

“Bridging the Waters” Revisited: Academia and Practice Collaborate Across the Cultural Divide

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Readers of The Link may recall a roundtable discussion that explored the differing professional and corporate “cultures” of public health agencies and schools of public health (The Link, v.12, no. 1). The article “Bridging the Waters: Understanding Linkages as Cross-Cultural Partnerships,” highlighted the institutional differences in mission, reward systems, functional priorities and organizational structure that often create complexity and misunderstanding as academics and practitioners try to work collaboratively. The authors emphasized the benefits of working to overcome these differences in building partnerships that overcome this “cultural divide.”

A vision for collaboration

In the summer of 1999, the Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) Health Department (ACHD) and the Graduate School of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh (GSPH) solidified a decades-long history of ad-hoc and episodic collaboration. Committing themselves to a formal collaboration, the two groups made an institutional commitment to working together in research, teaching and service. The terms of their formal collaboration made their separate missions to a limited, but important, extent mutually dependent.

The two organizations established a joint Collaboration Steering Committee to identify areas of common and mutual interest in which their respective capabilities would be maximized. This would enable each to translate cutting-edge research into public health practice and to bring excitement and timeliness to the education of students. Further, such a collaboration would bolster public health, achieving the best outcomes for the populations served by both organizations.

The formal commitment to work together brought the ACHD’s staff and the GSPH’s faculty face-to-face to discuss time commitments, funding issues, and decentralized (academic) versus centralized (agency) structure. At first, the steering committee struggled with establishing a strategic plan for the collaboration, but deferred that effort in favor of a more pragmatic approach. The key insight that ultimately drove the collaboration’s first-year activities forward was development of a functional collegiality based on a mutual recognition of each partner’s value, and an understanding of their strengths.

Collaboration activities

The collaboration undertook three projects in its first year, each of which contributed to acquainting ACHD staff and GSPH faculty with each other’s responsibilities, work methods, and areas of expertise:

- **Public Health Roundtable Cases:** First, GSPH began a program series in which ACHD staff presented a public health practice case to an audience of faculty and students. During the case presentation and discussion, faculty and students learned how necessary it was for the various disciplines in practice (environmental, infectious disease, epidemiology, and health administration) to interact in the case investigation and intervention. Simultaneously, ACHD staff learned from the faculty discussants

about new diagnostic technologies and conceptual approaches to improving infectious disease surveillance and intervention.

- **Faculty Agency Partnering Program:** Next, ACHD hosted a partnering program in which GSPH faculty participated in “job shadowing” throughout the agency, providing opportunities to observe first-hand the practice aspects of public health. The program began with a two-hour group orientation in which ACHD division chiefs described their organizational structure, responsibilities and daily activities. Faculty members then chose a division or programmatic activity and signed up for a day or more of “job shadowing.” A follow-up session was scheduled for faculty and staff together, to discuss observations and potential areas of collaborative research, teaching and service.

- **Strategic Workforce Training Program:** GSPH faculty members joined the ACHD’s Training Committee to assess the agency’s workforce development needs, and to design a training program linked to ongoing strategic planning and evaluation processes. Recognizing that all employees needed a grounding in the history, values, legal foundation, methods and systems of public health, the training committee and faculty developed and pilot-tested an orientation workshop soon to be given at regular intervals for all ACHD staff. Next, the training committee selected high-priority competencies needed to carry out the ten essential services of public health. In this ongoing effort, the committee is guiding faculty in the development of a training curriculum to be implemented incrementally over the next three years.

Comments on progress . . .

How well did these programs work?

The three first-year projects had short-term and long-term goals. Outcome indicators were positive for the short-term goal, which was to develop mutual respect, an understanding of each other’s strengths and a functional collegiality between faculty and agency personnel. Faculty improved their understanding of the structure, operations and personnel of the health department. Through these programs, agency staff became acquainted, in person and by name, with faculty experts in areas of programmatic importance. Progress in developing a comprehensive training program for agency staff led to the award of a major grant to support and sustain the effort.

Outcome indicators for the long-term goal of improving the health of the county population are hopeful. Agency staff and faculty are currently designing an applied research and program-development project to address difficult and longstanding pollution problems at an island in one of the county’s rivers. Faculty are supervising student interns in the agency’s conduct of a post-partum survey of the most at-risk new mothers in the county. Since these new initiatives arose under the auspices of the formal collaboration, agency staff and the school’s faculty recognize them to be not merely voluntary and isolated efforts, but rather as strategically important.

Outlook

Individuals at all levels of both the agency and the school are now engaged with and committed to operationalizing this partnership. Volunteers have agreed to continue and extend the three first-year projects. The collaboration’s value has been recognized and encouraged by the Linkages award and a federal agency has awarded five-year funding

to the training project. These experiences are evidence of the mutual benefits accruing to partners who work at “bridging the waters” through academic-practice partnerships.

[Back to Top](#)

[Back to *The Link* Page](#)