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# Early Career Psychologist Column

## Training and Development of ECPs During COVID-19



Geovanna Rodriguez, PhD  
University of Oregon  
&  
Emily Hickey, PhD  
Waisman Center



*Interview completed with Drs. Sigan Hartley and Leann Dawalt from Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

### **Describe your position and some of your responsibilities related to training.**



**SH:** I am an Associate Professor in the School of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'm also a Waisman Center investigator and run my research lab out of the Waisman Center. I train

graduate students, postdocs, and undergraduate students in that lab and also serve as the Associate Director of training at the Waisman Center. In that role, training activities include 1) organize a Waisman Center Ethics and Professional Development seminar series that provides professional development and research ethics training to advanced graduate students/postdocs; and 2) I serve as the director of the T32 that's funded by NIH. We have a cohort of four postdoctoral fellows who are engaged in research on intellectual and development disabilities, predominantly in behavioral social sciences. We also cater toward researchers who want to bridge with more biological sciences and more of that team science approach.



**LD:** I am also an investigator at the Waisman Center and what is unique and may be of interest is that I am a Senior Scientist so I'm not affiliated with a home department. The Waisman Center is my only location on campus. I'm also the director of our University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD). Within that role, I oversee our model direct services: clinical services, community-based training and technical assistance program, and information dissemination and research within the UCEDD. I'm also Research Director for our LEND program, which is Leadership and Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities. Part of what I do in my UCEDD Director role is making sure that all of the services of the Waisman Center are places where training can happen and overseeing students in my own lab, supporting their training and growth. Also, I support the LEND curriculum to have training in evaluating evidence and translating research to practice for practitioners and clinicians who are receiving training through the LEND program.

**COVID-19 posed unprecedented challenges to psychology education and training, but also many opportunities for growth. What**

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**have been some of those challenges and opportunities for you and your trainees?**

**SH:** From my perspective working with postdocs and graduate students, it's made a lot of people have to pivot a little bit. I think, in particular, pivot away from some of the in-person data collection, and into thinking about how we can use the data we already have, leverage secondary datasets, or work on grant writing. I think a lot of early stage, postdocs, or advanced graduate students, are really primed to want to write grants, so those were the students who we had been talking about a lot of options including proposing in-person data collection, but because they were early stage and it's often really important to be showing pilot data collection, we've pivoted a lot of those projects to leveraging secondary data sources, which in all honesty, I think is a great thing for the field. We invest all of these resources in getting these great datasets, and we don't use them enough because often with grants the grant period ends after data collection. You don't have that time to be innovative and go back into that research and really go beyond just those three big questions that you proposed. The other big thing in terms of a silver lining and new opportunities is an explosion of funding calls around COVID, both in terms of supplements as well as calls for new grants.

**LD:** I will add and completely agree with Sigan. I think another place where there's been an explosion, which is not necessarily bad for the field, and perhaps really great in some ways, is this explosion in telehealth. We're using this not just for virtual meetings as a team but collecting data virtually and doing diagnostics and treatment, and delivering intervention virtually. One of the great things for students and early career folks is that they're getting to learn how to do things well virtually. For research – how can we have the same level of rigor that we have for doing in-person experiments, in-person interviews,

autism diagnoses that we have developed? How can we have that same confidence in information that we gather virtually? How can we ensure, clinically, the same level and quality of care if we're delivering services virtually? Also, for whom and when is a virtual delivery of service going to be most effective and ecologically valid for individuals and families and when is in-person really going to be important? COVID, in my mind, has totally accelerated and forced us to start asking those questions. I hope that psychologists can lead the way in doing that important work.

**With many shifts in research protocols during the pandemic, how were you able to ensure the integrity of research training to prepare trainees for independent research and grant-writing? Did you have concerns in meeting training expectations?**

**SH:** It forced us all to use Zoom and online, which I think has had advantages. I think sharing screens, getting us all more used to Google Docs. Quite honestly, it's probably improved some of the practices. One set back with COVID was to recognize that a lot of people in our lab and in my graduate program have had personal struggles around it. It's been important for us as a group to spend some time on Zoom just socializing a bit and realizing we don't get that chit chat time we are used to. I've increasingly realized that in individual meetings with students or in lab meetings to take some time to just ask “Hey, what are your weekend plans; how are you doing; let's chit chat” and just to recognize that this is a tough time for students. Talking to trainees about – where is your workspace; how are you working? There's been a little bit of attention to where are you going to work, how are you going to work, how are you going to get protected time. It's been hard in COVID, that home/work balance is often not as clear for people. From a training perspective, the other thing I will mention is

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virtual conferences have been a learning curve for all of us. It's forced students to do a completely different format for posters. I've seen a lot of great advantages to that, particularly for early career folks who might be more nervous – it allows them to pre-record things, which for them is a nice way to ease them into things. I think the disadvantage is there can be low turnout, particularly certain poster sessions, because now these things are flexible and people don't carve out a full day to attend a conference because you're not physically there. We've talked with students about ways to network.

**LD:** I'll just continue with that. COVID has just required more intentionality with training and supporting advanced trainees and early career folks to facilitate that networking. I've had many meetings with folks who were encouraged to reach out to people at other universities. There's just had to be more directed-ness to make sure that can happen. The other thing related to this question is really slowing down and reminding trainees, students, and postdocs that this is an extraordinary moment in time and that we may not get everything in the same timeline that we had hoped. It may not be possible to get that grant in at the first due date because life is happening and there's been a lot of grief and suffering and a lot of anxiety. If we need to slow it down, that's okay. At this point, we may not have the level of productivity that we would have otherwise, and that's okay, because everyone is going through this experience globally. There will be time that we can have higher levels of productivity. Sticking to those fundamentals about asking good questions, understanding where the gaps are, going deeper into the theoretical underpinnings of our work – all those things are good to do.

**What guidance would you give to training organization leadership involved in funding in responding to some of the identified**

**challenges you mentioned? What guidance would you give to students who are interested in pursuing future training positions as we go through this recovery stage?**

**LD:** I think really having more funding that explicitly calls for secondary data analysis. I think so often when we start practicing writing our specific aims, we automatically think of primary data collection. I think that it's nice to acknowledge or even steer people in the direction of leveraging data that already exists and making that easier for folks so you don't always feel like you have to perform a whole intervention in order to be able to have funding. Also, then, having some flexibility. It would be really nice to have more supplements available and add-ons to training years.

**SH:** I love your last point about these training grants. To expand on that, it's been a challenging year for folks, for postdocs on the job market. I think of my trainees – we tried to be really proactive of acknowledging that and making sure to set realistic expectations. It took a lot of reassurance from a mentor: stay strong, stay steady, there's a lot going on right now, how not to overinterpret the fact that a lot of people were late to post some postings. It was really a long process for folks. Maybe it's going to take a couple extra years to get there, but making sure that they felt supported and thinking about what would that third year look like if they were not funded off a postdoc and trying to really be proactive in setting that up. This year, we were lucky that all the postdocs who were transitioning off of the T32 ended up finding a spot. Sometimes it was a longer journey than they wanted and it may not have been what they originally thought, but they're all feeling good about where they landed. It was a trying year for that group with this and getting them to stay strong to not lose sight of where they want to go, and if there are going to be some gap years, how can you design some gap years that are ultimately

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going to just make you stronger; what on your CV would give you that push; do you need extra teaching; is this the time that you buckle down and you submit your R03 and maybe having grant funding is what you need – well let's go get that for you.

**LD:** And maybe weaving in some clinical work. I'll just say one more thing: obviously, in my lifetime, I've never been through a global pandemic before. Now we have. We're going to be coming out with reflections and things. I think it is helpful to look back and I know, with my many mentors I have had and in the history of psychology as a field, there have actually been many recessions and many times when the job market was very bleak and very dark and people found things to do to continue to make themselves active in the field and learn new skills. Then things improve, and there are many great leaders and people that have gone before us who have had wonderful careers that had a time similar to what many trainees and early investigators are having. It's still a wonderful time to study individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and to be in this field and it's worth it, just keep working hard and stick with it.

**Now that we're in this recovery phase, post-COVID, do you have any final words of wisdom that you would give ECPs about what they should be prioritizing?**

**SH:** Ultimately, these are individual decisions. I think, as a trainee it's important to keep that in mind and to talk to your various mentors, not only your immediate mentor of your postdoc, but also who is in your network. I would also say, you're not alone. Everyone's figuring out – how much does it make sense to go after every new opportunity? It's about timing. What makes sense for where you want to go? If there's opportunities that you feel you could really collect some great COVID-related data, particularly if you already have a sample ready to go, or you have a great idea – go for it. I know a lot of people who have been really successful in getting great data and it's launching them in a way that they're going to have these beautiful datasets going forward. Talk to program officers at NIH and different institutes. You may get different advice about the supplements related to COVID, specifically, how likely they are to fund them or not. Reach out to NIH and talk about your ideas so you have a good sense if it makes sense to go for these new opportunities. Part of being successful is leveraging opportunities around you. That said, I think it's going to be hard to gain traction if you go after every little thing. Keep some sort of focus. It's just a balance and figuring out what's right for you.

### Attend our ECP Mentoring Event at APA Virtual!

*Join NIH Program Officers and recent awardees for a panel discussion about the process and their experiences applying and securing funding!*

Date: Friday, August 13th from

Time: 10am-11:30am PST (1pm-2:30pm EST; Q & A to follow panel discussion)

Event Title: Training Grants, Early Career Awards, and Graduate/Post Doc Research Funding: Tips for Getting Started and Developing a Competitive Application

Zoom Link: <https://uoregon.zoom.us/j/96821963884>