

## **Building Healthy Partner Relationships**

This document describes concepts and questions to consider when starting and building healthy relationships with partners. It also provides tips related to avoiding and dealing with conflicts among partners.

### **Connecting with Partners: Things to consider when approaching or being approached by potential partners**

#### **Finding Partners**

- Ask your colleagues and partners. Are there other community-based organizations (CBOs) that have worked with academic partners before? Use these experienced people (locally, regionally, or nationally) as coaches and mentors.
- Seek and use University contacts (ARCC staff)- understand how academics talk about CBPR and what their incentives for using this approach are. Look for academic institutions that are engaged in long –term community research projects.
- Find out who’s been doing work on your topic of interest. Build alliances with other CBOs who have similar research ideas, areas of interest, or questions before approaching an academic partner. Universities are not the only type of partners- also look to engage departments of health or other private or non-profit research institutions.

#### **Interview Potential Partners**

- What are each other’s interests?
- Are the partners’ skills and experiences adequate/appropriate for the proposed project?
- Are the partners’ reputations strong within scientific field and/or community?
- Are your work styles compatible? Good communication/listening skills? Culturally competent? Willing to share power/control over decisions?
- Do you like each other?
- Do you each have enough time?
- Can you commit for the long haul?
- CBPR is not for everyone or every community or every research question. Visit <http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/cbpr/u1/u14.php> to find other questions that are helpful in determining if CBPR right for the potential partners.

#### **Consider your Purpose**

- Why do this project together? What is the purpose of the research? What is hoped for? What is most important?
- What impact do you want the research to have (i.e., community organizing, policy changes, increase funding)?
- How will all of the team members benefit?
- Ask questions of your self/organization: What level of involvement do we want in each part of the project? Does our organization have the capacity (staff, time, \$, support from leadership)? What capacity-building may be needed?

#### **Consider who needs to be at the Table**

- Have deep organizational involvement- academic and community. Who needs to support and sign off? Who will do the work?
- How will members of the community be involved and/or give input? As research team members? On a Community Advisory Board?

## **Set the Stage to Build a Healthy Relationship**

- **Build Trust and Communicate Early, Well, and Often**
  - Discuss how to create the ‘glue’ for your partnership: Things that help your partnership stick together like process, infrastructure and procedures that promote and sustain trust, communication, connectedness, and meaningful work efforts that ensure each partner is respected and heard.
  - Take the time to meet in person as often as you can and in each other’s locations.
  - Discuss preferred communication methods.
- **Allow time for decision making**
  - Decide how decisions will be made: Who will be involved in discussion? Who will be consulted? Who will make final decisions? Who should be informed of decisions?
- **Discuss Finances**
  - How much money will your project cost?
  - How much money will it cost to support the community partners to participate? The academic partners to participate?
  - Discuss how money is allocated and managed?
- **Plan for Disagreements-** The best way to avoid conflicts is to have frank discussions about potential problems/uncomfortable topics **before** they happen.
  - Money: Financial losses or conflict about resource allocation
  - Past/related history, politics, turf issues
  - Unexpected or negative results
  - Insufficient communication
  - Institutional rules and regulations
  - Differing expectations/assumptions/priorities
  - Interpersonal conflict/clashing organizational cultures
  - Turnover of co-PI, project team, CBO leadership
  - Discriminatory “isms” such as racism, sexism, ageism, etc.
  - Power imbalances
  - Commitment imbalances or unequal work loads
  - Maintaining balance of power throughout project- community vs. scientific dissemination of results, research vs. action

## **Document these decisions in Signed Memorandum of Understanding!**

- **Develop a Written Partnership Agreement**
  - Decision-Making: Sharing power and control, Who runs meetings/develops meeting agendas?
  - Handling Disagreements: When is it appropriate to dissolve a partnership?
  - Data Ownership and Future Uses

- Distribution of Results
  - Finances: Who will get the money? Who controls the finances? When and how is it distributed?
  - Roles and Responsibilities: Who will do the work? What if the work isn't getting done?
- There isn't one way of structuring partnerships – tailor the agreement to your needs

*Note: For examples, see the hand out on developing these partnership agreements and more examples at <http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/commbas.html#MOU>*

■ **What do you do if conflict does arise?**

- Assume there is legitimate reason
- Take the time to resolve it: Reach out, don't let concerns fester, be willing to talk
- Be transparent
- Attack the problem not the person
- Go back to written agreements
- Look at strategies used by other partnerships
- Seek out assistance from a neutral party
- Agree to disagree

**Sources:**

The Examining Community-Institutional Partnerships for Prevention Research Group. *Developing and Sustaining Community-Based Participatory Research Partnerships: A Skill-Building Curriculum*. 2006. [www.cbprcurriculum.info](http://www.cbprcurriculum.info)

Nunavut Research Institute & Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. *Negotiating Research Relationships: A Guide for Communities*. 2007.

California Breast Cancer Research Program Community Research Collaboration: <http://www.cbcrp.org/community/>