

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING
SUCCESSFUL RESEARCHER-
PRACTITIONER COLLABORATIONS



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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING SUCCESSFUL RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER COLLABORATIONS

The National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center (NVAWPRC) was established in 1998 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Center consists of a consortium of researchers and practitioners concerned with violence against women. One of the most important goals of the NVAWPRC is to identify and overcome barriers to collaboration between researchers, victim advocates, public health professionals, criminal justice professionals, and violence against women practitioners. There are many challenges to successful collaboration, but there is ample evidence that such collaborations are important in the prevention of violence against women.

In 1999, we conducted focus groups with victim advocates, practitioners, and researchers to examine ways these groups could work together more effectively to produce sound and practical research about violence against women (NVAWPRC, 2001; a summary report is available at www.vawprevention.org). The recommendations provided in this document are based on the findings from those focus groups, published and internet-based resources on the topic, informal discussions at conferences and workshops, and the experiences that we bring to the table as researchers and practitioners.



Goals of this Document

In recognition that successful collaboration between various stakeholders will enhance our response to violence against women, this document is offered as a framework for discussing, establishing, and implementing successful collaborations between researchers and practitioners. We outline the core components of a successful research partnership and provide more detailed recommendations for assessing the value and credibility of potential collaborative research projects and for negotiating the terms of a particular collaboration.



Why Collaborate?

Collaboration is time-consuming and often challenging, yet the rewards can outweigh the costs. Collaboration can improve the quality of both practice and research and can help create theory grounded in social experience. Practitioners and researchers each possess specialized knowledge, experiences, and talents that, when combined, form a whole that is far greater than the sum of their individual parts. For example:



Victim Advocates and Practitioners

- Are trained to understand the perspectives of people involved in violent relationships and are able to draw attention to the unmet needs and wishes of the people whose lives we all want to affect positively.
- Have direct knowledge of how changes in policy and system responses affect victims, perpetrators, children, and families.
- Understand how individuals and institutions interact “in the real world”.

Practitioners want research that will:

- Improve victim outreach and community education efforts.
- Determine what is best for client services.
- Identify new problems, new directions and new solutions in efforts to eliminate violence against women.



Researchers

- Can access and interpret the literature on violence against women so that it is useful for evidence-based practice.
- Are trained in the design and implementation of research and can help to provide answers to questions in ways that will pass tests of rigor and objectivity.
- Have experience presenting complex information to a variety of audiences and can contribute to the dissemination of information outside of academic circles.

Researchers reported that:

- Collaborations sensitized them to important issues, problems and pitfalls in their research plans.
- Practitioners helped greatly with addressing safety issues.
- As one researcher stated.

“You can’t do this work in a vacuum.”

What are Some of the Characteristics of Successful Collaborative Relationships?

Successful collaborative relationships demonstrate mutual respect, trust, and appreciation among the individuals involved, and require a willingness to learn from each other through formal and informal means.

Collaboration means more than just cooperation between the people “in charge.”



Tips for Making Collaboration Work:

1. Discuss all aspects of the collaboration until mutually satisfying solutions are reached.
2. Talk about and establish a shared vision and goals for a joint project, and come up with specific scientific and research-to-practice and/or research-to-policy goals.
3. Be certain that goals are clearly stated and understood by all key participants.
4. Involve both the researchers and the practitioners/advocates in the planning of each phase of a project, and/or allow for the modification of a planned project based on feedback from partners.
5. Ensure that all parties' questions about the work are answered adequately (including the questions of project and organization staff).
6. Ensure that responsibilities for various project tasks are divided in ways that are reasonable, fair, and sensitive to the time constraints of those involved.
7. Provide for the material and other support needs of all the individuals and/or organizations involved.
8. Make it a goal to secure funds to support the time of all involved in the collaboration or offer student/work-study assistance, computer assistance, training, or workshops.





Initiating Collaborations and Establishing Goals for Research on Prevention of Violence Against Women

Collaborative research relationships can begin in several ways:

1. *The research question or idea initially may be generated by practitioners or advocates* — Practitioners and advocates often need information or statistics about their clients or services to obtain or maintain organizational funding, to determine the effectiveness of their services, or for public education and victim outreach.
2. *The research question or idea initially may be generated by researchers* — Researchers may have a research project in mind that requires access to special groups of potential participants, such as service providers or those affected by violence against women. Researchers already may have prepared a proposal or secured funding for such a project.
3. *Mutual concerns about preventing violence against women often bring researchers and practitioners together* — Research ideas may have emerged from meetings and joint presentations about key issues. These meetings and colloquia may have helped to identify common ground and the most pressing problems that need to be addressed if practice and research are to be advanced.

Regardless of how collaboration is initiated, it is important to establish collaborative research goals. As mutual trust develops, willingness to broach and then actually to address the problems and capabilities of research and practice will increase. Researchers should spend time learning about and, as time and skills permit, participating in the work of the practitioners. Formal needs assessments may help identify pressing problems that are amenable to research. Practitioners should make time to increase their exposure to research methods, findings, limitations and possibilities. Over time, these activities will help collaborators make informed decisions about the direction of their work together.





When specific research questions are identified, it is important to spell out the goals of the research and how these goals fit with those of the program and the individuals involved. All parties need to think about what the research will contribute to the field, the agency, the practitioners, the researchers, and the participants. Frank discussion of the capabilities and limitations (e.g., time, skills, resources, commitment) of the parties involved is needed.

Tips for Assessing the Qualifications of Researchers

In our focus groups, practitioners often raised the question of how they can assess the qualifications of potential researcher collaborators. Some areas of expertise and accountability that require close examination include:

1. The researcher should have prior experience doing this kind of research or the researcher should have a mentor/faculty advisor who has worked in this field (this latter point applies especially to graduate student researchers).
2. The researcher or someone on his or her staff should have had direct experience working with survivors, as a volunteer, paid staff member of an advocacy organization, or through interviews conducted with survivors themselves. If this type of experience is lacking, the researcher or someone from his or her staff should be willing to obtain training/experience.
3. The researcher should have a mechanism for obtaining peer review (i.e., an evaluation of the research by other scientists) of the proposal and of his or her on-going work.
4. The researcher should be linked with and accountable to an institution with an ethics review committee or institutional review board (IRB).
5. Potential collaborators should read and review the prior proposals, publications, papers, and reports of the researcher.
6. References should be checked, and it is advisable to talk to people who have collaborated with the researcher on prior projects and to ask them questions such as: Was this a true collaboration? Was the project completed as planned? How did decisions get made? What were the findings? Were there unanticipated findings and how were they handled? Were findings disseminated and, if so, how?



Adequacy of the Research

Assessing the adequacy of the research design is a complex task and involves judgment about:

- The benefits of the study to the field.
- How research builds on and adds to existing knowledge.
- The likelihood that the study design will yield meaningful results.
- The adequacy of the plan for analysis of the data, interpretation of findings, and preparation of reports and useful materials for policy and program development.

Peer review is an important component of the research process and a way that the practitioner or advocate can get others to assist with judging the adequacy of the research design. Practitioners can ask to see the written comments of peer reviewers or solicit reviews from other researchers. One successful mechanism for obtaining peer reviews of new research projects is to have a research review committee or include researchers on project or coalition advisory boards.

Practitioners and advocates may want to get the answers to the following questions:

1. Who will identify research participants?
2. How will research participants be informed of the study details?
3. Who will collect the data and how will data be collected (e.g., face-to-face interview, self-report, etc.)?
4. What instruments or measures will be used? Will the practitioner or advocate have an opportunity to review the measures? Will the study use instruments and measures with language that is understandable to participants?
5. How will participant confidentiality be protected and what safety measures will be taken to protect participants from harm?
6. Who will analyze the data? How will the practitioner or advocate participate in data analysis and the interpretation of results?
7. Is the project designed to assure sensitivity and attention to issues of culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender and race?



8. Has the researcher obtained (or will the researcher obtain) outside peer review of the research proposal? What were the results of this review?
9. Will advocates or practitioners have the opportunity to participate in any revisions of the study proposal?
10. Will funding be adequate to complete the project in a manner that is satisfactory to all involved? How will advocates or practitioners and their organizations be compensated for time spent in meetings with the researchers and for time spent on various study tasks?

Tips for Identifying Practitioner- Collaborators

Researchers who participated in our focus groups cautioned that true collaboration is very time consuming and expensive. Collaborations can also result in expanded networks of so many groups that it is difficult to hold the project together. Researchers should consider the following in assessing the likelihood that collaborations will work:

1. Do the practitioners have prior experience with research?
2. What do other researchers who have collaborated with these practitioners say about the extent to which the practitioners were able to cooperate in the planned research and whether there were difficulties encountered in following the research protocol?
3. Were there unanticipated findings and how were they handled? How were findings disseminated? What would they do differently in a new project?
4. To what extent will heavy demands for services limit the time practitioners have available to collaborate and participate in the research process?
5. Are decisions about the time practitioners have and their interest in collaborating based on discussions with project staff, in addition to program directors and administrators?
6. What is needed to enhance the organization's capacity to collaborate?
7. Can you obtain funds to compensate practitioners for their time or support their travel to present findings?



Ethics, Confidentiality and Safety

All research teams must take steps to assure the protection of the research participants. To formalize this process, all research with human participants must be approved by a board that reviews the research design to make sure that the individuals are adequately protected from potential harm that may result from research participation. This board is referred to as an Institutional Review Board (IRB). All universities have IRBs and all federally funded research involving human participants must have IRB review. Many private organizations also have set up their own IRBs or use the IRBs of other institutions to review their research.

When planning and evaluating potential research collaborations, it is important to discuss elements of safety, protection from potential harm, and issues of confidentiality. It is important that researchers and practitioners discuss these issues thoroughly and work collaboratively to develop a plan for the protection of participants. Additional information about safety and protection of human subjects can be found on our web-site: www.vawprevention.org.

Legal issues surrounding confidentiality are very complicated. There is no solution that will be applicable in every research context and setting. Legal statutes governing confidentiality vary by state. If client records and communications are desirable sources of data for a research project, collaborators should check state laws governing the confidentiality of these records and communications so that adequate safeguards can be designed into the study protocol. It is also important to be aware of circumstances in which mandatory reporting statutes place limits on the confidentiality of otherwise privileged communications (e.g., imminent threat of harm to oneself or another). Added protections to the confidentiality of research data can be achieved by obtaining a Federal Certificate of Confidentiality.





Dissemination of Findings

It is important for researchers and practitioners to develop a plan for disseminating findings in a timely, inclusive, and meaningful fashion. Discussion of the dissemination plan should include consideration of the following:

1. Negotiate the nature and type of products expected to be produced from the research. Make sure that there are plans to translate complicated scientific language and statistics into meaningful statements about the findings.
2. Include products tailored to meet practitioner needs.
3. Discuss what roles each collaborative partner will take in summarizing, interpreting, presenting, and publishing the research findings. Prepare a plan for collaborating on interpretation of findings and report preparation.
4. Develop a plan for publicity. It might be useful to consult public relations representatives for this purpose.
5. Agree upon roles for media interviews.
6. Plan for the possibility that the research might produce controversial or adverse findings and discuss how you will handle such circumstances.
7. Negotiate for authorship credit on any anticipated publication of findings. Such negotiation should result in shared credit on research products.
8. Create a venue for sharing the study's results with participants, agency staff, and/or board members.





Spelling Out Roles and Responsibilities: The Memorandum of Understanding

Some collaborators have found it useful to prepare a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to document key aspects of the collaborative work. Such a document provides a written record of the agreements made by all parties. Once an MOU is prepared, it should be reviewed and updated regularly to see if the project is on track and to make adjustments as needed with the agreement of all parties.



Seeking Funding That Will Support Collaborations

Funding agencies, organizations, and academic institutions can support collaborations between researchers and practitioners. Funding sources and proposal writers should consider proposals that will:

- Fund collaborative planning meetings and/or support ongoing dialogue between particular researchers and practitioners.
- Provide funds for researcher/practitioner cross-training efforts.
- Include paid practitioner involvement at every stage of the research process.
- Include dissemination efforts that are specifically tailored to meet practitioner needs.
- Give something back to the larger community so that everyone benefits from the research process.



For more information about the National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center and for reviews of research and articles on violence against women, please visit our website: www.vawprevention.org.

The NVAWPRC also has produced a training videotape which illustrates some of the findings and recommendations from the focus groups. To obtain a copy of the videotape, the focus group report or additional copies of this report, write to:



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Appendix

Other Resources on Researcher-Practitioner Collaborations, Including Examples of Successful Collaborations from the Violence Against Women Research Literature

Beutler, L. E., Williams, R. E., Wakefield, P. J., & Entwistle, S. R. (1995). Bridging scientist and practitioner perspectives in clinical psychology. American Psychologist, *50*, 984-994.

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Levin, R. (1999). Participatory evaluation: Researchers and service providers as collaborators versus adversaries. Violence Against Women, *5*, 1213-1227.

Murphy, C. M. & Dienemann, J. A. (1999). Informing the research agenda on domestic abuser intervention through practitioner-researcher dialogues. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, *14*, 1314-1326.

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Sobell, L. C. (1996). Bridging the gap between scientists and practitioners: The challenge before us. Behavior Therapy, *27*, 297-320.

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