

Academics and Nonprofits

Collaborative Partnering for Evidence-Informed Practice

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Abstract

This case study highlights the academic–nonprofit practice partnership between one social work faculty researcher and the executive director of a local domestic violence shelter. Initiated by the academic researcher in 2017, the resultant research project has informed the local domestic violence shelter’s plan of services, supported funding requests for both current and new services, and provided the academic partner with an additional potential statewide research project partner. Research outcomes to date include a detailed report to the shelter board of directors, a statewide research presentation, and a local poster presentation. This case study discusses the process of developing the collaborative partnership and the lessons learned.

Keywords: case study; academic–nonprofit partnership; evidence-informed practice

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There are a multitude of reasons for university/community-agency research collaborations. From the university perspective, researchers must add valuable knowledge to the research base as part of their tenure process and to increase the esteem and prestige of their universities; professors really must publish or perish. From the community agency side, evidence must support their work. Often, grants require data on needs, services, and effectiveness, yet staff at these agencies are often underpaid, overworked, and lack the research skills necessary to complete research activities without the support of a trained researcher. These are all valid reasons for research activities, and the benefits compel action even with the distinct difficulties inherent in such endeavors (Begun, Berger, Otto-Salaj, & Rose, 2010).

For example, while university research teams speak the same language even when multiple disciplines are involved (Dolovich, 2015), managing research–practice collaborations with nonprofits requires principles and strategies beyond that required with a multidisciplinary university research team (Secret, Abell, & Berlin, 2011). Successful university/community-agency research partnerships require attention to the privilege and inequity inherent in these relationships (White, 2010; Williams, 2004) and a long-term commitment by both parties (Chorpita & Mueller, 2008; Davidson & Bowen, 2011). Communication can become a challenge when collaborators are not colocated (Dolovich, 2015; Giffords & Calderon, 2015), and it is more difficult to create a positive team culture (Dolovich, 2015) or build relationships without weekly contact among all team members (Davidson & Bowen, 2011; Giffords & Calderon, 2015). However, overcoming these challenges leads to a successful collaboration. Other keys to effective partnership include developing the strengths and capacities of all involved in the research process (Chorpita & Mueller, 2008; Dolovich, 2015), including participants (Chorpita & Mueller, 2008), and clearly defining roles of all parties (Davidson & Bowen, 2011; Dolovich, 2015). This case study describes the process that one university researcher used to develop an effective collaboration with the director and staff of a local domestic violence (DV) shelter, including the benefits and challenges encountered throughout the project management process.

Research Pilot Project

The research idea explored in this case study arose from an interest in assessing the level of service knowledge for DV service providers that participated in state victim assistance academy training as compared to those that had not participated. Knowledge of victim services and interdisciplinary collaboration skills were included in the state victim assistance academy training curriculum, and the faculty researcher was interested in seeing if participants of an interdisciplinary training were more knowledgeable and skilled than nonparticipants. A graduate research assistant working with the faculty researcher shared a needs assessment study (Vinton & Wilke, 2014) that could potentially be replicated with some alterations to answer these questions. Vinton and Wilke were contacted and graciously shared all of their instrumentation, methodology, and resource articles for project implementation.

The faculty researcher and graduate research assistant decided it best to partner with DV experts in the local region to verify the utility of the research project, to alter the survey instrument appropriately as needed, and to identify potential research participants. Through discussions with their partners, the faculty researcher and graduate

research assistant expanded the study focus to include client and community needs related to DV services, specific needs of children, and other specific questions related to the region and state. As a result, a pilot test was proposed for the local region to precede a statewide roll out.

The resultant research pilot project included two online surveys: one for victims/survivors of DV and one for DV service providers. This mixed methods study gathered quantitative and qualitative data from both groups. Demographic data (i.e., age, years of experience, etc.) and Likert scale data on DV service knowledge were gathered. The study used open-ended questions to gather data on missing services and unmet needs, among other areas. Data analysis included use of parametric and descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic coding of qualitative data from open-ended questions. This summarizes the pilot study referenced throughout the case study, and the next section describes the case study methodology used in this study.

Case Study Methodology

The research question in this study was, how does the project life cycle model inform and facilitate the process of creating a successful academic–nonprofit research partnership? This descriptive case study was bound by time and activity, exploring the process of a university-based faculty researcher engaging a community partner (a non-profit DV agency) to complete the specific mixed methods pilot study described in the Research Pilot Project section. This type of exploratory case study describes an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003).

The project life cycle model served as the conceptual framework in this case study (Note, 2016). Data sources used to inform the case study included documentation of research goals, direct observations of research partners, physical artifacts (including research outputs), and participant observations of the process. Data analysis included the technique of triangulating data from various sources. This strategy ensured the convergence of all data sources and allowed the research team to understand the overall case and the contributing factors that influenced it. Member checking also occurred, with participants being asked to discuss and clarify interpretations and contribute new or additional perspectives on the issue under study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The unit of analysis in this case study was the research team, a convenience sample (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Project Management

This case study describes the use of the project life cycle model as a strategy for efficiently managing the collaborative project and effectively assessing and addressing team needs at each stage. This model includes a series of stages through which a project passes whereby each stage has clearly defined goals and outputs (Note, 2016). The distinct stages include initiating, planning, executing, and closing, and this case study uses these stages as a framework (see Figure 1). The collaborative strategies selected in each stage enhanced the partnership and facilitated the project goals. This section discusses each evidence-informed strategy in terms of effectiveness for the stage of project development.

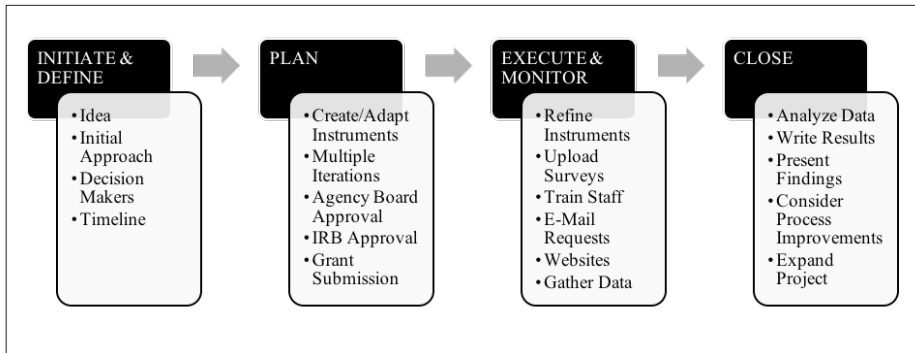


Figure 1. Project management model. Adapted from *Project Management for Information Professionals*, by M. Note, 2016, Waltham, MA: Elsevier/Chandler.

Initiating Stage

The initiating stage includes idea conception, initial partner selection, and identification of decision makers (Note, 2016). In this case, the idea originated from a graduate research assistant who was working with the faculty researcher. While completing a literature review for a different research project, the graduate student came across a study that could be modified slightly to meet the postevaluation needs of a recently completed statewide research project on a statewide victim advocate training academy. They determined that the ideal partner for a pilot study would be the local DV shelter. The faculty researcher had an existing relationship with the executive director (ED) of the local shelter, and the initial meeting with the graduate research assistant, the researcher, and the ED took place. The existing positive relationship between the faculty researcher and the ED undoubtedly assisted the research team in securing the first meeting; however, trust with the agency staff was not present and grew over time. The goals of the first meeting included an explanation of the research idea, provision of the original study to the ED, and identification of agency policy on research. The meeting was a success and all goals were accomplished. The ED was open to the project and excited to approach the board of directors for permission and begin to gather much needed data for agency initiatives and grants, among other things.

Relationship-building considerations. Important considerations at the initiating stage include attending to power differences and establishment of long-term commitment to the project. Project failure may result if these considerations are not addressed. Privilege and inequity due to societal position and knowledge base may result in power differences between community agencies and universities (White, 2010; Williams, 2004). Resulting inequities may lead to one party dominating the partnership by silencing the needs, wants, and views of the other party, and if all parties are not valued and given a voice, the partnership may not survive.

While the research clearly notes these dangers, in this partnership power differences were predominantly noted in the areas of research knowledge, access to participants, and funding. The faculty researcher had the most knowledge of research processes and some access to funding sources, while the agency researchers had easy access to study participants. In fact, the ED at a later point in the process brokered an introduction to the statewide DV coalition research coordinator to discuss a statewide research study

initiative. While that could have happened earlier, the ED shared that the success of the pilot study and the partnership was instrumental in her decision making to share that state-level contact. She carefully shared her power.

In another situation, while the ED clearly articulated the fiscal realities and funding limitations at a public university, others at the agency viewed the academic partner as having unlimited funding. As the researchers shared the proposed project and budget with the agency staff researchers, these beliefs became apparent. From both the agency and university sides, some thought that the purchase of new computers for facilitation of online completion of the client surveys should not be a problem; however, university funding restrictions required refurbished laptops be procured rather than new ones. Computer procurement took longer than expected because the refurbished laptops had no hard drives or operating systems. The faculty researcher's home department agreed to pay for the hard drives and operating systems, but finding someone to install these presented an additional challenge. Overcoming these obstacles to conducting research was a challenge that brought the team together, because extra meetings and communication were required to keep the research moving forward.

Establishment of commitment to the project is important for both parties (Chorpita & Mueller, 2008; Davidson & Bowen, 2011). The faculty researcher and the graduate research assistant were eager to establish the partnership and suggested roles they could realistically fill and roles for the agency staff researchers in the research process. Detailed roles and responsibilities were established as the project developed, but this initial transparent discussion of roles and responsibilities established a transparent communication style and a strong commitment to collaborative decision making as a team norm.

Collaborative strategies. To reduce the power imbalance, the researcher team used specific strategies. White (2010) suggested faculty be transparent about motivations for the research to build trust with community partners. In this case, the faculty researcher sought access to a population previously researched and clearly stated this motivation. In addition to benefits to both parties, costs and potential challenges were discussed. For the community partner, choosing a university partner with enough authority to make important decisions about the project and a willingness to share decision making is also important (White, 2010). In this instance, the faculty researcher served as coinvestigator with the graduate research assistant. This existing relationship demonstrated a willingness to share power on research decisions from the start of the project. Approaching the project with a formal discussion about decision making (as suggested by Secret et al., 2011) led the partners to utilize consensus decision making throughout the project. For example, the ED and shelter staff researchers were equal partners in study design, instrument development, data collection, grant requests for funding, and dissemination of results. Their participation in decision making served to share the power with the agency researchers. Implementation of these strategies used throughout the project minimized power imbalances that could arise in the university-community partnership.

Additionally, at the first meeting, it was important for the research team to establish the possibility of a long-term commitment. To demonstrate that commitment, the graduate student and faculty member shared their vision of a longer term relationship including a statewide survey following the pilot and of the possibility of larger grant

and research projects if this pilot successfully achieved both partners' goals. The partners shared a potential federal grant application at the first meeting of the partnership and were excited about the possibility of working toward this. While a \$1 million federal grant was not within the scope of this project, it became a long-term goal that both partners could be excited about. After successful pilot study completion, the partners decided to run the study with the whole state and then move forward to a larger federal grant project. The partners agreed that if at any time concerns about the research project or the process of working together arose, they would come together to problem solve with the goal of overcoming the challenges. If the challenges were insurmountable, the partnership would be dissolved.

The early establishment of shared commitment to a longer term partnership provided the foundation for future informal assessment of the health of the professional partnership. With distinct goals established, there was a clear pathway for assessing success through reviewing goal achievement. The strategies of transparency, consensus decision making, and establishment of commitment to short- and long-term partnership goals served to prepare both parties for the second stage of the project.

Planning Stage

It is important that potential outcomes of the research project are clarified during the planning phase. This helps researchers to provide goals, manage expectations, and mark progress throughout the project. Establishing roles for each research team member clarifies the activities of each of them (Davidson & Bowen, 2011; Dolovich, 2015).

The planning stage includes activities such as designing the research activities and timeline, obtaining research approvals from the agency board of directors and the educational institutional review board (IRB), and procuring funding for the project (Note, 2016). At the first meeting, the graduate research assistant, the faculty researcher, and the ED developed the initial skeleton research plan and timeline with the understanding that the process for the pilot study would require multiple iterations before finalization. They agreed that after establishing a firm plan, they would present that to the agency board of directors prior to seeking university IRB approval. The research team eventually decided that funding was needed to purchase research equipment, provide incentives for participants, and provide publication of technical reports to the agency board and other interested parties. The graduate research assistant and faculty researcher in collaboration with agency researchers completed an internal grant application and procured funds for the project.

Relationship-building considerations. Planning is a crucial stage in the research process because it affects the project throughout. Misunderstandings, miscommunications, or failure to pay attention to team building can decrease the effectiveness of the research project or even destroy a research partnership. Communication challenges may arise, indicating the importance of paying attention to language and creating a shared understanding.

If there is a substantial distance between the university and the agency, travel time can impede communication (Dolovich, 2015; Giffords & Calderon, 2015). In the absence of nonverbal communications present during in-person meetings, indicators such as tone of voice, turn taking, and slowed response time can impede timely and complete communications over e-mail or during teleconferencing. This can be somewhat alleviated through the use of video conferencing; however, both university and

community partners may have challenges with utilizing these technologies. Obstacles such as bandwidth in rural areas; lack of expertise in the use of various platforms; and low availability of up-to-date computers, webcams, and other technology may be serious challenges. Work schedules and travel time can also make it more difficult to create a positive research team culture (Dolovich, 2015) and build strong relationships (Davidson & Bowen, 2011; Giffords & Calderon, 2015). Much team building takes place before and after formal meetings. If all parties feel rushed to start and finish a meeting, there is little time for informal discussion and getting to know each team member.

Collaborative strategies. Several collaborative strategies can increase the likelihood of overcoming these barriers for creating a successful partnership. Respecting the knowledge and experience of all parties is one strategy. Nonprofit partners typically have expertise with agency acronyms and practice lingo while potentially struggling with research lingo. Agency acronyms may be unknown to university faculty researchers because these vary by region (Dolovich, 2015; Secret et al., 2011). In this case, the research team utilized a glossary of terms developed by the shelter staff researchers to increase clear communication. Additionally, agency researchers were encouraged to ask questions about research terminology they did not understand. For example, *IRB* (*institutional review board*) was a new term for most of the center staff but well known to the researchers, while TIPO (temporary interpersonal protective order) legislation was only recently enacted, and one of the researchers was not aware of this acronym.

Confusing lingo served as an equalizing force reducing the power differences between the university and community partners, because the university researchers were often asking for help in this aspect of the project (White, 2010). Agency partners reporting being intimidated by the research terminology at the beginning; however, by the end of the planning phase, increasing confidence levels were reported. Researchers also learned throughout the process. Learning from the agency is an important sign of respect and ensures that agency research needs are not forsaken in the quest for a completed research project (Davidson & Bowen, 2011). It would be unfortunate indeed if the research outcomes were not useful to the agency.

Taking the time to educate the community partner research team members on research terms and strategies increased the research capacity of the shelter team and is one key to effective partnership employed in this project (Chorpita & Mueller, 2008; Dolovich, 2015). Other keys were involving participants in the research process (Chorpita & Mueller, 2008) and clearly defining the roles of all parties (Davidson & Bowen, 2011; Dolovich, 2015). Participant involvement in the process was accomplished through participant feedback on the development of research instruments as well as after a trial run. Their feedback was important in this project and served to improve the instrumentation. As the research plan developed, roles for all research team members were clearly defined and measurable outcomes were established. These strategies effectively prepared the team for the executing stage of the project.

Executing Stage

The executing stage includes tasks such as creating instruments, training the research team in research protocols, administering the experimental condition, and data gathering and storage (Note, 2016). In this case, the research team collaboratively developed the study instruments and research protocols with the agency researchers,

while the community agency research team members administered the survey in accordance with the IRB-approved protocol. The data gathering and maintenance was handled by the graduate research assistant and faculty researcher. Some challenges were encountered during the research process, and these are described in the next section.

Relationship-building considerations. Few research projects have a perfect executing stage. A good rule of thumb for conducting research is everything takes longer than expected and new lessons are learned during each research project. This project team encountered timeline adjustments and participant recruitment difficulties, which pushed back project due dates on a few occasions. During this stage, it was important for the team to continue relationship building by attending to team culture and energy levels (Giffords & Calderon, 2015).

Collaborative strategies. Through holding regular in-person meetings and e-mail communication, the team was able to problem solve and support each other effectively in overcoming barriers by using clear, timely, and consistent communication (Dolovich, 2015). Maintaining a positive team culture (Dolovich, 2015) was critical during this stage because of the aforementioned challenges. The graduate research assistant and the community partner team members indicated experiencing a loss of momentum and frustration at this point in the project. To address this frustration, the team decided to change the timeline for presenting results. With the goal of reenergizing the team, preliminary data analysis was undertaken. The results were used in the creation of a statewide presentation on the project prior to the completion of the study. This was well received, and the agency researchers took great pride in the presentation and the positive reception of the research throughout the state. It led to an offer of a possible research collaboration from the DV state coalition. The presentation and resulting offer of collaboration were recognized with congratulatory e-mails to agency staff and board members. Communicating success increased morale and reenergized the team. Throughout the project, check-in meetings and e-mails describing progress, next steps, and outcomes bolstered the mood of the team.

Closing Stage

The closing stage is the final stage of the project management process (Note, 2016). This stage includes activities such as analyzing data, writing results, presenting findings, considering process improvements, and expanding the project.

Outcomes of this project included a technical research report provided to the non-profit board, a statewide presentation, a regional poster presentation, and a potential future statewide research project for the graduate research assistant, faculty researcher, and ED. In addition, the findings informed the local DV shelter's plan of services, supported funding requests for current and new services, and provided the shelter staff with evidence to inform their practice with victims of DV. The ED was proud of the research and enjoyed presenting the findings on multiple occasions throughout the dissemination period to showcase the agency's commitment to evidence-based practice.

Relationship-building considerations. Due to the nature of this research project, the majority of the closing stage duties were assigned to the faculty researcher; however, interpretation of results and feedback on the closing stage products were completed jointly with the community partner research team members. This allowed for equalizing the power differences inherent in the relationships (White, 2010). Shelter researchers' knowledge was invaluable to the research team in terms of interpreting curious

findings and articulating context to some of the qualitative data gathered during the research project. Without their assistance, important background might have been lost or gone unrecognized. For example, when surveyed, several survivor respondents suggested the need for a shelter for male DV victims (a finding not echoed by service provider respondents); this was brought to the attention of the ED and shelter staff. They discussed a rule that males over 18 who are living at home with an abuse victim are not allowed into the shelter. This rule causes difficulty for DV victims because they must seek alternative housing. While the DV shelter assists with this (a fact well known by service providers), it is a recognized problem, and sometimes survivors will not seek shelter because of this rule. Only staff well versed in shelter policy would be able to explain this discrepancy in findings.

Collaborative strategies. Discussions regarding outcomes occurred early and often throughout the project, and agency researchers held final authorization rights for all research outputs. Nothing was shared or published without prior approval from the ED, and all work products were collaboratively developed in terms of preparation and dissemination. This strategy of shared leadership and decision making allowed the agency to control the findings and trust that the results would be helpful for the shelter (Secret et al., 2011). The ED reported that shared decision making built staff trust in the university researchers, increasing transparency and understanding of the research process. At this stage, the ED reported the agency staff had voiced mistrust in researchers due to past research partnerships. They were unsure of how this process would go, and they have been pleasantly surprised by the results of this collaborative research process.

Another strategy related to the closing stage was sharing authorship with the ED on all outputs. Giving credit where credit is due is an important ethical consideration for university researchers, and with the high level of collaboration on this project, it was imperative that the contributions of the ED and the graduate research assistant were recognized. The ED presented preliminary research results with the university faculty researcher and a graduate research assistant at a statewide conference. This added credibility to the study for the university faculty researcher and reinforced the shelter staff's commitment to a high level of evidence-informed practice. It is important to note that all research products featured the shelter and university logos displayed prominently side by side, adding visual confirmation of the shared efforts of the research team.

Discussion

The case study method is useful for reviewing the effectiveness of research team functioning with a depth that captures the complexity of the partnership through rich narrative. This case study was presented and information organized through the project management theory (Note, 2016). Each stage of the project had unique considerations requiring specific evidence-informed collaborative strategies. Use of a highly organized project management system increases rigor, especially in collaborations with nonprofit agencies that are unaccustomed to research or in research involving new researchers (Aycock, 2017). In this case, partners were inexperienced nonresearchers. Using specific strategies (e.g., shared leadership, regular communication), the research team effectively overcame the challenges, ultimately producing several high-quality research products from a single study.

Sharing lessons learned ensures the application of best practices in future projects and literally “amplifies the impact” of the project’s influence over time as teams replicate successful innovations and avoid past mistakes (Tree, 2017, pp. 47–48). According to Begun et al. (2010), creating a regular exchange of ideas disseminated via organized networks of knowledge is best practice for the facilitation of ongoing benefits gained through partnership. It is important that the informal organizational systems of agency collaboration be formalized to position individuals in the most effective function for their skills and knowledge. This can only be accomplished through the realization of accurate attributions of success.

In this case study, success meant that all short-term project goals (e.g., developing the research plan, obtaining grant funding, creating research instruments, and disseminating results) were realized, culminating in the completion of the long-term goal: the pilot project. Collaborative goals including building trust, establishing and maintaining communication, problem-solving challenges, and celebrating success were accomplished.

Limitations

One limitation of this case study was the observational and subjective nature of data collection. The authors reported findings based on documentation of accomplishment of research goals, physical artifacts (research reports, e-mails, etc.), direct observation of participants, and participant observations. Second, case studies by their very nature are limited in scope to one specific case, meaning that the results lack generalizability. Third, the project management model utilized as the organizing framework was adapted for use in research rather than business as originally intended; however, it is an effective framework for systematic exploration of collaborative partnership processes. Last, the best practices were selected based upon their applicability to the model, and no specific measures of effectiveness were completed. Despite these limitations, the study provides important information for academic partners involved in nonprofit partnerships or those wishing to begin one.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study considers the context of academic and nonprofit organizations working in the academic area of social work and the nonprofit area of DV services; however, this process can apply to any discipline or nonprofit. Future research exploring collaborative processes, strategies, and challenges in other contexts would lead to more data that could be utilized for comparative analysis. It is important to effectively measure levels of team cohesiveness, team functioning, and/or trust level, as well as the contribution of each member to the entire collaborative project. Measures such as these would increase the rigor of future research undertakings and provide concrete and quantifiable information about the success of the partnership.

Conclusion

Approaching nonprofit agencies for research may initially feel daunting; however, the right mind-set coupled with the appropriate collaborative strategies leads to success. This case study provides anecdotal evidence that suggests the collaborative project management model is a promising framework for exploring the use of evidence-based practical skills, knowledge, and strategies in real life. Techniques such as power sharing and respectful, clear communication encouraged long-term commitment to the

research partnership. For many researchers, these strategies are second nature. For academics who do not operate within these frameworks, this case study offers an effective approach. Over time, lasting collaborative relationships that provide substantial opportunities for mutually beneficial research evidence development can be developed and sustained. As this case study demonstrates, the outcomes are worth the effort.

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