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2023

## **Being a Program Director in a Mental Health Training Program - A Candid Reflection**

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# Being a Program Director in a Mental Health Training Program - A Candid Reflection

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Accepted: 6 November 2023 / Published online: 13 November 2023  
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## Abstract

Despite the important impact that program directors can have upon a mental health training program, there is surprisingly little literature on program directors. This article builds on the existing literature by providing a candid insider's perspective on what it is like to be a program director of a mental health training program. The article describes twelve areas where program directors may experience challenges, such as developing a leadership style, the potential impact on relationships (e.g., power), managing triangulation, addressing the impact of the role on teaching and scholarship, dealing with burnout, managing accreditation, and working with university administrators. In each of these areas, recommendations for how a program director might navigate these challenges are offered. The article concludes with a call for more research on this topic given the limited literature.

**Keywords** Program director · Training · Education · Leadership

Program directors have the potential to make a significant impact on mental health training programs given the responsibility and control they have over many aspects of a program. In fact, national accreditation standards for counseling (Council on Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2015), family therapy (Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education, 2021), psychology (American Psychological Association, 2015), and social work (Council on Social Work Education, 2015) all have standards devoted specifically to the program director, providing evidence for the importance of the role. For example, the national accreditation standards for family therapy programs in Key Element II-A defines the qualifications and responsibilities of the program director, as well as the need to evaluate their effectiveness.

Unfortunately, there is limited literature on program directors, especially on how to navigate this important role. Therefore, this article will build on the existing literature by sharing my experience of being a program director in

a mental health training program, and how I have tried to navigate this complicated role. It is my hope the article will serve as a helpful guide to those new to being program director, as well as aid those currently in the role to reflect on how they can enhance their effectiveness and satisfaction as program director.

## Literature Review

Although program directors are often surveyed to provide their perspective on topics in the mental health field, they are seldom the focus of the research itself. The research that does exist is dated, published twenty or more years ago. For example, French and McCloskey (1979) looked at the characteristics of school psychology programs and their program directors (e.g., gender, type of degree, professional membership). It also looked at the time expenditure of program directors and found that slightly over half (51%) devoted 40–54 h a week at their job, with 11% claiming to work 65–100 h a week.

McWhirter (1987) surveyed a small number (N=30) of program directors of counseling psychology programs to determine their responsibilities and the compensation they received. The primary responsibilities centered around performing accreditation tasks, admission of students,

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evaluation of the program, and coordination of internships. Only 10% of directors were responsible for administration of a practicum or internship facility, and only 33% were responsible for directing practicum training. In terms of benefits or compensation, course reduction was most frequently endorsed (50%), followed by a graduate assistant (30%). A little over a quarter (27%) reported no benefits or compensation. Time devoted to program director duties varied from 2.5 to 30 h per week, with a mean of 13.6 h per week ( $n=26$ ).

The most comprehensive look at the program director role was a study by Wisocki et al. (1994), who surveyed 106 program directors in APA-accredited clinical psychology programs. Like French and McCloskey (1979), they collected information about the programs and the program director characteristics (e.g., gender, age, theoretical orientation), but they also examined other elements. For example, the study found that 28% of program directors said they were “very glad” they took the position, while 7% expressed some dissatisfaction with taking the position. Contact with students (60%) and contributing to the development of the program (41%) were the most cited positive aspects of the position, whereas the amount of paperwork and trivial administrative tasks (47%) and lack of support from faculty (34%) were the two most negative aspects. Program directors cited various reasons for taking the position, including making a positive change (86%), being best qualified (70%), it was their turn (34%), and no one else would accept the position (33%). Like McWhirter (1987), a reduced teaching load was the most common compensation, and only a small percentage (17%) said they oversaw both the program and the training clinic. Over three-quarters (78%) reported not having their own budget.

The study also looked at the impact of the role on the program director’s career, which included decreased time for personal work and research (75%), expanded horizons (24%), and increased recognition/respect (21%). Two-thirds (67%) said the position had a negative impact on their research productivity, whereas about two-thirds (68%) said that it had not impacted the quality of their teaching. Some program directors said the position had a negative impact on their personal lives, including reduced personal time (32%), higher levels of stress and burnout (25%), adverse effects on personal relationships (18%), and adverse effects on health (18%).

The only contemporary literature on program directors is found in an edited book entitled *Intersectionality in Family Therapy Leadership: Professional Power, Personal Identities* (Quek & Hsieh, 2021). Three chapters are devoted to a program director describing how they navigated their role in academia informed by their social location or intersectionality (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation,

immigration status, religion). For example, Quek (2021) describes some of the challenges she has faced being a female faculty of color (Singaporean of Chinese descent), including discrimination. As a result of these struggles, Quek states she wants to use her power as program director to empower those who have been disadvantaged. Quek emphasizes the importance of her developing a clear sense of self, taking into consideration all her multiple intersecting identities. In another chapter, Taniguchi (2021) describes how her background as an Asian, queer, immigrant woman from Japan has influenced her life in academia, including being a program director. Taniguchi notes how becoming program director has increased her power and visibility within the institution, yet there have been times when individuals have made her feel invisible due to her background. Like Quek, Taniguchi describes wanting to use her role and power as a leader to help create space for those with marginalized identities. In the third chapter, Eppler (2021) describes her journey in learning about Whiteness and privilege, and how her social location (e.g., White, cis-female, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class) has influenced this journey. Eppler also describes her efforts to create a just couple and family therapy program as program director, including challenges she has faced in doing so.

As noted above, the research on program directors in mental health programs is both limited and dated. Most of the studies focus on demographics of program directors and their programs, along with a description of the roles and responsibilities of the position. What is missing is a description of some of the challenges that program directors face in their role and how they navigate them, which this article will address.

In addition to the empirical literature, Quek (2021), Taniguchi (2021), and Eppler (2021) each provide a compelling narrative on how they have been impacted by their social location, both as a faculty member in academia and eventually as program director of a family therapy program. Although it is critical to highlight the role of social location and its impact on program directors (which this article will also do), this article will explore topics that go beyond the scope of what Quek (2021), Taniguchi (2021), and Eppler (2021) addressed.

Although the observations are based on my personal experience, I believe most program directors will resonate with what I share. As evidence of this, I will note throughout the article where my observations seem to align with findings cited in the literature. At the same time, many of the ideas explored in this article are not discussed in the literature. Therefore, the article will add to the existing literature by highlighting other topics that also deserve attention.

## Author's Background and Program Context

Before sharing my reflections, it is important to acknowledge my background and the identities I hold because they have shaped my experiences as program director, as well as how I have created meaning from these experiences. In addition, it impacts the various privileges I have as I navigate this role. I also describe the program in which I have been director because it provides another important context for understanding my experiences. Describing both will aid the reader in evaluating the extent to which my observations may be transferrable based on their own background or program.

In terms of my personal background, I am cis-gendered, heterosexual, White male in his early 60's. I have a doctorate in family therapy but worked for three years as a chemical engineer prior to changing careers. I have had to balance my professional role with being a husband, father of three, and now grandparent of three. I am also religious (Christian), which shapes my values and life perspective, such as a strong value around service and seeing my work as a vocation rather than simply a career.

My entire academic career (30 years) has been with one institution, a private, Catholic university in California. I am a faculty member in a marital and family therapy (MFT) program, which offers a Master of Arts degree and is nationally accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE). The program has a strong clinical emphasis, with no thesis required. Students do their clinical training in community agencies with the support of our Director of Clinical Training. The program is embedded in a department that has programs in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and School Counseling.

I have served twice as program director in the MFT program. My initial term was for two and half years shortly after being granted tenure and promotion to Associate Professor. I began my current term the summer of 2019 after having the rank of Full Professor for several years. I began the first term as director program relatively early in my career, while I entered the second term late in my career with considerably more seniority as a faculty member.

## What It Is like to Be a Program Director

In this section, I share an insider's perspective on what it is like to be a program director of a mental training program, including the benefits and challenges of the role. I also offer some insights on how I have attempted to navigate these challenges, perhaps helping others avoid some of the trial-and-error process from which these insights emerged.

## Defining Your Leadership Style

A key challenge I faced as a program director was deciding what my leadership style would be, without the benefit of having any formal training in leadership. My perspective of leadership has evolved over time, with three key elements defining it now.

### Collaborative Versus Autocratic Decision-Making

First, I see leadership existing on a continuum from autocratic (leaders make decisions unilaterally with little to no input from others) to collaborative (get input from others and seek consensus where possible). I lean heavily on the collaborative side, which is congruent with my values of wanting to give others a voice in the decision-making. Equally important, it makes me a better leader and decision-maker because it provides me with other perspectives, helping me avoid potential blind spots and learn of possible solutions I had not considered. Eppler (2021), who also endorses a collaborative approach, makes a similar observation by noting that her team has given her excellent advice and “taught me much about being a program director and working with people across social locations (p. 88).”

Despite its advantages, adopting a collaborative leadership style can present challenges. A collaborative approach takes significantly more time and effort versus making decisions unilaterally, an observation supported by Eppler (2021). Soliciting input and holding conversations with important stakeholders about the decisions requires more effort, as well as lengthening the process of decision-making. Therefore, it can be tempting to move forward without seeking this input to make the job easier, less time consuming, and expedite the process.

Unfortunately, a collaborative approach does not guarantee that consensus will always emerge. When consensus is not obtainable, I have had to wrestle with how to proceed. Does the majority rule? If you always follow the majority, you may at times find yourself supporting a course of action you don't fully believe in, as well as dealing with the negative consequences of that decision if things go poorly. Or does the program director do what they think is best after seeking input from everyone? The risk here is that you will make decisions that a significant number of faculty don't support. Each approach has potential risks. Discerning what is the best approach for each situation can be complicated, and it has the potential to disenfranchise individuals if not handled properly.

### Task and Relationship Perspectives

A second element of my leadership style is striking a balance between doing the job from a task and a relationship perspective. The task perspective focuses on what is the fastest and most expedient way to get the task done, whereas the relational perspective focuses on building relationships through the work. A task perspective allows me to move through my to-do list more efficiently and quickly, which is a huge asset when I am feeling over-extended. At the same time, I want to be attentive to ways I can build relationships through the work that I do. For example, when emailing or meeting with colleagues or students, I might ask how they are doing or take a personal interest in something they say. This is not necessary to accomplishing the task at hand, but it is rewarding to build relationships with colleagues and students in this way. However, the downside is that it takes more time to do this, particularly when multiplied across the many interactions a program director might have over the course of a week. I constantly feel this tension between wanting to invest in the relationships through my work, yet conserve my time and energy given the heavy demands of the position.

### Leadership and Program Coordinator Roles

A third element to my leadership style is balancing a leadership role with a program coordinator role. In the program coordinator role, the program director takes the lead in organizing important events within the program (e.g., admissions) and fulfilling other administrative tasks (e.g., filing accreditation paperwork, class scheduling). The coordination role is vital to making sure that the program runs smoothly and efficiently, whereas the leadership role focuses on providing the program vision and inspiration.

During my first tenure as program director, I was primarily focused on learning and doing the coordinator role. I felt that by helping the program run smoothly and efficiently, I was doing a good job as program director. However, in my second tenure as program director, the COVID pandemic was a catalyst for me to assume more of a leadership role. Like others, I had my own anxiety about what was happening in our world due to the pandemic. I began to share with the program things I found helpful in coping with the pandemic, which I hoped would be helpful to others. This was my initial foray into trying to offer something as program director above and beyond simply managing the administrative tasks of the program.

Subsequent life events also challenged me to continue to step outside my comfort zone as program coordinator and assume a leadership role. For example, shortly after the pandemic began, the country was rocked by the deaths of

Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. These events were a catalyst for the program to explore whether it could better address issues related to race, privilege, and discrimination. Although this was a collective effort among the faculty, I felt a special responsibility as program director to lead these efforts within the program. Various life events (e.g., mass shootings, racial violence) also have been an impetus for me to share my reflections with the program in the hope that they will offer some wisdom, comfort, or inspiration to others. In my leadership role, I try to lead at least one major initiative each year to help the program improve in some significant way. Therefore, maintaining the leadership role above and beyond the program coordinator role has become an integral part of my approach to being a program director.

### Be Prepared to Do Personal Work

Individuals who become program directors must not only learn the administrative tasks required to do the job, but they must also be prepared to do some personal work. This was not obvious to me when I first became program director. I was too consumed with figuring out the tasks that came with the job. However, as I have gained more experience, I have come to appreciate how program directors need to engage in self-reflection and develop greater self-awareness if they are to be optimally successful in this role. Although sparse, the literature written by other program directors in mental health programs supports the importance of doing this personal work (Eppler, 2021; Quek, 2021; Taniguchi, 2021). This personal work includes reflecting on how various elements of your background (e.g., family of origin, professional training, social location) impact your work as program director. Your personal background and values may also impact your leadership style or vision on how to improve the program.

An example of a personal issue that I have had to be attentive to is my tendency to overfunction. This predisposition to overfunction can easily be triggered by being program director. Left unchecked, this predisposition has made me vulnerable to burnout and resentment. So, I work hard to monitor when my tendency to overfunction is neither necessary nor desirable. At the same time, my predisposition to overfunction has a positive side, which I have tried to harness. For example, it can lead me to take initiative in addressing something that others may not be willing to take on. This illustrates how personal aspects can have both positive or negative elements to them, and sometimes both.

Our personal experiences can shape us as program directors, sometimes in unexpected ways. For example, program directors are sometimes faced situations where they must decide if they will make exceptions for students based on

their request or needs. In these circumstances, I find myself being extremely vigilant to setting a precedence that may be problematic. I believe my hypervigilance is due in part to my experience of raising twins. When one twin was given something, the other twin would inevitably (it seemed) ask for the same thing to make it fair. So, I quickly learned to be careful about what I would say yes to.

In addition, our professional training as mental health professionals can influence how we approach being program director. For example, I think about triangulation (see later section) when individuals approach me with concerns. In a similar manner, Eppler (2021) shares how she tries to channel Bowen's concept of being a nonanxious presence when addressing issues that others bring to her. Being trained as a family therapist has also taught me to think about contextual systems and their impact. For example, how the university is doing financially overall may impact admission targets.

Finally, as noted in the literature review, our social location can influence us as program directors (Eppler, 2021; Quek, 2021; Taniguchi, 2021). My various identities (e.g., White, heterosexual, cis-gender male) shape my world views, as well as holding implications for multiple privileges I possess as I navigate the program director role. For example, when addressing issues of diversity within the program, I worry how having multiple identities that are considered part of the dominant group (e.g., White, cis-gender male, heterosexual) impact my credibility or create blind spots for me. In a similar manner, Eppler (2021) describes how her White women processes or traits contribute to her success as a program director. Yet, at the same time, she questions how these same traits or processes may impact her ability to be an ally and build a socially just family therapy program.

### Power – Position and Positionality

An important element of being a program director is to be mindful of the role of power and its impact on relationships. The position of being a program director typically carries with it more power. At my institution, the program director does not have a supervisory role with regards to core faculty. Nonetheless, there is a subtle but discernible shift in power when you assume the role of program director. As program director you have access to information and the ability to make decisions about the program that do not necessarily include the faculty. Although being transparent in sharing information and being inclusive in decision-making can mitigate this shift in power, the director still has the power to decide how much this is done.

While the position typically offers the individual more power and influence, it also comes with some limits. Ironically, being program director also makes you more dependent upon others to do your job. I was able to work

independently as a faculty member in many ways. I could teach my courses or pursue my scholarship without extensive support from staff, administrators, or other faculty. However, moving into the program director role has made me more reliant on others to do my job. I often find that I have multiple items on my to-do list that I cannot complete until I get feedback, support, approval, or resources from someone else. For example, I am dependent upon my department chair if I have any needs that require financial support.

It is important to note that the program director's power is not only defined by the role, but also the privileges they carry by virtue of their positionality or social location. As noted earlier, I carry a lot of privilege as a White, heterosexual, cis-gender male. For example, as a male I am ascribed credibility that my female colleagues observe is not always afforded to them. I also don't have to contend with discrimination or marginalization due to my sexual orientation (heterosexual), race (White), or being religious because I am affiliated with a religious institution. I am often ascribed credibility due to my age (early 60's) and rank as full professor. This credibility has enhanced my ability to advocate for the program, while my rank as full professor also shields me from possible negative repercussions when it comes to tenure and promotion. However, not everyone in the program director role will hold all these privileges. For example, Quek (2021) and Taniguchi (2021) note experiences where they felt their authority as program director was undermined because of their social location, or they were made to be invisible.

### Impact on Relationships

When I stepped into the role of program director for the first time, I was taught about the administrative responsibilities I would have, but no one prepared me for the impact the role would have on my relationships with colleagues and students. Individuals who become program directors need to anticipate that there may be a change in their relationships with colleagues and students, especially with the shift in power dynamics that comes with the role. As a positive, being a program director role can provide one with more opportunities to interact with students, faculty, staff, and administrators in ways that were previously more limited. For example, students other than your advisees might reach out to you for support or advocacy in your role as director. Being program director has also increased my interactions with department staff. In addition, being a program director provides opportunities to mentor and support faculty, which can strengthen these relationships.

However, being a program director can also present challenges in terms of relationships. Being the program director

puts you at the forefront of dealing with programmatic issues. Therefore, there is the risk that faculty and students will be upset by decisions that program directors make, even if they are done with the best interests of the program in mind. Although a collaborative decision-making model can mitigate this risk, it is not always possible to achieve consensus on every issue, particularly when there is a diversity of perspectives.

The power that comes with being a program director can also impact your perceived accessibility with students. Although the relationship between faculty and students is inherently hierarchical, being a program director makes the power difference even more significant. You are more likely to be seen as an authority figure to students, making you perceived as less accessible and more intimidating. Eppler (2021) and Taniguchi (2021) both observed that students found them intimidating in their role as program director, despite their efforts to be friendly and approachable. Being an authority figure can be reinforced when you need to address remediation efforts with students. Therefore, program directors need to be cognizant how power differentials may impact their relationships with others, especially students.

### Triangles and Triangulation

One of the more difficult aspects of the job that I have encountered is how to handle complaints that individuals bring to me about another person. For example, students will sometimes bring me complaints about faculty, site supervisors, or other students. When someone brings a complaint to me about another person, I am now a part of a triangle, with one leg representing the conflict between the two people. However, I also must be mindful of the other two legs of the triangle, which includes my relationship with each of the other parties. I want the person who is bringing me the complaint to feel supported, but I also need to be aware of how my actions might impact my relationship with the other person in the triangle.

I have learned the need to discern what the person hopes to accomplish by bringing the problem to me. Are they simply venting and seeking validation for their concerns? Are they seeking guidance or advice on how to handle the situation? Or are they expecting me to intervene in some manner? If the latter, then I must determine how or even if I should intervene. For example, do I first encourage the individual to address the concern directly with the other person? Or do I need to act as an advocate or mediator? Unfortunately, I have not found a one-size fits all solution and have at times struggled with knowing the best approach.

Unless contraindicated, I typically ask individuals to address their concerns with the other person if they have

not done so already. This encourages individuals to learn to advocate for themselves, which is an important skill that therapists can benefit from learning, especially if they are going to teach it to their clients. However, students may be reluctant to directly address concerns with a faculty member or site supervisor due to the power differences that exist. Even in these situations, it may be advantageous to encourage students to first attempt to address the issue directly with the faculty member or supervisor. Coaching the student on how to approach the other person can increase the likelihood of the experience going well. In addition, many faculty or supervisors appreciate the opportunity to address the concern directly with the student. Encouraging individuals to talk directly with the other person can help protect the relationship I have with the other person.

Having the individual talk directly with the other person about their concern has other benefits from my perspective. First, it is often more impactful getting the feedback from the person who has the concern rather than through a third party. The individual can directly share how they were impacted rather than rely on someone else's translation of the experience. Second, it allows the individual to hear directly what the other person's perspective or experience of the situation was. If I intervene in the process, then there may be limits on what I am able to share due to confidentiality. Finally, it opens the door for a potentially emotionally corrective experience with the other person, especially if the person responds nondefensively and attempts to repair the relationship or address the issue.

However, there are situations when asking a student to address the issue directly with the other person may be contraindicated. For example, if multiple individuals are approaching you with the same issue, then it likely makes sense to intervene on behalf of the group rather than have each individual address the complaint with the other person. If the complaint is of a serious nature (e.g., abuse, ethical violation), then it would not be appropriate to ask the individual to advocate for themselves, especially if it potentially exposes them to further abuse. If the power differential is great (e.g., between a student and an administrator), then it may be unfair to expect a student to effectively advocate for themselves and need someone more powerful in the system to do so. If you anticipate that the individual will not respond well to the student's grievance (e.g., become defensive), then you may need to exercise judgment on whether to intervene on their behalf. However, it may be difficult to predict what another person's response will be. Sometimes individuals are pleasantly surprised by the other person's receptivity to the complaint, whereas others might be met with defensiveness. Finally, you may need to advocate for the individual if they have made a good faith effort to first

address the issue with the other individual and need additional assistance.

### Hiring of Adjunct Faculty

I have found one of the more challenging aspects of the position is hiring (and sometimes firing) adjunct faculty. Although I have hired many outstanding faculty, I have also hired some that have struggled. Sometimes I think hiring new faculty is like the NFL draft. Despite all the time and effort NFL teams put into scouting talent to draft, sometimes an individual who looks like they will be a star turns out to be a bust, while others taken late in the draft exceed expectations and end up being a star.

One of the challenges of hiring new faculty is knowing what to prioritize when evaluating them. Multiple factors can be weighed when evaluating a potential faculty member. For example, some factors we consider in our program include teaching philosophy, teaching experience, clinical expertise in the field, knowledge of research in the area, ability to incorporate issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in the course, and the ability to address the topic from a systemic perspective (which may or may not be tied to their professional identity). Rarely does one candidate excel in meeting all the criteria, so the top candidate may depend upon what criteria is prioritized. For example, do you hire the individual with the most expertise in the content area, even though they have little or no teaching experience? It is also difficult at times to know how much emphasis to put on teaching experience as a qualification. I have hired individuals with strong resumes and previous teaching experience, only to discover that they perform poorly in our program. Other times I have taken individuals who had little or no teaching experience, but they quickly established themselves as highly effective teachers.

Given the challenges of evaluating who will be successful as a teacher, including the faculty in the evaluation and decision-making can be a helpful safeguard. In addition to conducting interviews, individuals who have expressed interest in teaching in the program have sometimes been given the opportunity to guest lecture in the program, allowing us to directly observe their teaching and how they relate to our students. Program directors should also be prepared to offer mentoring to new faculty to increase the likelihood of being successful. I have found that some faculty who struggle in the beginning can later excel if they are given proper mentoring. Even individuals with previous teaching experience may need mentoring on how to adjust to the culture and expectations of a particular program.

### Impact on Scholarship

Given the demands of being program director, it is important to anticipate how it can impact other roles you have, including teaching and scholarship. Research suggests that scholarship is the area most likely to be affected. Wisocki et al. (1994) found that two-thirds (67%) of clinical psychology directors said the position had a negative impact on their research productivity. Consistent with this study, Johnston et al. (2015) found that publication activity was low for psychiatry residency training directors over a five-year period.

My personal experience is consistent with the research. Although I attempt to protect time for scholarship, doing so on a consistent basis has been a significant challenge due to the time demands of being program director. There is often little time left over to engage in scholarship after protecting time for teaching and a healthy work/life balance, especially if the administrative demands are higher than usual. This was particularly true the year I worked on the self-study document for our renewal of accreditation. Time I would normally have protected for scholarship was consumed with writing the self-study document.

Due to the challenge in protecting time for scholarship, I worry about the potential impact this can have on my yearly merit raise, which is partially dependent upon my scholarly output. Although I don't have to worry about promotion and tenure as a full professor, I would be reluctant to recommend that individuals who have not received tenure yet assume the responsibility of being program director. To mitigate the impact on scholarship, program directors may need to be strategic in where they invest their time in pursuing scholarship. For example, program directors may want to carefully consider the scope of their scholarship pursuits, such as seeking opportunities to be a co-author rather than being the sole or principal author on a piece of work. It may be more challenging to find time for larger projects, such as working on a book rather than a journal article. Sometimes I wrestle with wanting to spend more time on scholarship (e.g., pursuing a book idea), yet not knowing where I can scale back the time I need to devote to administrative responsibilities.

### Impact on Teaching

Individuals also need to be aware of how being a program director impacts their teaching. In terms of quality of teaching, Wisocki et al. (1994) reported that 81% of clinical psychology program directors said there was no negative impact on their teaching. Being program director has not significantly impacted the quality of my teaching overall, although I found that my evaluations dipped a little bit



during my first tenure as program director. Even though I felt equally prepared for classes, I suspect the small dip may have been due to my energy level being lower due to the demands of the position. The minor dip in teaching evaluation scores has not been evident during my second tenure, which I believe is due to doing a better job of protecting my energy for teaching.

Being a program director could also impact the amount of teaching a person does. Program directors within my school are offered either a stipend for being a program director, or a reduced teaching load along with a much smaller stipend. Although the role has put the biggest strain on my time, I have been reluctant to take the reduced teaching load because of how much I enjoy teaching. For institutions that only offer a reduced teaching load as compensation for the role, doing less teaching may come as a loss.

### Visibility and Criticism

As Taniguchi notes (2021), being a program director increases your visibility. This comes with both benefits and costs. Increased visibility gives you more opportunities to influence people and events in the program. As noted above, it also gives you the opportunity to interact with other people you might not normally do so. At the same time, this visibility increases your potential exposure to criticism. You may be criticized for decisions you make by faculty, students, or administrators, even if you make a good faith effort to make decisions that you believe are in the best interest of the program. As the visible leader of the program, you may also be blamed for any shortcomings of the program. In addition, any mistakes you make are also more public or visible.

Program directors will need to find ways to manage the criticism or scrutiny that inherently comes with the position. It can be especially difficult to receive criticism when you feel that you are doing your best. Being program director has forced me to become better at receiving and handling criticism. I have developed some radical acceptance around receiving criticism, acknowledging that this is something that inevitably comes with the role. I also try to be clear about values from which I am working when facing difficult decisions. If I am going to be criticized for a decision, I want to make sure that I feel I am doing it for the right reasons rather than to appease someone. Of course, it is important to see the validity of the criticism, and I try to learn from these experiences. I have tried to develop self-compassion for the work that I do, particularly when facing my own internal critic. If I am attempting to do the best that I can, that is all that I can expect. I also remind myself that no one is perfect, which is another truth that I must accept. Although not

totally new skills to me, I have had to draw upon these skills more extensively as a program director.

### The Potential for Burnout

Although the potential risk for burnout among program directors in mental health programs has not been studied, it has been in medical residency programs. For example, a study of program directors in internal medicine residency programs (West et al., 2013) found that 27% struggled with emotional exhaustion and 28.7% experienced overall burnout. In addition, 28.8% reported that their work-life balance was negatively impacted. Another survey of program directors in family medicine residency programs (Psenka et al., 2020) found about a quarter of program directors reported emotional exhaustion (25%) or depressive symptoms (25.3%). This literature, along with my own personal experience described below, suggests that the potential for burnout is a topic that deserves attention.

### Workload

Being program director has significantly increased my overall workload, increasing my risk for burnout. I find that I can easily devote 15–20 h a week (sometimes more) to responsibilities associated with being program director. This can mean a significant increase in the number of hours a week one works, especially if the position does not have a reduction in teaching load. Even with a reduction in teaching load, you may still find that you are working more hours than you previously did.

### Mental Load

Taniguchi (2021) also discusses the “enormous responsibilities” of leading a program, which may contribute to burnout. I have found the concept of mental load to resonate when thinking about the weight of responsibility you carry as program director. In some ways, learning to live with the increased mental load was one of the biggest adjustments that I had to make when I stepped into the role of program director.

There are two parts to the mental load for me. The first is the number of administrative tasks and events that you oversee as program director. Before I became director, I only saw the tip of the iceberg in terms of the planning and coordination that went into making these events happen. Some events require much advance planning, with multiple tasks to organize and coordinate with others. So, it can be eye-opening to discover how much work goes into a particular event when you step into the role of program director. Magnify this over several events or administrative tasks (e.g.,

scheduling), and the scope of the work quickly expands. Sometimes it feels like you are trying to keep several spinning plates simultaneously going in the air without letting one stop and fall to the ground.

The second part of the mental load is the responsibility you feel for making good decisions. You will confront difficult issues as program director, and you hope and pray you have the wisdom to successfully navigate them. Obviously, you lean on the wisdom and support of the faculty in your program, but there is a unique sense of responsibility you feel as program director in these situations. Decisions can weigh heavily on you, particularly when you feel you are having to choose between undesirable options or the lesser of two evils.

### Managing Burnout

Burnout has the potential to reduce job satisfaction and work performance, perhaps even resulting in the program director leaving the position prematurely. Therefore, program directors need to be aware of the potential for burnout and take proactive steps to avoid it. I manage the potential for burnout in multiple ways described below.

First, I have remained committed to having a healthy work/life balance, which means working no more than 45–50 h a week. If I were to try to do all the normal faculty responsibilities along with the program director responsibilities, then I could easily devote 60 or more hours a week. To accomplish this work/life balance, I have scaled back the work I do in some areas to compensate for the time I devote to program director responsibilities. One of these areas has been serving on fewer university committees, which my administration has supported because they view being a program director as service to the university. As noted earlier, I have had to scale back time devoted to scholarship to keep the total amount of work hours in a manageable range. In fact, most of the work on this article was completed during a semester-long sabbatical. Another area that has been impacted has been time devoted to clinical work. I have always volunteered as a family therapist in the community since I started working at my university. However, with the onset of COVID, along with the unusually high demands of being program director during this time frame, I stepped away from doing clinical work. I have found my family/work life balance has been much easier to manage without devoting several hours a week to clinical work. However, I miss the rewards of doing clinical work and hope to reintegrate it back into my professional life in the future. I anticipate that others will need to make some tough choices in terms of what to sacrifice to have a reasonable personal or family/work life balance, a sentiment echoed by Wisocki et al. (1994). However, it is important that program directors

figure out what is an optimal work/life balance for them, which may depend upon if they have a family and where they are in the family life cycle.

Second, finding meaning in the work has been a protective factor against burnout for me. This is consistent with a study by Shanafelt et al. (2009), who found that spending more time doing what were perceived to be meaningful activities helped to reduce burnout among faculty physicians in an internal medicine department. The literature suggests different ways this may be done for program directors. For example, Wisocki et al. (1994) found that interacting with students and contributing to the development of the program were the most rewarding aspects of the job for clinical psychology program directors. This resonates with my own experience. Simply being the person who administratively manages the program is not rewarding enough for me. Supporting students (or faculty) and developing a vision on how I can improve the program has helped create additional meaning. Eppler (2021), Quek (2021), and Taniguchi (2021) all described how creating a just program or using their role as program director to promote marginalized or disadvantaged individuals as being important to them.

I also try to find meaning in the problems that I inevitably encounter as program director. One of the more stressful aspects of the position is the constant need to address problems that may arise. I find myself more tolerant of these problems if I can create some meaning out of them. For example, sometimes the problem opens the door to developing or deepening a relationship with someone because of the support you can provide. Problems can also become a catalyst for self-growth as you reflect on personal aspects that are being touched upon. Each experience has the potential to better prepare you for dealing with the next crisis or issue.

Third, I have tried to keep realistic expectations about my work as program director. I continually try to remind myself that there are limits to what I can do at any given time. I have learned that I need to prioritize what initiatives I work on and not to take on too much. It has also meant keeping my perfectionistic tendencies in check (with some modest success). I ask myself at times, “Is this good enough?” I accomplish more if I don’t spend too much time indulging my perfectionist qualities.

Fourth, it is important to know when to ask for help. For example, the former program director requested that faculty take turns overseeing the practicum course, something that the program director had previously done. The faculty agreed to rotate this responsibility to lighten the program director’s load.

Fifth, it may be beneficial to seek out support and mentorship from colleagues given the demands of the position. However, Wisocki et al. (1994) found that 87% of directors reported that they did not have a mentor. Networking

with other program directors may reduce a potential sense of isolation, another potential source of burnout (Psenka et al., 2020). This may be particularly important for program directors of color, who may be more prone to feelings of isolation or lack of support (Quek, 2021; Taniguchi, 2021).

Sixth, taking the occasional break from the role (e.g., vacation, sabbatical) can be helpful in preventing burnout. Unfortunately, sometimes it can be difficult to escape the demands of the position given that most programs operate year-round. Although I try to take advantage of lulls in activity in the program (e.g., semester breaks) to take a vacation and recharge, sometimes program needs emerge that don't follow the academic calendar and need immediate attention.

Finally, practicing self-care has been another important safeguard against burnout. Unfortunately, during my first tenure as program director, I let the pressures of the role push out time devoted to self-care. To quote Spock from *Star Trek*, I let “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,” or the one in my case. As a result, I often forfeited my time to exercise to attend to work, reducing my primary form of self-care. Fortunately, I have not repeated this mistake in my second tenure as program director. I am also better at recognizing the early signs that I am feeling over-extended and need to take steps to recharge my batteries.

### Navigating Accreditation

As program director, I have primary responsibility for accreditation in my program, which includes overseeing assessments to remain in compliance with accreditation standards, developing new policies and procedures to maintain alignment with evolving standards, filing annual reports to document ongoing compliance with standards, and completing tasks for the renewal of accreditation (e.g., self-study document, site visits). Given the scope of what program directors are responsible for in terms of accreditation, individuals new to the role should anticipate a significant learning curve in the beginning.

I have a complicated relationship with accreditation. I believe in the importance of accreditation for a variety of reasons, including providing standards of quality, making the program more attractive to applicants, and helping the program secure and protect resources. Therefore, I believe managing accreditation is an important contribution that program directors can make. At the same time, I have found managing accreditation a burden at times. Maintaining accreditation can be time consuming, especially when seeking or renewing accreditation. There may not always be compensation for doing this work, which can contribute to the risk of burnout. Time devoted to accreditation tasks can also detract from other important initiatives or priorities you may want to pursue. For example, I found that time and

energy I wanted to devote to other initiatives was consumed with preparing the self-study document for re-accreditation. Eppler (2021) also notes how accreditation demands can sometimes seem at odds with other priorities.

To reduce frustration over the time devoted to accreditation tasks, I attempt to find synergisms between accreditation work and other initiatives I want to pursue. In some cases, accreditation work has been a catalyst for improving the program rather than simply demonstrating compliance with a standard. Ideally, program directors will seek out and find support for accreditation from various sources, including administrators (e.g., release time), faculty, staff, graduate assistants, and accreditation officers within the university or school.

### To Leave or Not to Leave

The decision to become program director is a big decision. An equally important decision is deciding when to leave. During my first tenure as program director, I was struggling with the work/life balance because I had three young children at home. I often worried if I was devoting enough time to my children. This concern, along with some health issues, led me to step down as director. I remember this being an incredibly difficult decision to make. Fortunately, the program had someone who was both willing and highly competent to step into the role.

In my second tenure as program director, I question how long I should continue in the role and evaluate this on a year-by-year basis. I sometimes grow tired of the responsibility and demands of the position and ask if I want to continue to work as hard as I do, especially as I consider approaching retirement. I am also mindful of how the position impacts my work-life balance, and I continue to question if I am devoting enough time to my family (children during initial tenure as program director, grandchildren during my second). At the same time, I feel that I am in a unique position to contribute to the program role as program director. So, the position offers me a sense of purpose that would be a loss if I relinquished the role.

I also weigh the impact the decision will have upon the program. Is there another faculty member who is willing and able to step into the position? Programs need to anticipate and be prepared for transitions in program leadership. For example, do they have an established process for selecting a qualified person for the position? Wisocki et al. (1994) found that when program directors were asked why they took the job, a third (33%) reported that no one else would accept the position. Programs may face challenges in identifying individuals who are both interested and qualified in serving in this role, particularly if the number of faculty is small. Thus, programs would be wise to evaluate if new

faculty hires have the potential to serve as a future program director. Otherwise, they may find themselves in the difficult position of not having a viable or strong candidate when the current program director leaves. In some circumstances, the program may need to hire senior faculty to ensure that an untenured faculty member is not the only viable candidate to replace a program director.

### Working with University Administration

When a faculty member is elevated to the position of program director, they will have more of an opportunity and need to work with university administrators. Having support from university administrators can make a positive impact on the program director (while the converse is also true). Because most program directors do not have direct control over a budget (Wisocki et al., 1994), they will be dependent upon administrators for financial support when developing initiatives or unexpected needs arise. Another way that university administrators can show support is ensuring the program director receives adequate compensation for the role. Inadequate compensation for being program director increases the risk of burnout and poor morale, and it may disincentivize individuals from taking on the position. Support can also take other forms, such as offering mentoring or validation for the work the program director is doing.

Policies and decisions made by university administrators can also have a significant impact upon a program, in both positive and adverse ways. For example, our program has been able to develop several courses with a global trip component due to my university's commitment to integrating an international perspective, including subsidizing these courses. As another example, universities that are facing financial challenges might put pressure on programs to increase their enrollment targets, which may place a strain on their resources. Therefore, at times program directors may find themselves in situations where the priorities of the program and the university do not align. In these situations, the program director's role is to educate administrators on the potential impact of these decisions upon the program, and advocate for the program's needs to the best of their abilities.

### Conclusion

Little has been written about the experiences of being a program director in a mental health training program. To begin to fill this gap, this article expands on the existing literature by providing an insider's perspective on what it is like to be a program director in a mental health training program. A variety of issues and complex challenges that program

directors are likely to face are described, as well as possible considerations for navigating these issues.

Considering the limited and dated research on program directors in mental health training programs, the field would benefit from further research in this area. For example, focus groups or interviews with program directors could be conducted to see if other themes or issues beyond those addressed in this article are uncovered. It will be important to include voices of program directors with diverse and potentially marginalized identities, especially given that the existing literature suggests this can impact a person's experience of being a program director (Quek, 2021; Taniguchi, 2021). It will also be important to explore whether the type of program that the director oversees impacts their experience. For example, are there differences based on program size, type of degree (masters, doctorate), or if the program has primarily a clinical or research focus?

**Funding** Open access funding provided by SCELC, Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium

**Data Availability** No data were analyzed or collected for this article.

### Declarations

**Compliance with Ethical Standards** The author has no potential conflicts of interest to declare. No research with human participants and/or animals was conducted.

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