

# **Research? Why? For Whom? Inviting University Alumni to Help Bridge the Gap between Research and Practice**

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*Studies indicate that mental health research publications are infrequently read by counseling practitioners because most believe that published research is not relevant to practice. Though they perceive a need for research studies, practitioners rarely undertake their own studies. The purpose of this article is to help close the gap between the university research community and practitioners by proposing the development of a faculty/alumni research alliance program based on invitational theory.*

"The time is ripe for us to examine very seriously the gap between research and practice and take bold steps to close this gap" (Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996, p. 1012).

In the fall of 1995, I began my Master's program in counseling at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I learned something during my first class that significantly altered my thinking regarding the effectiveness and purpose of university research. In this class, "The Counselor as Scientist-Practitioner", I had expected to learn how to evaluate and utilize research studies so that I could continuously develop as a counseling practitioner after my graduation. I did learn how to evaluate counseling research. I also learned that, "Although psychotherapy researchers presumably are engaging in activities that can have implications for practice, it is fairly well accepted that researchers typically write for other researchers; the implications for clinical practice, more often than not, are an afterthought" (Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996, p. 1008). In addition, not only did I learn that counseling research is inundated with suggestions that practitioners derive little benefit from published research (Hinkle, 1992), very few counseling practitioners perform re-

search themselves, the modal number of published publications for clinicians being zero (Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986).

I left my "Counselor as Scientist-Practitioner" class haunted by several questions: Why are counseling researchers and practitioners estranged from one another in a profession devoted to improving the quality of human communication and relationships? How can we, as counselors, have confidence that our interventions are current and effective if we are rarely influenced by research studies and almost never conduct studies that evaluate our own techniques? Can the counseling community effectively bridge this gap between researchers and practitioners, or is it inevitable due to the inherent differences in our approach to our work? And, if we continue to accept the gap as inevitable, how can we continue to justify the funding of counseling research studies that seldom benefit practitioners and their clients? What will be the long term consequences regarding the reputation and development of the counseling profession? Is there anything practical that can be done to remedy this situation?

During the first semester of my Master's program at UNCG I also took a class entitled "Helping Relationships" taught by Dr. William Purkey. He introduced me to invitational theory and encouraged me to discover ways of putting this theory into practice. He taught that, "A basic ingredient of invitational theory is a recognition of the interdependence of human beings. This interdependence is based on mutual trust...established by recognizing the rights and self-directing powers of others" (Purkey, 1992, p. 111). Further, he explained to us that,

An indispensable element in any democratic encounter is shared responsibility based on mutual respect. This respect is manifested in the caring and appropriate behavior exhibited by people, as well as by the places, policies, programs, and processes they create and maintain. It is also manifested by establishing positions of equality and shared power.... The final assumption of invitational theory is that the realization of human potential can best be accomplished by places, policies, processes, and programs intentionally designed to invite development... (Purkey, 1992, p. 112).

The theory strongly appealed to me and did not seem at all congruent with how university counseling research is presently conducted. I began reading more about the gap between research and practice. My studies led me to an idea that might invite a successful dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

### **How Extensive is the Gap?**

"There are more than 400 different psychotherapies for the treatment of psychological disorders and problems. Unfortunately, there is no scientific evidence to support the efficacy of most of these therapies" (Perez, 1999, p. 205). Morrow-Bradley & Elliott (1986), found from their survey of members and fellows of the American Psychological Association, that on average, only 37% of research articles that were read and 57% of the research conferences that were attended were considered useful. When those who reported no consumption of research were added to derive the mean percentage of use for all responders, only 28% found research articles and 35% found research conferences to be beneficial to their practices (Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986). Although clinicians indicated that they did not often consume or participate in research studies, they did indicate that they wanted to make more use of research in their practices (Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986).

### **Why Don't Research and Practice Mix?**

Many practitioners report finding the questions addressed in research to be irrelevant to their needs (Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986). Furthermore, most people who become counselors often do not conduct research themselves because they tend to be people-oriented and action-oriented, do not find the activities involved in research congenial, and are not comfortable with statistics courses (Goldman, 1978). Also, counselors often work in busy settings where there is little time, money, assistance, or support for conducting research, and studies that are regarded as good quality often involve complicated techniques and procedures (Goldman, 1978). In addition, most clinicians would have a difficult time gaining access to a large enough number of subjects to do

large group-comparison research (Grubb, 1986) that is so highly valued by the research establishment.

### **If Research Is Not Influencing Practice, Then What Is?**

Most practitioners report learning their therapeutic techniques from watching their teachers and then altering those procedures based on their own trial-and-error experience. Also, they are influenced by workshops, conversations with colleagues, and the literature describing clinical innovations (Barlow, Hayes, & Nelson, 1984). If conversations with colleagues are one of the most useful sources of information for practicing clinicians, "It is unclear what the long range consequences might be of psychologists relying on each other for information, when seemingly few of them read the research literature on a frequent basis" (Cohen, 1979, p. 784). Cohen concludes that attempts to increase clinicians' use of research should probably focus on communication channels that involve interpersonal contact.

### **How Can We Close the Gap?**

"People cannot accept invitations they have never received. Teachers who are dependably inviting check to see that their invitations are received and acknowledged" (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p.75).

After reviewing research literature that addressed the gap between research and practice and learning that interpersonal contact might be an important key to bridging the gap, I considered how university counseling faculty typically attempt to communicate with their former students, and how they might alter their approach as a first step toward significantly impacting their alumni's counseling practices. Presently, the majority of university alumni are treated as passive research consumers. After graduation, most professors rarely inquire about their former students' research interests or invite them to participate in the planning and implementation of research studies.

## **An Invitation to Alumni**

Inviting messages are intended to inform people that they are able, valuable, and responsible; that they have opportunities to participate in their own development; and that they are cordially summoned to take advantage of these opportunities" (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p.10).

A convenient means that faculty have for re-establishing two-way communication and obtaining feedback from their alumni is to send them an annual survey designed to track their alumni's career development, research consumption, and their willingness to participate in research projects. Asking alumni questions such as, "What impact have research articles had on your practice? What research questions would you like to see addressed in the research literature?" and "Would you like to participate in a research project with a professor?" would communicate to alumni that their former professors respect their opinions, value them as consultants, and continue to care about their professional development. The answers to questions like these could aid faculty researchers in obtaining information for the development of research projects which practitioners would find more relevant. (For a sample survey, please see Appendix A).

In order to increase alumni enthusiasm for involvement in the research process, to encourage a high rate of survey return, and to receive more in depth feedback, faculty could hold an annual alumni reunion to discuss survey results. A reception, allowing faculty to introduce alumni to current students, followed by small group discussions led by faculty members specializing in particular research areas, could further increase the likelihood of collaboration between students, faculty, and alumni regarding future research endeavors. To introduce graduating students to the idea of a research partnership, a letter describing the purpose of the partnership along with a survey assessing students' interests in participating could be distributed before graduation.

To further encourage communication and the development of professional partnerships between counseling students and alumni, faculty advisors also might wish to establish a notebook or file containing their alumni's surveys that they could share with their current students. On a form located in the back of the notebook or file, students could record their reasons for accessing the surveys and state whether or not they found them beneficial.

The distribution of surveys and the planning of an alumni reunion involve an expenditure of time that many faculty members may be unable to give. Inviting members of student counseling organizations to assume leadership roles regarding the distribution and collection of surveys, the tabulation of survey results, and the planning and implementation of reunions could save valuable faculty time. It also could increase student interest in forming partnerships with alumni which could aid students in the development of their own research projects and assist them in networking with alumni who could help them locate employment after graduation. When faculty call students and alumni together to work for the common benefit of their profession, students and alumni can take ownership for their learning and "the collaborative, cooperative nature of the teaching/learning process is emphasized in the 'doing with' nature of inviting" (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 3).

### **Expected Invitational Research Partnership Benefits**

A research partnership built upon the tenets of invitational theory can benefit the counseling profession in several ways. First, researchers consulting with and involving alumni in university sponsored research projects allows practicing alumni the opportunity to have a voice in the type of research studies conducted, increasing the likelihood that research will become more meaningful to them, and that research articles will be read and utilized. Second, faculty and students who wish to conduct research in clinical settings can gain access to a large pool of willing practitioners by consulting the research partnership files maintained by faculty advisors. Third, mental health practitioners can obtain the support and guidance necessary to conduct research projects in their

work settings and publish their findings, and university faculty can receive continuous and more in-depth feedback from alumni which faculty may find helpful when updating their curriculums. Also, faculty and students can contact alumni who are interested in speaking to university classes and to student organizations about their clinical experiences and therapeutic techniques. Students who desire shadowing experiences in clinical settings and who need assistance and advice concerning the obtainment of employment will be able to more easily communicate with practicing clinicians who can assist them. Finally, the university faculty will be better able to track and conduct longitudinal studies of the career development of their graduates and can obtain information from alumni that will be helpful in providing better career planning for future graduates.

## **Conclusion**

Studies confirm that counseling researchers continue to expend their time and resources conducting research designed to improve the mental health practice when their work is often not utilized by those they seek to benefit. Practitioners feel a need for research studies to improve their practices, yet rarely conduct studies of their own techniques, leaving them uncertain as to their true effectiveness in helping clients. "It is clearly not an egalitarian partnership, but rather one in which each views the other with a certain amount of disdain. To a very great extent, each has difficulty in understanding the needs and concerns of the other, and each rarely validates the legitimacy of the other's activities" (Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996, p. 1008). Perhaps this division between researchers and practitioners can be diminished if university faculty who are committed to the democratic principles of invitational theory were to begin reaching out to their former students by sponsoring faculty/alumni research alliance programs. These alliances could not only facilitate the integration of research into practice, but also could involve practitioners in the training, mentoring, and the career development of counseling students. Alumni, faculty, and students could then begin to perceive graduation not as the symbolic end of their relationship to one another, but the beginning of a mutually beneficial alliance and could model the spirit of collaboration and the art of communication the mental health community seeks to facilitate in others.

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