



Seven FAQs for Successful Academic-Practitioner Collaborations
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This document is intended for academics and practitioners who are considering a research collaboration. Want more details? Feel free to reach out: hello@r4impact.org.

1. Why collaborate?

For academics, there are several possible reasons: answer an important question, learn from people with a diverse set of expertise, produce research that will have a direct and immediate impact, and access and collect awesome data that may otherwise be unattainable.

For practitioners, there are also several reasons: learn what works, gain a broader academic outlook on their work (such as how what they're seeing day-to-day accords with broader trends and theoretical frameworks), and be a model for other organizations. Some collaborations with academics, such as impact assessments, may also satisfy funding demands.

2. What do I need to keep in mind as I'm starting a conversation about collaborating?

Research collaborations are still quite new for many folks. In the abstract people know that they are interacting with others who have diverse professional experiences and incentives, but they aren't always sure what they need to keep in mind. Here are a few key differences to be mindful of as you're getting to know a potential collaborator (see FAQ #7 for more on how this "dating phase" fits in with the overall process of doing a collaboration).

--Need to align the "benefit exchange"

Even when they share many of the same underlying ideas of the social good – high voter engagement, good schools, improved health, good nutrition, gender and racial equality, reduced poverty, and so on -- academics and practitioners often face very different immediate professional incentives.

Academics' immediate goal is typically to answer questions that contribute to a larger scientific discipline (i.e. that other scientists would find valuable). They also want the ability to publish data regardless of the findings, which practitioners might chafe at.

Practitioners' immediate goal is typically to produce a concrete product that will help them directly achieve their goals efficiently and effectively with limited resources. They want to know what works.

--Different decision-making structures



Academics often “work for themselves” whereas practitioners are part of a larger organization with a decision-making hierarchy. Too often potential collaborations get scuttled due to legal/organizational capacity/strategic priority issues. Or they get scuttled because one person is eager to collaborate but a manager is less keen. In addition, academics may face institutional or procedural constraints. For example, if organizations work with vulnerable populations, institutional review boards may take longer to approve the research.

--Attitudes toward risk may differ

Career pressures may lead academics to prioritize making novel discoveries that challenge the status quo. Yet practitioners may be risk averse if they have funding and jobs that depend upon existing programs.

--Different timelines

Timelines may differ for several reasons. In some ways academics may reach the start line more quickly – they 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. Research may not be their highest priority.

Conversely, sometimes practitioners are ready to go more quickly, as their focus may be more urgent and in response to events. This focus on conducting research to satisfy short-term needs may conflict with the time academics want to spend to achieve a desired level of rigor.

--Standard operating procedures may be different

Both parties may take for granted standard operating procedures, and so they should be prepared to explain the reasoning behind their objectives, procedures, and limitations. Part of this reflects how they use different kinds of language or jargon. In addition, practitioners may be unaware of the requirements for sound research design, and scholars may not understand norms and policies that constrain organizations. More generally, because they are interacting with people with very diverse professional experiences and incentives, all collaborators need to be prepared to answer questions about how they do their work.

3. How do I build a new working relationship with someone with very diverse expertise and experiences?

At the beginning of a collaboration it’s helpful to adopt the mindset that you’re not just “doing a study together”, but rather you’re “building a working relationship”. Key parts of building a new working relationship involve establishing *competence* and *trustworthiness*. For researchers, a key part of competence entails being a clear and confident advocate for sound research design, which is especially vital if you are asking an organization to depart from their standard operating procedures (e.g. by randomizing clients into a control and treatment group). For practitioners a key



part of competence is having capacity to carry out a study (e.g. allocating sufficient staff and/or volunteer time to it). Regarding trustworthiness, practitioners frequently voice two concerns:

- Practitioners are mission-driven, and they want to ensure academics support their goals
- Within some practitioner communities (especially marginalized ones), academics need to be wary of the “savior syndrome” and mindful of negative stereotypes regarding research, academics, and/or specific universities.

In addition to being competent and trustworthy, it’s also vital that both parties are *engaged* – that they are able to (a) effectively communicate what they know to each other and (b) actively encourage their potential collaborators to share what they know. Too often, people in diverse teams don’t feel comfortable sharing their unique expertise with others, which diminishes the creative potential of the collaboration. There are several relational techniques that are helpful for being engaged (we cover them as part of research4impact’s “*How to be Helpful: Building Relationships for Social Impact*” workshop).

4. How do I find potential collaborators?

Academics and practitioners are often part of different social networks, and so it can be difficult to know how/where to meet potential collaborators. Here are three possible avenues:

--Attend each others’ events – For academics, this means attending conferences that the practitioners you want to collaborate with are likely to attend. For practitioners, this means attending academic conferences – either big national ones, or perhaps smaller ones at local universities. It’s often easier to meet people at smaller ones, and they are cheaper to attend as well. Some organizations, such as the Climate Advocacy Lab, regularly hold Research + Experimentation meetings that bring researchers and practitioners into the same room.

--Publish op-eds, blog posts, or other pieces showing relevance of your work, including past research you’ve done and/or highlighting research you’re interested in doing in the future.

--Utilize a third-party, such as a matchmaker: People are often uncertain about the relational elements mentioned in FAQ #3 (i.e. whether potential collaborators will be competent, trustworthy, and engaged). Third-party matchmakers that know a wide variety of folks and can provide endorsements are helpful.¹

5. What are the types of collaborations?

Here are the most common types of collaborations we’ve seen so far:

--Assess impact of existing programs/messages/tactics/strategies

¹ We’ve collected data on the value of matchmakers. See our one-page brief entitled “Do practitioners prefer do-it-yourself or hands-on matchmaking?” on our website: www.r4impact.org.



- Test a brand new idea/hypothesis
- Analyze existing data together (e.g. administrative data, other previously-collected data)
- Synthesize existing bodies of knowledge (which may include setting a new agenda for the future, re-interpreting existing findings, and/or bringing together previously-disparate audiences)

In all cases (and especially the first two that involve collecting brand new data), it helps to break down big questions into smaller pieces if possible. This allows new collaborators to only focus on one piece to begin with and then, if all goes well, address remaining questions over time. Given the need to build relationships at the beginning (i.e. to demonstrate competence and prove that you're both trustworthy and engaged), it is extremely beneficial when partners can collaborate over time with multiple studies. It's also easier to respond to changing world events or other priorities if an ongoing relationship already exists.

6. Are research collaborations expensive?

Not necessarily. Projects *can* be very expensive if they require a lot of staff time, participation incentives, volunteer recruitment and organization, faculty and grad student time, and so on. Yet, in other cases they may require very little added cost above and beyond existing operating budgets (e.g. if a project entails an impact assessment of an existing program, it may not entail doing much *more* work but instead entail doing already-existing work differently). Either way, collaborators need to talk about funding and costs early on, especially if external grants are required.

7. What is the process of collaborating?

This list of steps covers all the basics, though the precise order may differ:

- 1) Decide that a collaboration is a good idea for you given your goals (see FAQ #1 & 5)
- 2) Find a potential partner (see FAQ #4)
- 3) Begin building a working relationship (this is the "dating phase" of collaborations!).
 - Assess each other's capacity
 - Establish level of equity in design/conceptualization
 - Have initial conversations about funding (e.g. Do you need outside grants?; see FAQ #6)
 - Recognize that this step may involve lots of back-and-forth with uncertain outcomes/timing (especially to discuss all of the topics mentioned in FAQ #2 & 3).
- 4) Decide to collaborate
 - Create memorandum of understanding (MOU) to describe each partner's responsibilities
 - Discuss data ownership/analysis/dissemination plans
 - Discuss possible pilot testing
- 5) Secure funding and other organizational approvals (e.g. IRB approval)
- 6) Collect data
- 7) Analyze data and present results
- 8) Possibly do another study together