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Early Career Scholar Application Materials
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My program of research is within the broad area of early identification for child behavioral and emotional problems. I am particularly interested in assessment, classification, and screening technologies that could allow for population-based screening within schools. Focused on the school context, my priority is to understand how to best identify children in need of early intervention services and how to utilize early identification data to inform early interventions. Recognizing the increasing diversity and multicultural nature of schools and families, I am interested in conducting research on ethnic differences in emotional and behavioral problems and how this knowledge impacts early identification and intervention.

My previous and current efforts along this line of research include scholarly publications, presentations, collaborations, awarded grants and subcontracts, and applied research activities. My interest in early identification developed primarily through research I was involved with during graduate school which indicated that the majority of children with severe emotional and behavioral problems were not being properly identified or treated in the school system. I became involved with the creation of a school-based screener to identify children with emotional and behavioral problems and I co-authored an initial study on this screener. I have since been involved in further screening validation studies and I am currently collaborating with senior researchers on a large, federally funded grant investigating the validity evidence for screening. I have received a subcontract, an internal professional development grant, and a diversity enrichment grant to further support this line of inquiry. Furthermore, I am currently involved in the evaluation of a Safe Schools Healthy Students initiative in which screening will be utilized to inform early intervention efforts. My scholarly publications and presentations to date have focused on behavioral assessment, early identification, universal screening, alternative classification methods, ethnic differences, and providing culturally competent services.

Over the next three to five years I will continue to be involved in research in the area of early identification and intervention. As there is not yet consensus regarding optimal screening procedures and/or instrumentation to be utilized, additional research and development on screening instruments is needed. My goal is to be involved in multi-site longitudinal research to make comparisons across screening instruments and investigate the predictive validity of these screening instruments. I plan to investigate the relative utility and acceptability of problem-focused screeners versus screeners developed from a strengths-based perspective. Second, further investigation into the screening process and implementation is needed. Multiple-gated identification procedures are often used in universal screening programs; however, there are varying opinions and research evidence regarding the number and type of informants. In particular, I will conduct research investigating “the value of different informants at various stages of the assessment process” (Johnston & Murray, 2003). Third, I plan to investigate differences in screening outcomes as a function of gender, self-identified ethnicity, parent-identified ethnicity, language proficiency, and language of screening forms completed.

The implications for this line of work are significant. It is clear that many students have unmet mental health needs (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003) and early detection and referral for treatment should be a high national priority. However, schools are often unprepared to provide early identification and, as a result, don't intervene until the illness progresses (Jamieson & Romer, 2005). Early screening is a critical first step in providing targeted prevention and early intervention services (Glover & Albers, 2007). This line of research can provide school-based practitioners with evidence-based, culturally-appropriate tools for early identification, which can lead to more efficient early intervention and prevention services.

References

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Research Proposal

Abstract

Erin Dowdy

Screening for behavioral and emotional problems is a critical first step to providing early intervention services. However, few schools are systematically screening students, which is in part due to the dearth of evidence available on screening tools and their effectiveness. This proposal attempts to address some of the gaps in the current screening literature by engaging in multi-site collaborative research to: make predictive-validity comparisons across screening instruments, assess screening instruments and procedures for potential bias, and determine the value of different informants in the screening process. Four research scholars from various regions of the country would recruit two schools, collect screening and outcome data, and work collaboratively to evaluate various screening technologies and their effectiveness. Results would be presented at conferences and in manuscripts. The research team would utilize the pilot data collected to prepare grant proposals and continue along the line of inquiry into screening for early identification and early intervention.

Across a variety of governmental, research, and educational agencies, there has been an increasing amount of attention paid to the need for early identification and early intervention. A first step in providing these needed early intervention services is an early screening for emotional and behavioral problems (Glover & Albers, 2007). While schools offer the ideal setting for large-scale, broad based mental health screening (Wu et al., 1999), a small percentage of schools engage in a universal screening practice for mental health services (Romer & McIntosh, 2005). School personnel have begun to endorse large scale screening approaches (Glover & Albers, 2007) but additional research on screening tools, implementation, procedures, and effectiveness are needed to provide practitioners with the best practices for school-based screening (Dowdy, Furlong, Eklund, Saeki, & Ritchey, in press).

I envision establishing a collaborative, multi-site research program to address gaps in the current screening literature. First, additional research and development on screening instruments is needed. Screening measures with known reliability and validity are needed to correctly identify children for early intervention services. Comparisons across screening instruments need to be made and the predictive validity of screening instruments needs to be improved (Albers, Glover, & Kratochwill, 2007). In particular, the comparative ability of problem-focused screeners versus strengths-based screeners to predict a wide range of behavioral, emotional, mental health, and academic outcomes would be examined. Additionally, screening instruments will be investigated for potential predictive validity bias (gender, ethnicity) or overall mean score differences that might lead to bias in referrals for early intervention.

Second, additional research into the screening process and implementation is needed. Multiple-gated identification procedures are often used in universal screening programs in which students that are initially identified as at-risk by the screening instrument are then assessed with a

different assessment (generally a more comprehensive tool or one utilizing a different informant/person). However, there are varying opinions and research evidence regarding the number and type of informants who will provide the most valid screening information. While it is often recommended to collect ratings from multiple informants (Kamphaus & Frick, 2002), there are several studies that suggest gathering information from additional informants adds little variance to the identification process above and beyond what was provided by the first informant (Biederman, Keenan, & Faraone, 1990; Jones, Dodge, Foster, Nix, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2002). However, the lack of consistency that often exists among raters (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987) further complicates the decision about which informant to utilize in the screening process. Research examining the number and type of informants that should be included in screening process would be conducted.

In brief, this multi-site collaborative research program proposes to:

- 1) Make predictive-validity cross-instrument screening comparisons
- 2) Assess screening instruments/procedures for potential bias (gender, ethnicity)
- 3) Determine the differential value of various informants in screenings

To embark upon this line of inquiry, a collaborative research group consisting of at least four scholars from diverse regions of the country with an interest and expertise in early identification would be formed. During the two-day national conference, the group would highlight research priorities and engage in focused discussions on pilot projects to further the aforementioned research agenda. Each research scholar would be responsible for recruiting two large, diverse elementary schools, assisting the school with implementation of a universal screening program, and collecting one-year outcome data on participating students. The collaborative research team would aggregate the pilot data collected at each of the eight schools

to make predictive validity comparisons, assess for bias, and investigate the value of different informants. Research scholars would present results at conferences and in professional journals to inform scholars and other educational professionals of the results and implications.

Additionally, scholars would work together to prepare larger, extramural grant applications.

The proposed budget is as follows:

Budget Item	Projected Cost
Materials (screening instruments, office supplies)	\$9,000
Honorarium for participating schools	\$2,000 (\$1,000 x 2 schools)
.50 FTE Researcher Summer Salary	\$5,000
.25 Graduate Student Researcher Summer Salary	\$2,000
<i>Sub Total</i>	\$18,000
Total Cost (per Researcher X 4 Researchers)	\$72,000

There are many advantages of a collaborative, multi-site research program to address these research questions including the ability to efficiently collect information from a diverse sample of students to examine issues of bias and provide generalizability information.

Additionally, multi-site research allows experts across the country to work together toward a common goal of improving early identification and can aid with the rapid dissemination of results across the county. The challenges of multi-site research include determining divisions of responsibility, ensuring consistency of implementation, and agreeing on procedures for working together to analyze, discuss, and distribute results. However, all of these challenges can be addressed through consistent communication and by forming a truly collaborative working group.

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