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*Erik Lindbloom, MD, MSPH
Chair, STFM Research Committee*



**From the Association
of Departments of Family Medicine**

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH DIRECTORS IN DEPARTMENTS OF FAMILY MEDICINE

While family medicine departments strengthen their focus on building research capacity, it is important to consider the role of research directors. In general, research directors are responsible for promoting the growth and development of research, but there has been little discussion on how this task is best achieved. To try to provide better clarity on this topic, comments on the role of research directors were collected via the electronic mailing system of family medicine chairs. Strikingly, there is general agreement that research directors are not absolutely necessary. One chair stated, "To my knowledge there is not another discipline that uses the research director assignment with such frequency as we do," while another respondent said, "If a department has a few good researchers, then it probably does not need a research director."

The need for a research director may depend on the stage of development of research in the department and on the leadership style and research proficiency of the chair. Once a department has achieved some success, the need for the research director diminishes (the need for research coordination increases, but it does not have to be done by someone with a terminal degree). If the research director is the best researcher in the department, then it is important to keep that person productive in research in addition to supporting the research of others. The research director position itself can decrease personal research productivity. For those departments that are still in an early stage of developing research, there is a real possibility of sacrificing the research director for the advancement of the whole. "It becomes too easy to see research as the director's job

and have the rest of the experienced faculty disengage from the mentoring process."

When research first began to play a greater role in the departments of family medicine, there was a preference to have physician researchers. One respondent stated, "An MD may be a better role model for doing research and have more credibility, especially for junior faculty, fellows, and residents. A PhD is more likely to have advanced research training and is less expensive." Some departments have gone through several iterations of research directors and have found that the leadership ability and personality of the research director are more important than the degree.

A number of specific recommendations were derived from a discussion after a recent NAPCRG seminar on the role of the research director. The audience of mostly research directors offered the following recommendations that would improve research productivity: (1) Departments that desire research expansion should conduct formal strategic planning to articulate the vision of the department's goals and objectives. In this process specific attention needs to be given to the role, duties, and evaluation of the research director. (2) The department should have specific content areas in which it is willing to invest resources. (3) The department should do an analysis of the demographics of its own patient population, so as to know its community and its needs. (4) Research directors, like anyone else, want to be valued. Sometimes faculty believe that patient care and teaching are more important and that research is being imposed, which can set the research director up as being the bad guy. Nor do research directors like it when faculty act as if the role of the director is to crunch numbers instead of being a member of the research team. Research directors need to know they have the full support of the chair. (5) Protected time should really be protected. (6) The research director needs strong administrative support, so that time is spent doing things that really require the director's expertise. (7) The research director should not be expected to do all the mentoring if there are senior investigators in the department. (8) Collaboration should be promoted within the department, in the medical school, and throughout the community.

As family medicine departments expand their scope of research, it is worth clarifying the role of the research director so that this often-critical member of the faculty can be effective in building the research foundation of the department.

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