NIH launches online resource on behavioral and social science research methods

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A Web-based interactive anthology will provide psychologists, economists, anthropologists, sociologists and other scientists with the latest research methods and tools to address emerging challenges in public health, such as the obesity epidemic and the rise of chronic diseases such as heart disease. The Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) at the National Institutes of Health collaborated with New England Research Institutes to create the free resource (http://www.esourceresearch.org/), called e-Source.

Because behavioral and social scientists hail from widely varying disciplines from political science to social work research, there was a need for a central resource for current, high quality behavioral and social science research methods. With contributions from international experts, this anthology provides authoritative answers to methodological questions and sets quality standards for the research community.

The goal of the program is to demonstrate the potential of behavioral and social science research, focusing on applying research findings to public health activities and the potential to enhance biomedical research. It is also a useful training resource for biological scientists, providing them with a basic foundation for collaborations with behavioral and social scientists. "The behavioral and social sciences research community has long needed an easily accessible, low-cost central resource for standardized methods," said Dr. Robert M. Kaplan, director of OBSSR.

Behavioral and social science has broad appeal and impact, and the

program was developed to reach a wide audience of researchers, within the NIH, nationally and internationally. The Web-based interactive collection consists of 20 interactive chapters with new features including a discussion forum and enhanced note-taking capabilities. The twenty chapters cover a range of topics, but are accessible to all users, including those with limited familiarity of concepts such as how to conduct a qualitative analysis. The concepts are supported with interactive exercises and a full set of references linked to abstracts in Pubmed (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed), a library of citations for scientific journals.

The program includes chapters under five major categories relevant to behavioral and social science. "Setting the Scene" introduces major concepts in design and planning of social and behavioral science research. "Describing How" addresses methodologies used to explain how something occurs (for instance, learning how a disease is distributed in a population by conducting a survey or an observational study). "Explaining Why" provides guidance on qualitative methods appropriate for describing why something occurs. "What Works" explores research methods that can evaluate whether one treatment is better than another and whether there are cost differences (for example, a brand drug versus a generic medication). "Emerging Issues" addresses challenges in behavioral and social science research.

Several features engage the user and promote sharing, including a discussion board, a notes feature to save content and share it with others, and a function which allows the user to print a page or a chapter as a PDF. Unlike a printed textbook, the site has been developed with the expectation that it will provide a foundation of methods, but also evolve as new issues emerge. Future topics may include the effects of living in a particular neighborhood, the impact of differences in language and lifestyles, and the science of writing questions.

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