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Viewpoints & Discussion:

Current Reflections on Collaborative and Engaged Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the key elements of a meaningful research collaboration strategy between community-service organizations and academia. We discuss the challenges in developing an effective partnership, and we highlight current strategies for sustainable research partnerships between academia and community. To address the issue of effective partnership we include a case study to illustrate the connections among community-service organization contexts, by focusing on the research and capacity building infrastructure and specific forms of research education. Although the community-university relationship tends to push the work toward a consultant-driven model, this article emphasizes the need for a guiding framework to foster a more meaningful agenda for collaborative research in future.

Index Terms: sustainable partnership; community-university collaboration; community program; meaningful research; engaged research; capacity building; health leadership

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1. Changing Contexts of Research Education

In 2007, the *Journal of Research Practice* (JRP) published an editorial by Mark A. Earley entitled "Lessons Learned from Students' Research Experiences" (Earley, 2007). In this article, Earley describes the challenges facing research students, covering both pedagogical and systemic challenges. A decade has passed and it might be timely for JRP readers to reflect on the changing contexts of research education. In this article, we examine certain key issues of research education and comment on the trend of partnerships between community-service organizations and universities in the development of researchers (Cacari-Stone, Wallerstein, Garcia, & Minkler, 2014; Dash, 2015; Ulrich & Dash, 2013).

We present a case study on how the Research and Capacity Building infrastructure of the Vancouver Island Health Authority (Island Health) in British Columbia, Canada facilitated a form of research education by connecting a community-health care provider and a graduate student. Additionally, we discuss the implementation of a management framework introduced by the Canadian College of Health Leaders (Dickson, 2010), which provides useful guidance for effective and meaningful research collaboration. This framework emphasizes on the key knowledge and skills required to lead at all levels of an organization. It aligns the competency frameworks and leadership strategies in Canada's health sector (Dickson & Tholl, 2011).

We focus on increasing research capacity by strengthening collaborative activities. The partnership between academia and community organizations can generate greater understanding of health problems in a local context, meaningful research activities, and novel research methodology, leading to more effective policy development (Cargo & Mercer, 2008).

While there are several studies on the benefits and challenges of community-based research, engaged research, and researcher development (Baiardi, Brush, & Lapides, 2010; Dash, 2015), few studies examine research capacity development through community-academic partnerships. This article is intended to encourage readers of JRP to reflect on opportunities for sustainable partnership between community-service organizations and academia.

2. Community-Engaged Research as a Context for Research Education

Earley (2007) identified four key themes from the lessons learned by103 research students, based on their experience of conducting research. The first theme was "cultural," which includes the challenges student researchers faced in new environments,

foreign countries, or working within multiple fields. The second theme was "social," referring to the challenges of developing effective partnerships and support networks with peers, mentors, and advisors. The third theme was "process-oriented," as student researchers felt challenged in "(a) generating useful and meaningful research questions, (b) securing appropriate participants, (c) collecting and analyzing meaningful data, and (d) considering issues of validity and quality as they wrote the final report" (Earley, 2007, p. 3). The final theme was related to students' "identities" whereby student researchers struggle to find their voice.

Community-engaged research provides a context for student researchers to address these challenges in a constructive way, by developing authentic collaboration with research partners and stakeholders. The idea goes back to Freire's (1976) notion of community-based participatory research, which is the process by which individuals bring their prior understandings to develop solutions to common problems, then apply the solutions, and finally, evaluate the outcomes. Freire views this as a process of *authentic help*: "Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality which they seek to transform" (Freire, 1994, p. 54).

In this kind of context, combining expertise of the participants from different backgrounds (i.e., community members, community-service providers, researchers, and other stakeholders) can enable novel ways of connecting ideas (Kontos & Poland, 2009; Nicolini, Powell, Conville, & Martinez-Solano, 2008). Specifically, on-going interaction between researchers and practitioners is identified as critical to knowledge being used in practice. Mitton et al. (2009) identified that engaging key leaders or champions is an important factor for successful knowledge exchange. In the health sector, for example, successful knowledge exchange among multiple stakeholders can foster creative interventions, programs, and curricula that may enhance quality of health care (Fazey et al., 2014).

In the last decade, there is abundant evidence that collaborative and community-engaged research has become the norm in several fields (Bozeman, Fay, & Slade, 2013). According to Dash (2015), the implementation of a collaborative process requires a "sustained institutional collaboration and a supportive policy environment" (p. 144). Nilsson, Rickne, and Bengtsson (2010) discuss the importance of a supportive infrastructure in universities, particularly with respect to increasing researchers' confidence that they have sufficient social capital to partner with industry. The exact collaboration patterns that develop are also shaped by the roles played by universities and community partners in the dissemination of knowledge (Ronchi, 2014, chap. 6).

While involving themselves in community-engaged research or any other form of collaborative research, student researchers would do well to appreciate the intentions driving research collaborations. We distinguish between two different strains of research collaboration: (1) collaborations aimed chiefly at expanding the base of knowledge and enhancing academic researchers' reputation and careers; and (2) collaborations dedicated, at least in part, to producing economic value and wealth for the researchers. We refer to these as *knowledge-focused* and *property-focused* (or product-focused) research

collaborations respectively. There is a growing literature critically examining the impact of academic entrepreneurship (pejoratively referred to as "academic capitalism"; Slaughter & Leslie,1997). The chief arguments in this literature are: (1) industrial involvement has unduly affected university researchers' choice of research topics; and (2) perhaps more importantly, it has led to an exploitation of graduate students, who have become "tokens of exchange between academe and industry" (Slaughter, Campbell, Holleman, & Morgan, 2002, p. 283).

3. Case Study: Capacity Building Through Collaborative Research

Lycia M. Rodrigues, the first author of this article was undertaking her master's program and was interested in program evaluation in a residential care facility. The co-author, Wendy Young, a research facilitator with a community organization connected Lycia with Johanne Hemond, a recreation therapist, also a co-author of this article. Hemond coordinates an innovative creative visual arts program in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. She was interested in research that could describe the outcomes of a community arts program which focused on the participation of older adults with disabilities. So there was a convergence of interests and there was an opportunity to collaborate (Rodrigues, 2016).

The arts program in the long-term care facility offers older adults an opportunity to explore their creativity and potential as artists. A narrative inquiry approach was used with data collected through face-to-face interviews and observations of 10 residents and 3 staff-members involved in the visual arts program. Analysis of the data indicated that the program fostered a sense of community among participants and enhanced their quality of life. The public exhibition of their artwork at a community art gallery validated the merit of their work and gave meaning and purpose to their participation in the program. The study contributes to a broader understanding of the importance of arts programs that foster creativity in later life. This resonates with Tornstam's (2005) argument that older people living in institutions can experience multiple dimensions of the self through individualized forms of expression.

The participants of this research spoke about the creative process of making art as an opportunity to improve socialization and foster feelings of psychological well-being. They were aware that these benefits had the potential to create meaning in their lives and compensate for the loneliness of being in a residential care facility. This matches with the general idea that people in residential care facilities ought to have access to activities that allow them to regain or retain their sense of identity and improve social relationships, and thus, enable them to develop meaningful lives (Grenade & Boldy, 2008).

The results of the narrative inquiry corroborated the broad understanding available in the literature. Thus, there may not be an original contribution to knowledge here, in the traditional academic sense. However, there are several achievements that seem to enrich the local context. These include the pattern of collaboration achieved, the participants' experience of sharing their narratives, the independent feedback generated on the visual arts program, and the increased awareness of the stakeholders concerning the broader discourse on the quality of life of older people living in residential care facilities.

Together, these local achievements may amount to a form of capacity building through collaborative research.

4. Policy Environment for Collaborative Research

The above collaborative research project also offered an opportunity to reflect on the policy environment within which this type of capacity building work may take place. The policy environment around the Canadian health care system appears to emphasize the contribution of knowledge and practice in addressing the contemporary challenges within the system. The concept of *health leadership* has become a focal point for health authorities in Canada.

In this regard, the broad policy direction set by the Canadian College of Health Leaders (CCHL) seems relevant (Canadian College of Health Leaders, 2015). CCHL is a professional body that aims to make competent leadership available to Canada's health system. In 2010, CCHL developed the so-called LEADS management framework to enhance health leadership capacity (Dickson, 2010).

The LEADS framework is defined as: (L) Lead self, (E) Engage others, (A) Achieve results, (D) Develop coalitions, and (S) lead Systems transformation. It is intended to guide the practice of leadership in healthcare. A co-author of this article, Carson McPherson is a board member for the Vancouver Island chapter of the CCHL and, in this capacity, has had the opportunity to work with the Research and Capacity Building team at Island Health to both align the LEADS framework and participate in research opportunities that are uniquely associated.

In 2017, co-authors Carson McPherson and Wendy Young co-presented a series of case studies displaying the value of the LEADS framework aligned with research projects in the domain of integrated knowledge mobilization. Carson McPherson has found meaningful use of this framework to develop further research opportunities and is currently engaged with a team of healthcare leaders from across Canada on a health leadership project specifically aligned with two core domains within the LEADS framework.

The project described in the case study has received both resources and attention form senior staff and directors of CCHL. This indicates the presence of a supportive environment in the Canadian health system for projects aimed at capacity building within the system.

5. Policy Environment for Collaborative Research

It is our opinion that much can be learned from this case study about students' research experiences. We agree with Earley's (2007) conclusion that "research skills learned in graduate school only take a student so far . . ." (p. 4). Experiential learning achieved through collaborating with individuals from different backgrounds is essential to developing research skills and addressing real-world issues.

We would like JRP readers to consider the pre-requisites for the success of such collaborative projects. Sometimes research partners may be unaware of how students can help them move their programs forward. Some partners may have had negative experiences with graduate students. It is difficult to overcome this negativity without sustained partnership with win-win outcomes.

This article is meant to encourage dialog and debate about implications for developing more collaborative and engaged forms of research education. We have created a collaborative situation but what sustainable process can we introduce that will ensure that this approach is replicated across the Vancouver Island Health Authority? Island Health's Research and Capacity Building department is now collecting meaningful topics and identifying enthusiastic community organizations and members that have the skills and interest in collaborating with students. We are hopeful that these activities will lead to meaningful research experiences and sustainable partnerships for students and for their community collaborators.

Acknowledgments

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