



Good Practices for Successful Collaborations
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What should you keep in mind as you begin a conversation with a potential partner?

1. Collaboration is an iterative process

Both academics and practitioners may initiate a conversation with a goal in mind, but sometimes it's only through the process of conversing that they realize why they want to answer a research question in the first place and/or what is achievable. Conceptualizing outcomes of interest in ways that are measurable may require several discussions.

2. Standard operating procedures may be different

It's not just that both parties might be used to different kinds of language or jargon, but it's also the case that both parties may simply take for granted standard operating procedures. So, academics and practitioners alike should be prepared to explain the reasoning behind their objectives as well as their limitations. Practitioners may not be aware of requirements for sound research design, and scholars may not understand norms and policies that constrain organizations. For instance, when conducting an experiment, academics are used to having a control group. Yet for some practitioners the idea of excluding people from an intervention that is hypothesized to be effective may seem like a waste of scarce resources. In a case like this, the academic partner needs to be prepared to explain why a control group is necessary.

3. Make sure that the timing works for all parties involved

Discuss how issues or events may influence the timing of the collaboration. Academics may be ready to work "whenever" whereas organizations and government agencies might face constraints or procedural delays that affect when they can start a project, release findings, and so on.

4. It may take time to reveal interests that are aligned between researchers and practitioners

Academics are often incentivized to prioritize making novel discoveries and challenging the status quo. Yet many practitioners may be motivated to prove to funders and other stakeholders that existing programs are working (i.e. that the status quo is doing just fine). Be aware that such goals may conflict.

5. Address any organizational impediments to collaborative research up front

Academics generally "work for themselves", whereas practitioners are typically part of a larger organization with a decision-making hierarchy. Too often potential partnerships get scuttled due to legal/organizational capacity/strategic priority issues. Or they get scuttled because one person is eager to collaborate but a manager or supervisor is less keen. On the other side, academics may



face institutional or procedural constraints. For example, if organizations work with vulnerable populations, institutional review boards may not approve the research, or grant applications may be denied. Both parties should be upfront about considerations that impact available resources and timing.

6. Have an early discussion about your expectations of the kind of research you would conduct together

Many practitioners are often engaged in some form of research even if they don't think of themselves as researchers. Anytime there is a question posed that requires an answer they are conducting research. "Research" may mean gathering new data and/or analyzing existing data and then writing up results. It may also entail a wider set of activities such as synthesizing existing bodies of knowledge, setting a new agenda for the future, re-interpreting existing findings, and/or bringing together previously-disparate audiences. Moreover, for practitioners, research may mean "evaluation" and be associated with something that either "works or doesn't work". The upshot is that all of these different (though not necessarily incompatible) definitions should be made clear from the beginning.

7. Make sure you agree up front about how any data generated by collaborative research will be used and maintained, including decisions about whether findings will be published

Make sure to talk about how the data will be analyzed and used. Talking about how the data will be analyzed ensures that the study is designed to do what it's supposed to, and to avoid unproductive data mining down the line.

In terms of using the data afterwards, academics typically want to publish findings in a peer-reviewed setting, yet practitioners may not necessarily want the data to be made public, even anonymously. This is especially a concern if the research entails evaluating a program, tactic, or strategy that the practitioner has been engaged in for a long time. People may bristle if the data show that certain things don't work as originally believed.

Along these same lines, make sure you agree on the intended audience for the study. This has implications for who can write about the results and if the organization can be named in print in an academic journal or other context.

8. Try to build a relationship

If possible, avoid transactional (i.e. one-off) studies. Once trust is established it is easier to collaborate again down the line. It's also easier to respond to changing world events or other priorities if there is already an ongoing relationship.

This piece of advice also compliments another key idea: break down the big questions into smaller pieces. Focus on one to begin with, and address the remaining questions over time.