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HIGHLIGHTS AND LOWLIGHTS OF RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER COLLABORATIONS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM



Findings from the Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships Study (RPPS)

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Summary

Research has the greatest potential to effect 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). However, very little information has been shared by researchers and practitioners who have collaborated successfully so that future collaborations could benefit from their lessons learned.

Toward the aim of learning through the lessons and experiences of others, researchers and practitioners from the United States and Canada were asked to share their personal “highlights” and “lowlights” of collaborating. The information shared can be useful to researchers and practitioners new to collaborating as well as those who have substantial experience collaborating. The purpose of this brief is to communicate those high- and lowlights so that they can inform the development of future research collaborations and contribute to their likelihood of their success.

HIGHLIGHTS

A strong relationship between the researcher and practitioner was key.

The researcher was knowledgeable about the system and “walked in the shoes” of the practitioner.

Practitioners learned the basics of conducting research.

The project was developed and carried out in a truly collaborative manner.

Administrators were invested and helped move the project forward.

Findings had direct relevance to services and policies for practitioners and clients.

LOWLIGHTS

Collaborations took longer than projects done by a researcher alone—and longer than practitioners imagined.

Bad past experiences or misunderstandings about researchers and the research process contributed to a distrust of researchers by practitioners.

High staff turnover contributed to difficulties in keeping staff invested and completing projects.

RPPS STUDY OVERVIEW

Goal: To improve understanding of successful researcher-practitioner collaborations¹ 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. Individual interviews and focus groups 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.

Participants 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.

Data analysis. 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. A Web-based survey 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.

Participants 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) directors².

Data analysis. Data were analyzed to present simple descriptive statistics such as an average or the percentage of participants who endorsed a response.

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.

HIGHLIGHTS

Highlight 1. A strong relationship between the researcher and practitioner was key.

According to RPPS participants, researchers and practitioners who developed trust and shared specific interests had positive experiences collaborating—regardless of their studies' results. Relationships with commitment, trust, and investment from both parties led to strong, productive relationships. For example, a Government-System SAA practitioner described how his collaborative partnership with an academic researcher has lasted over 10 years as a result of the trust and open communication on behalf of both partners.

Highlight 2. The researcher was knowledgeable about the system and “walked in the shoes” of the practitioner.

Practitioners explained that their researcher counterparts who learned the context and daily responsibilities of the practitioners' world had a better understanding of the CJ system and, therefore, were more realistic about the type of research project that could be conducted. Researchers spent time shadowing various practitioners and training from practitioners' perspectives, through direct observation of practitioners' daily work, attending board and staff meetings, and sitting in on case conferences. Doing so gave researchers a better understanding of how the CJ system functions, the clients served by the system, and the day-to-day responsibilities of practitioners. Therefore, a more meaningful study was ultimately designed that is manageable within the context of the practitioners' responsibilities and workload.

“I spent an entire summer driving around to every legal aid office in the state and sitting in on their case staffing just to learn how do they make those decisions? How do cases move through the system? [I] spent lots and lots of hours learning their [data] system—their database system for what kind of data they have, and how does that work? And how could things be extracted from that system? [I] spent a lot of time talking with their intake staff on how cases come in from the very beginning—how are they screening at that point? Really trying to kind of understand all of the data.” —Academic Researcher

Further, understanding the workings of the practitioners' organization gave researchers more opportunities to consider the development of more practical products.

Highlight 3. Practitioners learned the basics of conducting research.

Collaborations also benefited when practitioners saw the project from the perspective of researchers and when they learned about the research process itself. Staff who understand the basic concepts and workings of the research process are better able to understand the limitations of conducting research and rationales for decisions made. Therefore, they can be even more actively involved 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.

“I spent an entire summer driving around to every legal aid office in the state and sitting in on their case staffing just to learn how do they make those decisions, how do cases move through the system.” —Academic Researcher

An SAA practitioner explains his desire for his staff and himself to be trained:

“Instead of having graduate students do the data collection, have my staff help you with the data collection. Have my staff help you, learn how to clean the data, learn how you code things, learn how you conduct certain analysis, so that we leave with some tools.” – Government-System SAA Practitioner

Highlight 4. The project was developed and carried out in a truly collaborative manner.

“Everybody being equal. Equal players in the process” is a Government System SAA practitioner’s notable highlight. Successful researcher-practitioner partnerships were truly collaborative when the same goal or vision was shared, expectations were jointly determined and rooted in the skills of the partners, and open communication was maintained. Mutual investment was demonstrated because the project was a product of the collaborators’ interests and passion.

Importantly, collaborations were successful because most aspects of the project were discussed and decisions were made mutually. Researchers and practitioners shared their ideas with each other, from initial research questions, to study design and implementation, and to analysis, write up, and dissemination.

“I think it’s really being intentional about recognizing the talents and the knowledge of people,” said one Government-System SAA practitioner about how to begin creating a collaborative effort.

Highlight 5. Administrators were invested and helped move the project forward.

Successful researcher-practitioner partnerships received and benefited from the support of higher-level administrators. For example, administrators

supported collaboration through advocating for it and highlighting its importance to other administrators and policy makers:

“So that becomes our job as administrators—to frankly sell the importance of these efforts to the legislature, to the chief court administrator, that these are key—that this is key for us to maintain the quality of our work.” – Government Systems SAA Practitioner/Administrator

The investment of administrators often ensured an additional critical perspective to the development and implementation of the research project, advocacy for project funds, effective dissemination of products, prevention of time-consuming obstacles, and opportunities for the creation of future collaborations. Additional benefits to having administrators who were invested in the collaboration were: (a) turnover of front-line supervisors and staff had less of an impact on the research that it might have otherwise, and (b) challenges with “red tape” were reduced.

Highlight 6. Findings had direct relevance to services and policies for practitioners and clients.

Successful collaborations were often characterized by products that evoked change—and evoking change by using research findings was a notable highlight for both researchers and practitioners. “Change” in some collaborations meant that policies at the state level were created or revised, in others it meant that the practices of the service organization were improved, and in others it meant that lives of the clients served were directly affected. One practitioner working in victim services discussed the impact of her collaborative project findings:

“Highlights is being able to say that part of the knowledge you produced had an impact, it had an impact on the daily lives of [victim] advocates, it had an impact on the Coalition to begin to advocate for different kinds of resources and to understand some of the ... important advocates’ needs.” –Researcher and Director of an Academic Research Center

LOWLIGHTS

Lowlight 1. Collaborations took longer than projects done by a researcher alone—and longer than practitioners imagined.

Time is not on the side of collaborations. Collaborating to accomplish almost anything takes longer than doing it alone—and research is no exception. The time it took to plan and carry out a project was almost always underestimated, even by researchers and practitioners with research experience. Certainly for those new to researcher-practitioner partnerships, the amount of time it took to start and then complete the project was a surprise. Practitioners new to research collaborations often discussed their frustration with the (unexpected) length of time of the research process. One time-related struggle noted by researchers was the relatively longer time it took (compared with projects not done in collaboration with a practitioner organization) to obtain approval to conduct the study through their institution review board (IRB).

“It took a long time to get it through our IRB and kind of making changes ... ‘When we were going through it ... it was just like it will never end.’ But, they made some great suggestions.” — Academic Researcher and Co-Director of a Research and Practice Center

Although the lengthy IRB process resulted in great suggestions to improve the project, it extended the timeline.

Successful researcher-practitioner relationships benefited from both researcher and practitioner learning each other’s daily responsibilities in order to create a more realistic timeline for the project. As long as the “extra” time was considered in the development of the project timeline, the benefit of collaboration far exceeded this drawback.

“I had a very negative first impression of researchers; my sense was they don’t listen to you, they are arrogant, and any time they disagree with you they chalked it up to [your] ignorance as the practitioners.”
—Practitioner/Attorney and University Faculty

Lowlight 2. Bad past experiences or misunderstandings about researchers and the research process contributed to a distrust of researchers by practitioners.

Another challenge for successful researcher-practitioner partnerships was (some) practitioners’ initial distrust of researchers.

A practitioner discussed her dismay and her experience with self-serving researchers in the past:

“And so it wasn’t a reciprocal relationship. It was more that they were, you know, taking the information we could provide probably during their dissertation or whatever paper they had to write, and then not really giving us much in return.”
— Practitioner/Organization Administrator

It is understandable that some practitioners distrust researchers in general because of bad past experiences or misunderstandings about researchers and the research process. Taking the time to develop a relationship with a researcher can help practitioners learn if the researcher is like the many who have tremendous respect for practitioners and the work they do, and knowledge about the very real constraints of conducting research in the practitioner’s system—or like those researchers who have contributed to the bad reputation.

Those collaborations that were most successful were ones that succeeded in mutually benefiting the practitioner/organization and the researcher. Stated succinctly by a practitioner, *“We’ve developed this mutual—mutually beneficial relationship that allows us to change the whole shape of corrections of females.”*

Lowlight 3. High staff turnover contributed to difficulties in keeping staff invested and completing projects.

Changes in practitioners/staff negatively impacted the stability and timeline of collaborative projects. Practitioners and researchers explained that an obstacle in developing trusting relationships in their collaborations was due to the high staff turnover. In the event of staff turnover, the remaining members of the researcher-practitioner partnership were required to develop new relationships, which included explaining the details of the project and reestablishing investment. For instance, one researcher explained her frustration with staff turnover:

“There was so much turnover at every level ... during the time that we were doing this project, that a recurring role of mine was selling the project to somebody else.” – Academic Researcher

The findings indicate that a large amount of time was used for reestablishing investment and developing new relationships instead of moving forward with the project. The negative consequences were mitigated when higher-level administrators were invested and therefore willing to help engage new practitioners/staff.

High- and lowlights are realities facing both researchers and practitioners as collaboration is developed, maintained, and sustained. Recognizing and balancing each type are among the keys to success.

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