

Newly Elected CPA Fellow



Dr. Tavis Campbell

Written by Jessie Young (Regina)

Dr. Tavis Campbell is a professor of both clinical psychology and oncology at the University of Calgary. His research has made extensive contributions to our understanding of the behavioural mechanisms involved in the development, progression, and management of chronic illnesses, such as cancer, hypertension and insomnia. Recently, these significant contributions were recognized when he was elected as a CPA fellow. I had the pleasure of discussing Dr. Campbell's career and hearing his wise advice for early career researchers. Here's what he had to say.



What motivated you to pursue a career in research in general and in your area of research, more specifically?

I thought about this many years ago when I was an undergraduate student at Concordia University. I was taking a social psychology class and I saw a little health psychology section and they talked a lot about randomized control trials that looked at reversing some of the consequences of heart disease. It was pretty interesting and it sort of blew me away, I've always been interested in fitness and health, and this was a bit curious to me because I had never appreciated more of the importance of prevention at all levels, including for people who are already unwell and the potential for making them well. So that got me sort of interested in the area.

Can you tell me about some of the key moments that have shaped the trajectory of your career?

I think for sure doing an honours project and realizing that as an undergraduate student you could make a contribution, a small but still a significant contribution, to the understanding of scientific questions. For sure when I started graduate studies at McGill was a big deal. That was a real change for me where I entered a program and was told that it was going to be collegial, and not taught down and that they were encouraging collaboration and exploration of ideas. It was a program that was extremely motivating in the sense that, you had a real sense of volition and they gave you skills to feel competent and you felt connected to the other people in the program and to the wider scientific community.

Is there anyone professionally or otherwise who inspires you?

Yeah, I am often inspired by researchers who are involved in work that sort of challenges notions that we are born with a fixed set of skills. I've been reading

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Anders Ericsson who is a psychologist who does a lot of work on the role of actually engaging in delivered practice in order to improve skills. His motto, I think is something like: talent is over-rated. Much the idea that you should work hard at something and you can achieve. The other psychologist that I really quite like is Carol Dweck who everyone knows from the fixed vs. growth mindset world, and again, this notion that, you know, if we set the right circumstances people can achieve. It really resonates, I think, in the health psychology world where there are traditionally beliefs about certain illnesses that are the consequences of aging, that are unavoidable and so on and we know that it is simply not true. The kind of behaviours that people engage in on a regular basis have a great deal to do with whether we get sick or stay healthy.



What do you love most about your job?

Probably training second generation researchers - this is something I get the most enjoyment out of. I have had a number of successful former trainees that are well known in the Canadian landscape and across North America like Josh Rash, Sheila Garland, Jill Johnson, Gerald Giesbrecht, and I really enjoy seeing them launch and succeed and do better than me.

What advice would you give to early career investigators?

First of all, to remind yourself to enjoy what it is that you are doing. To have a wonderful career where you can actually spend your time engaged in trying to answer questions that are of personal interest and that benefit society. I think that sometimes you can get, as a graduate student for example, caught up in exams and grades and so on. Or as an early investigator, where are you published or impressing people with your work. I think what really matters is that you enjoy the work, you work with people who you also could learn something from and enjoy working with. The career is very much like a marathon rather than a road race. And so, you want to sit back and appreciate that your livelihood involves doing things that you, to a large extent, control and drive.

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