

# Creating Problem-Focused Outreach Partnerships

The focus of this session was on the question, “How can interdisciplinary, problem-focused outreach work in partnership with communities?” Discussants drew upon their experiences with university partnerships involving Mott Children’s Health Center in Flint, Michigan; United Way of Michigan; and the Calhoun County Human Services Coordinating Council in Battle Creek, Michigan. The university partnerships discussed were facilitated by the institution’s Applied Developmental Science program, which draws upon the expertise of eighty faculty members from thirty departments in nine colleges.

The Applied Developmental Science program, under the leadership of Professor Hiram Fitzgerald of the Department of Psychology, has made a five-year commitment to work with a set of primary partners: the Girl Scouts, Butterworth Health Systems, Calhoun County Health System, United Way of Michigan, and Mott Children’s Health Center. Partnerships in the human service arena tend to be more difficult than in other areas since technological solutions are less likely, evaluating impacts takes a long time, and human service providers have fewer dollars available for partnering.

## Characteristics and Principles of Successful Collaboration

Experience gained from three current partnerships suggests some characteristics for successful collaboration. Research faculty members should lead the initiatives. The corporate/university commitment must be long-term. The university must provide an infrastructure to sustain partnerships, enabling individual faculty members to “parachute in and out of the program.” The best partnerships are those where the unique capabilities and passionate interests of faculty members are front and center. Both the university and community partners must be willing to be co-learners with opportunities for communities to teach as well as learn.

Principles common to all partnerships with Applied Developmental Science included:

- shared ownership for the partnership by the university and community;
- a shared mission by the cooperating partners;
- the development and use of a dynamic work plan;
- participation by both parties in research rounds at six-month intervals to assess progress and make adjustments as indicated;
- commitment to resource allocation for the partnership by both the university and community.

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## **Examples of Partnerships**

The partnership with Mott Children's Health Center promises over time to improve practice, programs, and policy development. Its major thrust is evaluation. With a fifty-year history, the center seeks to impact the lives of high-risk families in Flint, Michigan. Among its many programming thrusts, it provides specialty clinics for chronically ill children, focuses on child abuse prevention, sponsors teen health centers in schools, and provides parenting education and life skills training for teen parents and for incarcerated adults.

Stephen Williams outlined the barriers that had to be addressed to make the partnership with MSU work. The center was skeptical about the university's long-term commitment, since historically researchers "blew in, blew off, and blew out," rather than "staying the course." Many questioned whether academics know what the real world is like or have relevant expertise to share. "What do we need the university to tell us?" they asked. Some were concerned that the community staff members wouldn't or couldn't match up intellectually with university faculty. Finally, many believed that there is more "art" in human relations behaviors than science and, therefore, that more research is not the answer.

A "barrier busting team," consisting of representatives from the university and health center, meets regularly to deal with potential problems, to coordinate the work, and to provide guidance for implementers. Based on the partnership's one-year history, it is possible to suggest the following conditions for success: Partnerships need to have a coherent agenda and cannot be viewed as a long distance relationship. Senior faculty members should regularly be present on the site, and exchange visits to the campus by community participants is also valuable. Partners must use a common language — no jargon. Faculty expertise should match community problems. Both sides must be willing to learn as they go through what is a slow process and recognize the parity of partners with mutual listening and learning. Celebrating early successes — even small ones — is critically important.

The university must "ante up" financially in the beginning of the partnership to get the process underway and demonstrate its commitment, but community partners must help pay for evaluation or other university contributions. Grant dollars play an important role, especially in the beginning; they may also be important for project sustainability.

The United Way partnership focused primarily on capacity building, especially in the area of program evaluation. The organization is trying to show increased accountability and a return on investments made. It wants to be known for quality customer service both to donors and program recipients. Goals of the partnership focus on enhancing the

impact of the organization and evaluating the effectiveness of its training programs.

The university brings to the partnership expertise and skills and a commitment to assist in the development of staff and volunteer capacities. The organization brings the capacity of a statewide network and the willingness of six communities to partner immediately. In addition, the organization can provide staff to serve as liaisons with its various units and, since collaboration is part of its operation, spinoffs to other agencies are promising.

The partnership with the Calhoun County Human Services Coordinating Council emphasizes policy analysis and evaluation. This council enhances collaboration among some thirty organizations in a community having a rural/urban mix. The primary goal for the partnership is improved outcomes for children, youth, and families in such critically important areas as reduction in teen pregnancy, improved parenting skills, violence prevention, and reduction of substance abuse. Joint work teams are concentrating on the evaluation of block grants that are part of the Strong Families Safe Children Program, and work is being done to establish a database for tracking immunization records of children and to conduct asset mapping. If the partnership succeeds, the community will eventually say, "We don't need you anymore, MSU."

The Calhoun project involves a \$10,000 annual budget matched by the university and council, these funds being used to leverage additional outside funds. Faculty members contribute their time to this initiative as part of their research assignment, on load. Besides the contributions made to the communities and in research, the Applied Developmental Science initiatives with communities also provide quality learning experiences for both undergraduate and graduate students.