

Roundtable NIJ Research Assistantship Program Meeting Notes

Wednesday, November 18, 2020 3p ET/12pPT

Shannon Discussion Prompts and In-person Student Questions

- How did Shannon “get to” (decide to apply for and accept) NIJ RAP?
 - Some of it was logistics; the majority of the decision making was wanted to get applied research experience; thought wanted to be in a Federal space
- What did Shannon work on while there?
 - She had a different experience than some of the other NIJ RAP’s
 - Projects:
 - The Sentinel Events (?) initiative (opiate program area)
 - ISSITAP (?) to help build logic model for program evaluation of implementation of international police force
 - First Step Act implementation – sat in on discussions about the risk assessment process in the BOP setting
 - Other examples of work RAP’s do:
 - Community and school safety issue
 - Helping to convene the world congress meeting
 - Body worn cameras
 - How to take a psychosocial lens to some of work that NIJ is doing
- How do they place people in projects and/or pair with senior researchers?
 - Based on prior research experience (skills that are required based on specific projects)
 - Some projects quantitative in nature, others not at all
 - Prior subject matter expertise and/or research interests
 - Are placements made based on skill building preferences?
 - They can be depending on the project needs
- What sort of deliverables did you help work on? Publications?
 - In-house (NIJ and higher up chain in Fed system) documents that are used in publications
 - Would have had opportunity to write on the qual data collected for Sentinel Events project, but Shannon left before that
 - Shannon says that if you have a good idea and bring it to NIJ folks they have a track record of helping you to publish that (whether peer reviewed or for public facing audiences)
- How many projects did you work on at once? What was the workload like?
 - For the most part worked on all the projects at once, as well as some one-off stuff
 - However, Shannon says NIJ RAP admins are really great about helping you to balance your workload and make/achieve realistic and stretch goals
 - Important to remember that NIJ projects are prioritized based on federal initiatives and interest... but the staff are good with helping RAP’s to prioritize their work to meet NIJ’s evolving needs

- Projects start and stop based on NIH and Federal, etc., priorities so there are times when you won't touch a project for months before picking it up
 - In Shannon's experience, they were understanding about needing to either scale back or pause work temporarily in order to facilitate Doc program completion
 - Also experienced help by NIH scientist staff, they were open to asking questions and/or welcome requests for help, etc.
- How did home department feel about taking a position with NIH? Was there support? What is the impact of the award on the home department?
 - Shannon experienced extreme support – GMU takes pride in having students who hold the RAP
 - Spent less time physically in presence of department, mentors, etc., so was sometimes left out of things; Shannon ended up having to make some proactive effort to connect with mentors and dis chair
 - Logistics of the NIH RAP award: it is considered a grant that goes to the Dept., and you are the staff mentor on the grant (so the award comes with both direct and indirect funds)
 - FYI that the application and award process is very labor intensive for the faculty member/advocate who will help with the contract specifics (# hours you can work, benefits/salary, etc.)
 - Very slow process to finalize the RAP contract!
 - Suggestion of things to think of: do you have to repay prior tuition remission/insurance if leave a previous contract from home department in middle of academic year?
 - How handle contract process if the home institution covers a stipend that is much lower than cost of living in DC metro?
 - Will need to work with faculty member/advocate to figure out what to do about this situation
 - Make sure you start thinking about this and working with faculty advocate earlier in process on this, because might be a sticking point further down the road in contracting/award process
- What did you get out of your experience with the NIH RAP?
 - Really good understanding of the solicitation process, how RFP's are rolled out, how the award selection process works
 - Understanding that in the federal space (at NIH at least) they do agenda setting, not necessarily the research about it
 - As an NIH RAP, you help the scientists determine what we do and don't know about a priority area to then figure out how to build the RFP's
 - Critical thinking about priority areas – what are gaps? When thinking about these gaps what sort of research (methodologically) would help to answer those gaps?
 - Connections to people that you want to meet, departments that want to get into, subject matter experts and scientists who work in different priority areas (help with networking)

Student Questions Submitted in Advance

- How to navigate leaving your institution in middle of your program (logistics sometimes involve moves, etc.)?
 - Shannon experience:
 - Does believe it was helpful that she was not in classes at the time (but other NIJ RAP's have done so...)
 - Need to work with mentors and diss chair to stay connected and on-track
- Any advice on public safety essay need to submit?
 - Be thoughtful and approach what you decide to talk about through a critical, research lens
 - Demonstrate that you can “see bigger” than the topic
 - Remember that NIJ is a federal entity and scientists need to be apolitical and balanced in their approach to any topic/priority area
 - From the NIJ RAP webinar “show them that you can critically think”
 - Page limit recommendation?
 - Webinar said 5-10 pages... but that is broad
 - Recommendation that take the amount of time you need to answer the prompt but demonstrate your critical thinking
 - Preference not for page limit but for content
 - Do you think it would be best to focus on NIJ priority areas, etc.?
 - Fine to talk about something that is not directly aligned with current priorities, just make sure that you talk about something critically
 - Important to know what they have funded and are doing (programs) so that you can talk about that in interview, etc., but don't have to spend whole essay talking about it
- Is there a history of direct pathway from RAP into a coveted federal position?
 - No, not a direct funnel these days (issues of hiring freezes, etc.)
 - Still have to go through normal hiring process
 - But... it does give you a leg up to show you have had a Federal position (prior security clearance is a good thing), that you understand dynamics of work in a Federal space, and informal networking can always help