to begin to apply for grants
 - Run through what would make that difficult
 - What gaps in training you have, what mentorship would buy you, what protected time would buy you, why now? Unique contributions of training and focus?



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VA Career Plan:

Career Goals & Objectives

- **Justify award and how it will enable you to develop or expand research career (cont'd)**
 - *Always* a balance between making a case that you have great qualifications and yet need more training, mentorship and time to be “fully cooked”
 - Get mentors and peers to read your justification to get input on balance and story clarity



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VA Career Plan:

Career Goals & Objectives

- **Expected results of experience in terms of benefit to VA and to your research program**
 - What would VA lose by not investing in you?
 - Requires thinking through possible end results (post-CDA) of your line of work
 - Matching that end game to specific VA benefits
 - Requires knowing what VA values, what VA's operational and strategic plans are (e.g., Blueprint for Excellence, Community Care initiatives, legislation)
 - Know where your research fits in the bigger picture



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VA Career Plan:

Career Goals & Objectives

- **Expected results of experience in terms of benefit to VA and to your research program**
 - Related to whether you need a CDA
 - If you didn't get this additional training and mentorship, why would your research program fall short of what it could otherwise accomplish?



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VA Career Plan: *Career Goals & Objectives*

- **Commitment to and goals for professional advancement within VA**
 - Commonly includes:
 - Solid statement of commitment to VA and its mission, to Veterans and their needs
 - Reminds reviewers of concordance between your interests and those of VA
 - Why are you well-suited to VA?
 - Why is VA the right professional and academic home?
 - Why there's a future for you and your work in VA?



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- **Instructions indicate you should do following:**
 - Stress new enhanced research skills, techniques, and knowledge you will acquire
 - Describe structured activities, (e.g., course work, technique workshops) part of developmental plan
 - *If Implementation Science focused*, state core competencies that mentoring/training will develop
 - Include descriptive titles of any courses planned
 - Discuss each of the training activities and how related to proposed research and career development plan



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- Applicants tend to list array of topics (e.g., economics, advanced stats, implementation) in early drafts...expect to revisit often
 - Training plans **must map** to Research Plan!
 - CDA is not training for training sake but training with a purpose → independent investigator at end
 - If research in year 2 is qualitative, you may need to get qualitative training before and during
 - May need stat training ahead of big 2^o analysis project
 - Demonstrate how training plan fills your gaps



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- **Enhanced research skills, techniques, knowledge you will acquire...described structured activities**
 - Didactic coursework
 - Seminars (local, national, VA and/or non-VA)
 - Tutorials and mentored reading
 - Clinical shadowing
 - Database training
 - Implementation science training
 - Visiting scholar opportunities
 - Leadership development



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- **Essential to include Gantt chart** (training activities on timeline for duration of proposed award)
- **What skills do you need to acquire?**
 - What are different ways to acquire them?
- **What classes would you need to take?**
 - Are they available locally? Or will you travel?
 - How will you pay for them?
 - How do they map to your research plan?



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- **Example: You lack economics training in your methodological “toolkit”**
 - You’ve always wanted to take econometrics
 - The VA has a need for more economics-trained investigators (priority area)
 - You have no economics projects or research question in your research plan
 - **What do you do?**



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- **Example:** Your mentor wants you to include training in QI research and Lean methods
 - Your research plan is not QI-oriented
 - VA describes QI/implementation research as a priority area and VA is pushing Lean
 - **What do you do?**



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- Example: VA HSR&D Service has ↑ emphasis on implementation science and partnered research
 - Your area of research does not have much evidence to implement
 - **What do you do?**
 - OR you cannot figure out who the “partner” would be for your area of research
 - **What do you do?**



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- **How does each activity is related to proposed research and career development plan?**
 - Essential to develop sense of career trajectory
 - Not just about doing a few projects in 5 years
 - Think about possible paths that you might take towards end of CDA and beyond
 - Notion of “launch” and mapped to VA priorities such that you will have a series of future studies



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VA Career Plan:

Training Activities During Award

- **% time involvement for each activity by year**
 - *Rationale*: Does plan make sense...
 - Training and research underway simultaneously, so plan needs to be logical, feasible and high-value
 - Clinicians have max 25% clinical commitments
 - VAMCs now pay, demonstrating local support
 - Non-clinicians no comparable service commitment
 - But should NOT be on R&D or IRB or related committees
 - Should NOT have a teaching load or major course resp
 - Unique time of your life...be selfish and focused!



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Review of VA Career Plans

- Reviewers are told that the VA Career Plan is a major part of critiques
- Described as *essential if not one of the most important components*
 - Notion is that if you can write up a great research plan but cannot justify additional training time... then why apply for a CDA?
 - That said, the CDA application will not succeed on the merits of the Career Plan alone



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Next Seminar

- Development of Mentoring Plan, including discussion of mentor selection and mentor letter(s)



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Questions?



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