

What's it like working with researchers?

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So someone from a university approaches you about doing research. What might you think, and what could you do. This section of the web site provides our suggestions and thoughts. We know that this advice cannot be "one size fits all," for the types of relationships established will vary across different types of research and the particular needs of the researcher. In effect, our suggestions may fit in certain circumstances, and not in others. We try, however, to focus on the key process and relationship issues to address as part of developing your collaboration.

Developing relationships. We believe that effective engaged research comes from understanding what the partners goals and major needs are. Expect researchers to be willing to spend time **developing understanding and trust**, for those are needed to bridge gaps across differences in size, scale, needs, and available resources. Based on our experiences, trust can be built through developing a common understanding of community and researcher needs, and recognizing what different partners have already done and are doing to address them and where convergence of interests and opportunities lies. Trust can also be built upon professional and personal relationships between partners, based upon common interests in identifying and implementing approaches to improve conditions and outcomes for residents, organizations, and institutions. Engage in activities that contribute to developing a sense of community and trust. Take time in meetings and discussions to share your perspectives, establish common interests and goals, and acknowledge contributions of various partners to the work – while recognizing and publicly acknowledging that meetings need to move to action. If necessary, meet informally to share concerns and interests specific to subgroups. Invite researchers to attend meetings in the community. Researchers can meet others, and others from the community can see the researchers there, which can improve how the researchers are perceived and thus community partners' willingness to work with them.

Compatibility of goals. It is important initially to ensure that both the partners and the researchers have common or at least compatible/complementary goals and interests tied to the proposed research. If there are not shared goals, then the partnership is likely not a good one, for it seems unlikely to be sustained over time even if it is successful.

Specificity of the research design. Ask researchers if they are set on their research plan, or if it is open to changing. In some instances researchers aren't sure about the exact project they want to do or the direction the work needs to go or how it should be implemented in your setting. They have broad goals and may be interested in partnership building and developing relationships to establish a longer term research program. The other instances, however, because of circumstances like previous agreements or funder limitations, the researcher may already be committed to a particular approach or restricted to particular activities. The latter cases are clearer to respond to, for in those instances the research would need to conform to what you find valuable, where valuable could include instances where you are willing to cooperate because you see other opportunities that you would like to pursue with the researcher in the future. If the latter, you should present your interests immediately, even if they are not fully formed, for that sets expectations about the future.

Coordination with other research projects. At large universities, believe it or not, many researchers could come to you with no idea about what their colleagues already are doing with you. Don't be

surprised, for universities are often very disconnected places, with lots of people doing their own independent work. It is difficult to coordinate research at large universities, for people from all across the university seek community partners and projects, and do so for different reasons and with different purposes. In many instances, contacts are made and projects initiated by individuals within units without the administrative leaders in those units even knowing about them (e.g., church-initiated projects with a parishioner/member, or ones initiated by community partners contacting a faculty “expert” whom they think might be able to help them).

Organizing meeting time. Our experiences may be idiosyncratic to our particular projects (although they have been largely consistent across projects), but we have found that it is critically important to organize meetings so they use time productively. We have suggestions about approaches/experiences that were helpful for us in developing and sustaining partnerships (See Maruyama & Ryan, 2014):

- Have a clear agenda and share it with everyone involved before the meeting.
- Engage in specific discussions within the broader topics of interest to the people involved in order to narrow down interests and create a focus for the shared work.
- Discuss existing community efforts that are similar in any way to the research being developed/proposed, and try to coordinate with or complement those efforts.
- Determine common goals among the broader set of specific and shared organizational interests (recognizing that in some instances there may be fundamental differences in values and approaches that make identification of common goals very difficult).
- Before starting research, reach agreement about objectives, outcomes, shared efforts, and individual (organizational) contributions from each partner/organization.
- Be sure that everyone understands the evaluation part of the project, establishing process and outcome criteria early on, so appropriate collection of measures and documentation of what is happening in the program can take place throughout the entire project.
- Talk about sustainability issues before the first project starts so those issues are clear (Is additional funding needed?, what will responsibilities of the different partners for the long term?, etc.)
- Develop and maintain communication and opportunities for follow-up and review throughout the duration of project activity.
- Promptly address any issues and misunderstandings that may occur.
- Ensure that there are at least some outcomes that will be attained as the project is nearing completion (or even ongoing) and that can be shared as success stories.
- Share information about outcomes broadly throughout the community.
- Be sure that researchers have been informed about any upcoming changing conditions that might alter your activities or activities of those participating in research or other partnership activities.

- Recognize that in diverse groups all individuals are not likely to view things in common ways.
- Maintain an atmosphere of equality and inclusiveness.
- Make sure that everyone follows through on commitments, for partnerships are judged by their actions more than their words.

Building commitment to the work. The projects you agree on need to be viewed not as your work or as university work, but as partnership work. Dividing up work is not easy, particularly in instances where grants provide resources to support research projects (what Kania and Kramer (2011) call backbone or infrastructure). In those instances you may be happy to have the researchers do much of the work, but then when the grant ends, no capacity exists for continuing the work. In most instances, partnership work needs individuals to resist accepting control of and responsibility for the projects so that partnerships remain more egalitarian and projects are shaped collectively.

Pathways to engagement. The processes that unfold are unlikely to be linear, and are not for people who like predictability. Groups start working in a particular direction, then pause and reconsider, sometimes even pulling back and rethinking their direction. Eventually, they move forward again, although often in a somewhat different direction. Until each group reaches a point where sufficient trust is established, it is difficult to move very far in any direction. Neither university nor community partners are likely to engage fully until they trust that their participation will help them fulfill their reasons for being part of the partnership.

Adding new partners. Until there is agreement about direction and purpose, adding partners may slow down the work insofar as revisiting of processes and decisions is needed. Once there is agreement, bringing on additional partners is much simpler, for different partners then are able to articulate the project in consistent ways.

Confirming understandings. Developing and sharing written summaries of the decisions made and their justifications is important for increasing shared understandings of what agreements have been made and why decisions were made the way they were. That task often is taken on by the researchers, which makes it more difficult to cede direction and control to the partnerships that researchers are trying to develop.

Dynamics of power in relationships with communities. Universities are massive in comparison to most non-government partners in community partnerships. It wouldn't be unusual for you to expect that because university budgets are large, university people have access to substantial resources. The image of research universities and their researchers as powerful and with many resources is important to acknowledge, but, probably surprisingly, researchers often don't feel like they benefit from their institution's power, reputations, size, and status. They more likely believe they have expertise and interests, but often don't feel particularly powerful or that they have access to the sorts of resources that others might expect. Students who work as research assistants or as part of a service learning class certainly don't feel a sense of power from being "from the university." University people are often unaware of how they are perceived from being from the university, so relationships require balancing between the positions the researchers hold and the institutions they implicitly represent. For example, University researchers may be perceived enviously by partners who are paid hourly and may not receive compensation for attending meetings. Even students can be perceived enviously, for they are privileged to attend college – particularly if it is a highly selective one to which many other

students sought admission but were not accepted or if it is expensive to attend. Perceived differences in power and resources can create complex power dynamics between communities and universities throughout the engagement process – even ignoring dynamics tied to preexisting relationships within communities, within universities, and between communities and universities.

Take time to explicitly discuss the perceptions that exist among community and university partners. Major challenges are to build relationships based on accurate perceptions of what different partners have to offer in the particular setting and circumstances, and to ensure that each partner contributes something to the partnership. If you believe that the university has funding available, it might seem that as long as you follow the lead of the university, you eventually will secure some of the funding. This type of thinking can create or perpetuate an unequal power dynamic between partners, and limit candor. As long as partners have an accurate understanding of the resources available, they all should be able to think more concretely about what they need to advocate for and promote as well as what they can contribute and what they need to pursue to attain their goals. Throughout the partnership, community and university partners need to continue to discuss expectations and work to continue to develop and strengthen honest, open relationships.

Communication. Once specific projects begin, partners with lesser specific interest in the work likely reduce their involvement in the partnerships. Keeping those partners – both university and community – engaged can be difficult. Good communication helps keep the work visible, which increases momentum and keeps project efforts moving forward. You know best what is of interest to your constituents, so your help in developing key messages in advance of the work to be shared across the partners is really important. Similarly, shaping reports of successes and accomplishments in ways that reinforce those messages and help increase awareness of what the partnership is doing and why in newsletters and other communications is important. Most community residents and potential community partners don't have a lot of direct contact with universities, so messaging needs to be consistent, straightforward, and focused on accomplishments and who all the partners are.

Establishing timelines for work and a work plan. As partnerships develop, flexibility and openness to diverse perspectives are essential, for this gives partners a sense of inclusion rather than exclusivity. At the same time, however, participants can focus better if they see the specific things they have to do and dates by which they have to do them. They need to know what they are expected to do and when the work needs to be completed. Also, having a timeline and work plan with assignments allows group members to see the resources that have been contributed by different partners. Once decisions are made to move forward, it is beneficial to establish specific **timelines** and **priorities** so that partners can see how they are moving forward into an implementation stage of the work. Establishing timelines sometimes exposes differences between the pace of movement in universities, which is often slow and on different timelines (e.g., semesters), and the pace in community organizations. (The standing joke of the first author's community partners was to ask whether we would be working on "university time" or "real time.") Work with partners at the beginning to define clear and reasonable timelines that adapt to community timelines and schedules as much as possible, and try to stick to them.

Support for ongoing research. When there is funding, if the proposal did not involve partners during its development, a major challenge is to engage community partners to do work designed by the researchers, perhaps without much direct funding. In such a case, it is important to attract funding that will support the work, which is difficult until one knows exactly what resources are needed. If the

work is intended to support efforts of some partners as well as researchers, a new proposal needs to be submitted with a budget and effort from all partners, likely developed collaboratively. Review processes are slow, often taking almost a year from submission (e.g., the U.S. Department of Education Institute on Education Sciences September deadline has July 1 as the earliest starting date). Lags in starting the work creates challenges, for the engagement present during the proposal diminishes over time. If the proposal is not successful, enthusiasm for a second cycle may be substantially less, and partners may need to move ahead with their work. Easiest projects are ones that are immediately “doable,” that already have enough support to conduct (e.g., seed money) without any more support.

In concluding, I list specific points from experience that warrant attention. These points come from a final report on urban partnerships from an earlier FIPSE project (Maruyama, Jones, & Finnegan, 2009), with additional ideas from Maruyama and Ryan (2014) .

1. Trust is key to success, and needs to be earned.
2. Flexibility from all parties in approaching the research is essential, for changes may be necessary and obstacles surmounted.
3. Preexisting relations – be they good or poor, will strongly shape the work. These may be individual or institutional reputations or histories.
4. Virtually all parties, university and community, come to the table with their own goals and agendas, and they will promote those.
5. Expect to learn a lot about yourself through partnerships (e.g., your culture, perspectives, perceptions and expectations, blind spots).
6. Expectations of university and community partners need to be managed. Setting modest and achievable goals is a way to build realistic expectations and seed sustainable partnerships.
7. Expend effort in advance to define what success will be, so you know it when you experience it and can celebrate it.
8. People come with different views about what research is. Spend time ensuring that everyone understands what research is and what the immediate and desired impacts are of the particular project.
9. Researchers need to be ready to provide support and technical assistance to make efforts successful.
10. Communication about what is happening and how it is working is critical to partnership success.
11. Whenever reasonable, set clear expectations for all partners and get partnership agreements in writing.