Research Training During Residency

Rationale and Development

Among the many challenges facing 21st-century medicine is the need to train psychiatrists who will undertake basic and clinical research careers in psychiatry. Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic (WPIC) and the Department of Psychiatry have created a specialized residency research track that offers a wide range of opportunities for clinical, basic and translational neuroscience research experiences. The track is available to residents in both the four-year general and the five-year combined general and child psychiatry residency programs. Residents gain expertise in the etiology of mental disorders, clinical treatment trials, service delivery systems, and research methodology by participating in WPIC’s broad-based training approach, in which clinical care, research, and education are offered in an integrated context. The coordinated program gives the research track resident both the theoretical knowledge and the practical clinical and research training that are necessary for a successful research career in academic psychiatry.

The Department of Psychiatry and WPIC offer a wide array resources for research and education and is richly endowed with investigators examining core questions in psychiatry through the windows of molecular biology, genetics, cellular and systems neuroscience, neuroimaging, neuropharmacology, genetic epidemiology, behavioral pharmacology, psychosocial studies, services research, and law and psychiatry. An extensive clinical therapeutics program, which includes both pharmacological and psychosocial treatments for a variety of psychiatric disorders, provides opportunities to study direct applications of research results. With more than 100 full-time faculty who are principal investigators on research grants, the department offers unique opportunities for teaching and mentorship. In addition to individual research programs, the department houses several federally funded centers: the Alzheimer Disease Research Center (NIA), Pittsburgh Adolescent Alcohol Research Center (NIAAA/NIDA), Center for Education and Drug Abuse Research (NIDA), the Obesity/Nutrition Research Center (NIDDK), Mental Health Intervention Research Center for Mood and Anxiety Disorders (NIMH), Conte Center for the Neuroscience of Mental Disorders, the Advanced Center for Interventions and Services Research for Late Life Mood Disorders (NIMH) Pittsburgh Mind/Body Center/Understanding Shared Psychobiological Pathways (NHLBI), Affect Regulation and Adolescent Brain Center (NIMH), Advanced Center for Interventions and Services Research for Early Onset Mood and Anxiety Disorder (NIMH) and Center for Suicide Prevention: A Lifespan Approach. Research residents have the opportunity to interact with postdoctoral fellows in more than a dozen postgraduate research training programs associated with the department. Residents may go on to a postdoctoral research fellowship on completion of their residency training.

The research track is designed for residents who intend to pursue a research career after graduation from the residency program. Residents may express interest in the research track at any point during their training, but do not formally apply to the track until the end of their second year. Formal application involves a letter of support from the mentor and a research project proposal. Upon acceptance into the program, residents will be given protected research elective time, allowing an in-depth research training experience. Training includes working with a senior investigator / mentor on a research project as well as didactic lectures and journal clubs. All research track residents meet twice-monthly with a research track faculty member, the research track chief resident, and invited research faculty including the training director. These meetings concentrate on successful use of your mentor, research design, conduct of pilot studies, preparation of manuscripts for review, research survival skills, balancing life and work, and application for NIH loan forgiveness programs as well as other grants.

Many other residents for whom research may be an important but less central component of their post-residency career will choose to participate in research opportunities outside the research track. These residents will allocate less time to research to accommodate other experiences important to their planned career.

The research residency track diverges from the traditional residency in the third year. The service requirements for the twelve-month PGY3 outpatient psychiatry service are reduced in a manner to allow significant portions of time to pursue research. For residents in both four-year adult psychiatry and five-year combined programs, a majority of the final year of training may be used for research. RTRs primarily interested in laboratory research can select from a wide range of approved research assignments. RTRs primarily interested in clinical research choose mentors working in one of WPIC’s clinical research centers. The focus here shifts from learning the role of an interdisciplinary team leader in primary patient care to learning the role of a research project leader and developing scientific thinking skills as applied to clinical research. The research track is flexible enough to accommodate alternative training options with proper planning.

At the end of the residency training, many research track residents will go on to a research post-doctoral training program either in our department or elsewhere. We have funded post-doctoral training programs in child, adult, and geriatric psychiatry, behavioral medicine, and psychiatric epidemiology. Within our department, one can follow a research career progression arc from the research track while a resident, to an NIH-funded research post doc position, to successful receipt
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of an NIH individual career development award and faculty status. Our success rate for residents following this progression is extremely high – be sure to ask us more about others who have done this before you.


Continued Development of the Residency Research Track (RT)

The Research Track continues to develop as a unique prospective research training program for residents, and remains one of only three programs nationwide which served as model examples in the recent IOM report on training future generations of psychiatry researchers. It includes:

- A system for matching the residents with productive scientific mentors with the assistance of faculty leaders ("meta-mentoring").
- A formal application process with rigorous review of residents' background and research proposals by RT faculty and residency training director.
- Clear minimal requirements focusing on "high-yield" time-limited projects such as secondary data Analyses and reviews leading to first-author publications during the residency.
- A rich, supportive learning environment provided by twice monthly RT resident meetings, participation at the Annual Department of Psychiatry Research Day, and feedback on residents' performance.
- Protected time to pursue research projects and attend scheduled activities.
- Mandatory presentations of residents' research projects, which are critiqued by peers under the direction of a senior faculty member.
- Practical, case-based workshops on biostatistics, reference software, grant and manuscript writing.
- Dissemination of the University of Pittsburgh RT experience through presentations at annual meetings such as the American Psychiatric Association and the American Association of Directors of Psychiatry Residency Training.

2011-2012 Research Track Residents

Ana Stan, MD, PhD
Garrett Sparks, MD
Amy Meadows, MD
Danella Hafeman, MD
Julie Poulin, MD
Faith Rowland, MD
Roy Smetana, MD
John Tumeh, MD

Research Track Candidates

David Atkinson, MD
Xenia Borue, MD
Chris Hope, MD
Aaron Koenig, MD
Heather Liebherr, MD
Brandon McKinney, MD
Laura McLafferty, MD
John Saunders, MD
Mehah Sharma, MD
Loren Sobel, MD
Joe Tasosa, MD

For more information regarding the Research Track, please contact: Ana Stan, MD, PhD
Chief Resident - Research Track
Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic
3811 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
E-Mail: stanad@upmc.edu