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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLABORATING SUCCESSFULLY WITH ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS

Findings From The Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships Study (RPPS)

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Summary

Research has the greatest potential to impact change in practice and policy when (1) it is conducted in collaboration with practitioners rather than conducted by an academic researcher alone, and (2) its findings are meaningfully communicated to the people who influence policy and practice (Block, Engel, Naureckas, & Riordan, 1999; Mouradian, Mechanic, & Williams, 2001). Practitioners in the criminal justice (CJ) system have the potential to play a fundamental role in the development and conduct of research. As administrators, supervisors, and direct service staff, practitioners have knowledge and experience that is critical to conducting the most rigorous research possible and producing useful results and products.

This brief provides recommendations to practitioners for collaborating, based on a study conducted with practitioners in the CJ system (staff employed within the CJ system or staff who provide services to CJ-involved clients but are not employed within the system) and researchers in the United States and Canada who, from their perspectives, collaborated successfully to complete a research project. The aims of this brief are to help practitioners (a) plan for future research collaborations that will function as seamlessly as possible and (b) produce findings that have significant impact on practices, policies, services, and ultimately contribute to improving advocacy and support for victims and reducing crime and recidivism.

Recommendations

Build Rapport—Develop the Relationship.

Have a Voice. Your Perspective Is Critical to the Success of the Project.

Work with Researchers Who Are Willing to Walk in the Shoes of Your Staff and Clients.

Plan for the Resources Needed to Collaborate.

Establish a Formal Agreement That Documents Roles of Each Party and Expected Outcomes of the Research.

Identify a Research Point Person or Develop an Internal Research Committee.

Be Informed. Ask for a Research 101 Training.

RPPS STUDY OVERVIEW

Goal: To improve understanding of successful researcher-practitioner collaborations[1] between those working within and outside of the CJ system so that the knowledge learned can be used to promote the creation of new partnerships and enhance existing ones.
Design: There were two components to this study.

1. <u>Individual interviews and focus groups</u> were conducted with practitioners and researchers who self-identified as having at least one past or current "successful" research partnership (though many also had past unsuccessful partnerships). The purpose was to learn from them what they thought made their partnerships successful. Practitioners, as defined by the National Institute of Justice for the purpose of this study, were CJ system employees (including administrators of CJ state administrative agencies, SAAs) and those who provide services to CJ system clients. Researchers were those who conducted research but were not CJ system employees.
<u>Participants</u> were 55 women and 17 men of various racial/ethnic groups. They were employed in a range of settings located in urban, suburban, and rural settings in the United States and Canada, including family violence and sexual assault programs, private practice, and SAAs such as departments of corrections, local county courts, independent research institutes, and colleges/universities. They had 4 to 40 years of experience (average of 12 years).

- 49 people (38 women and 11 men) participated in individual interviews (8 of which were with SAA staff) face to face or via telephone.
- 23 people (17 women and 6 men) participated in 5 focus groups convened at professional or academic conferences.

<u>Data analysis</u>. The audio/video recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. With the aid of a qualitative analysis software package the transcribed files were coded with identification tags corresponding to the RPPS research questions related to the following categories determined a priori: highlights of the collaboration, lowlights of the collaborations, reasons the collaboration was needed, benefits of the collaboration, characteristics desired in a collaborator, characteristics desired in an organization, characteristics of a successful collaboration, facilitators of a successful collaboration, barriers/challenges to a successful collaboration, balancing the needs of researchers and practitioners, products and results of the collaboration, usefulness of resulting products, sustainability of partnerships, advice for researchers, and advice for practitioners. The research team reviewed the coded responses to identify salient patterns or themes.

2. <u>A Web-based survey</u> of CJ-system SAAs aimed to (a) determine each state's infrastructure and general experiences regarding research in the CJ system and (b) document lessons learned from past or current successful collaborations with a researcher not employed within the CJ system.
<u>Participants</u> were those whose responsibility it was either to oversee the conduct of research in the SAA or to conduct research on behalf of the state. Seventy-five participants from 49 states completed the survey, with several states having multiple respondents from different SAA research departments (i.e., department of corrections, office of the courts, etc.). Of respondents, 41% were administrators or directors of the agency, 35% were supervisors or managers, 21% were front-line or support staff, and 3% were university-employed Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) directors[2].
<u>Data analysis</u>. Data were analyzed to present simple descriptive statistics such as an average or the percentage of participants who endorsed a response.

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[1] "Collaborations" and "partnerships" are used interchangeably.
[2] SACs are funded by the Bureau of Justice Statistics to contribute to effective state policies through statistical services, evaluation, and policy analysis. SAC contracts may be awarded to SAAs or researchers at academic institutions.

REASONS TO COLLABORATE

There are many reasons why practitioners (on behalf of an organization) might collaborate with researchers. One reason is necessity. More and more often, funders are requiring organizations to use evidence-based programs and/or to evaluate proposed programs for effectiveness. Having an established relationship with a researcher before there is a need to collaborate is preferable. This way, the relationship develops without the constraints of deadlines and the expectations that go along with developing grant applications and writing required reports. If and when a need does arise, the practitioner will already have an established relationship to draw upon, which will serve to strengthen the study and the interpretation and implications of its findings.

"The response to build this rapport (with the researcher) was really driven by our inability to answer key questions to our funders, to legislators, to folks that were looking at 'Why are we investing in your services? How do we know they are effective? And how do you we know you're really achieving the results that the public acts and public policies intended?'"—Government Systems SAA Practitioner/Senior Administrator

Another reason to collaborate is choice – for example, when a researcher approaches an organization to propose a collaborative project and the organization agrees because it is invested in the findings and their implications for the clients, staff, and/or the organization as a whole. When collaboration is a choice, practitioners will need to evaluate the likelihood that the collaboration will be successful and will benefit them in the ways they expect. The recommendations that follow are an integration of the "lessons learned" shared by practitioners and researchers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Build Rapport—Develop the Relationship.

"There's a level of trust, familiarity, and roundedness in the work. …When you have trust, it makes all the difference in the world."— Director of an Academic Research Center

Regardless of the reason(s) for collaborating, investing the time it takes for the practitioner and researcher to develop their relationship will be invaluable to all parties involved throughout the collaboration and after it has been completed. In the face of timelines and deadlines, it can be easy to move quickly through the early stages of developing a relationship and beginning a study and therefore miss the opportunity to lay the foundation of mutual trust. This is unfortunate because, nearly unanimously, practitioners and researchers who participated in our study identified a strong relationship based on trust as the most critical element of a successful collaboration—namely, having a positive experience during and after the collaboration regardless of the results.

Some of the academic researchers described the development of the collaborations as similar to a dating/courting process in which both the researcher and practitioner were trying to determine if they were a match for one another and the likelihood of a successful relationship:

"I found [the researcher] ethical, I found her thoughtful, I found her listening."
—Practitioner/Organization Administrator describing how trust was established with a Researcher

"The dating story—This was kind of a joke in our relationship about when we first started to meet and talk about this project. 'Okay, we've agreed to date for a little while, and we're just going to see where this goes.' And that was the pilot process of this, and we just kind of continued to talk about 'How is this going? Are we going in the direction that's going to meet your needs?'"

"But then, you know, I felt like she [also] really appreciated what I bring as the researcher in terms of…understanding the [research] method and what you can and cannot look at. And as the relationship and the pilot work continued to progress and we got to the point of writing a grant to [the National Institute of Justice], I remember calling [the practitioner] and saying 'Ok, this is the next step in our relationship. We're moving from dating into a longer-term commitment here—and are you ready for that?'"—Academic Researcher

It is understandable why some practitioners distrust researchers in general—many have had bad past experiences with or misunderstandings about researchers and the research process. Taking the time to develop the relationship can help the practitioner learn if the researcher is like the many who have tremendous respect for practitioners and the work they do, and possess knowledge about the constraints of conducting research in the practitioner's system, or if he or she is like those who have contributed to the bad reputation of researchers and the research process. Learning this information sooner rather than later will serve the practitioner and his/her organization well.

"I think that with both the researcher and practitioner you get the full product—the full benefit of everyone's expertise and skills and experience. And without that you have a product that's not fully complete in my mind."
—Community Based Practitioner

Some ways to find out about a respected researcher are to:

- ask trusted colleagues at different organizations,
- search university websites for a researcher with expertise that matches the organization's goals,
- subscribe to list serves that focus on issues consistent with your organizations' mission and the population served,
- search professional networking web-sites,
- attend meetings of area task forces, workshops and coalitions targeted to the clients you serve and/or the mission of your organization (the ease of which will depend on your geographic location).

2. Have a Voice. Your Perspective Is Critical to the Success of the Project.

"I think we own a lot of this, and we need to be open-minded, and we need to be able to promote [research evidence] from the top down. If I'm embracing this research as the director and our managers are embracing it, then that provides, hopefully, what would be the example and the guidance for our field folks to utilize this information in an effective way."—Government Systems SAA Practitioner/Senior Administrator

Practitioners' active involvement is critical to a successful project. The level of involvement can vary tremendously based on the focus or needs of the project, the availability of the practitioner(s) and researcher(s), the availability of financial resources, and the time allotted to complete the project—to name just a few factors. Both practitioners and researchers agreed that practitioners' active involvement ensures that:

1. The research questions being asked are those whose answers will help develop new and advance existing practices, services, or policies;
2. Obstacles are anticipated and, to the extent possible, solutions are achieved;
3. The project is manageable within the context of the practitioner's responsibilities and workload;
4. Findings are interpreted through the lenses of those who best understand client's day-to-day experiences.

Active involvement that practitioners have throughout the research process spans the spectrum from both parties working together to make all decisions and jointly take on responsibilities and perform tasks to both parties agreeing to divide decisions to be made, responsibilities, and tasks. Depending on the type of collaboration that is desired or possible, the practitioner and researcher may work together to generate the idea for the study, develop its specific aims or goals, develop the survey questions, and create the study protocol, or the practitioner may be involved by contributing to the revision of ideas and information already developed by the researcher. Practitioners also may be involved in additional tasks such as administering questionnaires, collecting data, writing reports or manuals, or developing content for trainings, manuals, Web-based information, and toolkits. Regardless of where on the spectrum collaboration falls, the level of involvement that the practitioner and researcher will have should be discussed and mutually agreed upon.

3. Work with Researchers Who Are Willing to "Walk in the Shoes" of Your Staff and Clients.

When choosing a researcher to collaborate with, consider ones who are willing to learn about the everyday workings of the organization, the roles and responsibilities of staff, and the lives of the clients who are served. A researcher's willingness to develop a full understanding of the goals, procedures, practices, and policies related to your organization and the CJ system being investigated can demonstrate respect for the work being done and communicate that the person doesn't consider him- or herself the expert on the topic. This characteristic was highly valued by practitioners who participated in the RPPS and was characteristic of all collaborations defined as successful.

There also is value in partnering with a researcher who has been a direct service provider and/or who understands the complexity of navigating through specific types of administrative systems and related-client issues (e.g., confidentiality, safety, mental health concerns). It may be useful to partner with a researcher who is knowledgeable about the population served by your organization, but this is not critical and is not always possible. It may be useful (but again not critical) to partner with a researcher who has collaborated with practitioners in the past. If this person previously has partnered, consider asking him/her,

- *Describe what the collaboration(s) looked like.*
- *What were some outcomes of the collaboration(s)?*
- *What was one of the greatest challenges?*
    - *and (how) was it overcome?*
- *Can you share an example of a time when there were differences in opinions or ideas about how to move forward?*
    - *and how those differences were resolved?*

Additional criteria to evaluate potential research collaborators include someone who:

- *Communicates effectively using terminology understood by all parties.*
- *Is able to hear feedback without getting defensive.*
- *Values back-and-forth dialogue.*
- *Demonstrates mutual respect.*
- *Is patient.*
- *Is able to see things from different perspectives.*
- *Is not intimidating or pompous.*

4. Plan for the Resources Needed to Collaborate.

Practitioners and researchers alike strongly recommended that a plan be developed at the outset of the collaboration for the resources needed to carry out the project. Examples of resources include staff time and the associated costs (which were typically underestimated by researchers and practitioners), graduate student and/or volunteer time, computers and other equipment, space/rent, compensation of study participants or organization staff, and general funding for the project.

It is not an absolute requirement to obtain funds to compensate the researcher, given that some can work "in-kind." There are many researchers whose institutions will require the researchers' time to be "covered" or compensated. More important than considering the funding is to partner with a researcher who you can envision creating a relationship with—who is invested in the needs of the clients served by your organization. If this researcher is one whose time must be compensated, he or she may have the ability to secure funding for the project through the submission of grants to government agencies or private foundations or internally from his or her institution (see Block et al., 1999, for futher reading).

5. Establish a Formal Agreement That Documents Roles of Each Party and Expected Outcomes of the Research.

Be clear at the outset about (a) the roles of the organization (i.e., practitioners) and the researcher(s), and (b) expected outcomes of the research. Practitioners in the RPPS underscored how important it is to document this information in a formal agreement such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU). From the inception of the collaboration throughout the project to its completion, clear communication about how tasks will be shared and who is responsible for which tasks, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and write-up, substantially reduces the challenges experienced by either party. It also may be useful to establish and agree on guidelines to ensure client confidentiality and safety, including access to information (this was noted as a significant barrier in development of an effective collaboration between practitioners and researchers). Be sure to discuss (a) how to proceed with unexpected findings (particularly those that will not reflect favorably on the organization, staff, or clients), (b) what products will be developed based on the findings, and (c) the dissemination of those products so that they can have the impact desired by all involved in and effected by the collaboration.

6. Identify a Research Point Person or Develop an Internal Research Committee.

If possible, identify a research point person or develop an internal research committee at the organization whose role it is to review proposals for research projects and/or be responsible for oversight of the research. A committee, rather than an individual person, may be most feasible at and useful for larger organizations that receive multiple requests. This person or committee can ensure that the organization and researchers are entering into a mutually beneficial relationship. The person or committee may decide to create a process for screening research projects and the researchers who propose them, essentially to support projects that are consistent with the mission and priorities of the organization and identify researchers who are respectful of the organization's needs and willing to gain perspective on the organization's staff and clients. Ideally, a research committee could meet throughout the process of a collaboration to determine if progress is being made, needs of the organization are being met and to brainstorm solutions for problems that arise.

7. Be Informed. Ask for a Research 101 Training.

One Government-System SAA administrator explained his approach to empowering his staff in the research process:

"I wanted to do some seminars on research ethics, not only for my department but for the entire organization, specifically the people who were involved in our research review committee. So we [the practitioner and researcher] set up a half-day [training] on research ethics and how to look at research proposals, confidentiality, human subjects, and stuff like that. I think [the training] has been our biggest success because it has provided us [the practitioner agency] with a lot of flexibility, and I think it is the example of the true researcher-practitioner collaboration because it's an entire department of a state organization and an entire department at a university. And it's been nice because we got to know [the researchers] outside of work and it's been a really good relationship-building piece. And, we've been able to utilize them in so many different ways because of this agreement; it's open ended."

Staff who are trained in the basic concepts and workings of the research process are better able to understand the limitations of conducting research and rationale for decisions made. Therefore, they can be even more active in the process. Training can be done by an experienced practitioner or a researcher (ideally the one in the collaboration) or done jointly and may include the entire spectrum of organization staff, from higher-level administrators, mid-level managers and supervisors, to direct service staff. Training can focus on the basics of conducting a research study; developing questions that are pertinent to the organization and client needs; analyzing data with basic statistics or quantitative techniques; accessing/collecting and managing data; and interpreting, writing up, and disseminating findings. Training can foster an environment where everyone's contributions are valued and all parties are invested in and accountable for the research conducted and its subsequent outcomes. Seasoned practitioners who participated in RPPS emphasized the importance of training staff in the basics of research methods.

Conclusion

The RPPS documents lessons learned from successful researcher-practitioner collaborations within the criminal justice system. Practitioners with various levels of expertise and experience underscored that through commitment and shared goals, research collaborations can produce evidence that enhances practice and service, informs policy, and ultimately benefits the community, and (potential) victims in particular, in many ways. We hope that these recommendations for collaborating communicate that, as practitioners, you and your organization have vital resources to bring to the collaboration. In doing so, your collaborations will ultimately provide invaluable information to improve your organizations ability/capacity to better serve your clients' needs.

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