

COUNTY-UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS:

Essential Elements for Successful Collaboration



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INTRODUCTION

More county governments are moving towards using evidence-based policymaking to better serve individuals in their community and effectively use taxpayer resources. However, many localities lack the capacity to undertake rigorous data collection and analysis and program evaluation. To help fill these gaps, counties are partnering with universities and colleges to access a network of public policy experts and the capacity to collect, examine and analyze data and all its complexities. These partnerships are mutually beneficial: Educational institutions have researchers and students eager to examine data that counties can provide, and counties gain information, expertise and policy recommendations on issues in their jurisdiction. Universities can also act as neutral partners and provide an unbiased perspective on an issue or effectiveness of county services. Creating partnerships with universities can position counties to receive grant funding from government and private organizations looking to increase the use of innovative justice, health, community/economic development and human service practices.

While university partnerships offer many benefits for county governments, there are certain hurdles that may arise within these unique partnerships. Counties and universities/colleges may use different terminology and thus have a hard time clearly communicating their interests, needs, skillsets and more. Counties may also be limited in what information they can share with external organizations and what public tax dollars can be used for. Universities and governments may also have competing interests: While counties usually are focused on services and outcomes, university researchers may be used to traditionally looking at more abstract concepts of public policy. Counties may also want to be careful that potential negative data or information about local programs and practices are not made public, while colleges and universities seek to publish results of their work.

This guide will highlight essential elements that can help ensure counties can successfully navigate university partnerships to improve data collection and analysis and implement evidence-based policymaking to provide innovative and cost-effective services to their constituents. This guide will give insight into the initiation and maintenance of county-university partnerships as well as advancing the partnership once the implementation phase of a project has been completed.



INITIATION & COLLABORATION

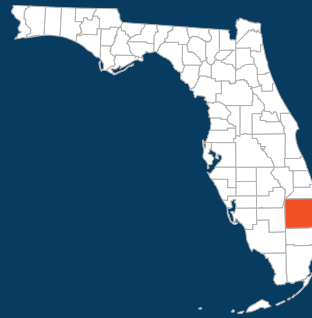
Create a Research-Friendly Culture

It is imperative that counties create an evidence-based culture within their government before pursuing partnerships with research entities. County officials should create policies and processes that encourage the use of data and evidence-based methods, which will allow for the implementation of proven-effective services and programs based on research that may come from a college or university partner. For example, counties can put into place ordinances and policies that require programming be based on evidence-based methodology, utilize data tracking and be evaluated for effectiveness. Counties should prioritize recruiting young researchers with an interest in public policy research and, if funding allows, can also hire a staff person in charge of data and research who can coordinate partnerships with universities. Counties can also create internship and fellowship opportunities with local universities to increase in-house capacity for data and research. These short-term opportunities can be used to create pathways to full-time job offers.

County governments should make working with researchers attractive and as easy as possible. County officials should keep in mind that professors and students are not the typical vendor or service provider and should not be treated the same way. Typical servicing contracts may be burdensome for university researchers to navigate. Counties should simplify the contracting process to work with universities on projects, perhaps by designing special contracts, requests for proposals (RFPs) and forms that are specific to and clear about research needs and requirements. Counties can solicit university research and consultation services through RFPs and advertisements in research forums.

Palm Beach County, Fla.— Florida State University

Palm Beach County and Florida State University (FSU) have worked as partners on numerous research projects since the 1990s. The county has even established an ordinance that encourages the use of evidence-based policymaking, leading to an evolving partnership with the university's policy research experts. Recently, Palm Beach County tasked FSU with assistance on three different projects that examine its criminal justice system for the county's Safety and Justice Challenge efforts,



including analyzing the functionality and validity of the county's Risk Assessment Instrument and Pretrial Release Matrix.



Find “Best Fit” University Partners

When looking for a university partner, counties should be sure that the university they are pursuing is the best fit for their research needs. A good university partner will have researchers that have the subject matter expertise and interest in the topic area the county wants to work on. The specific department and professor should also be willing to dedicate time and resources on the research project. Reaching out to university research offices and attending research symposiums and conferences can give county officials exposure to researchers interested in particular policy areas and programs. Counties should not limit themselves to only working with local institutions and if a university is geographically “out of reach” but can offer better support, counties should see if working long distance is an option. Utilizing technology, such as video conferencing and online data portals, can help facilitate this working relationship. Regular site visits and open communication can also improve long-distance partnerships.

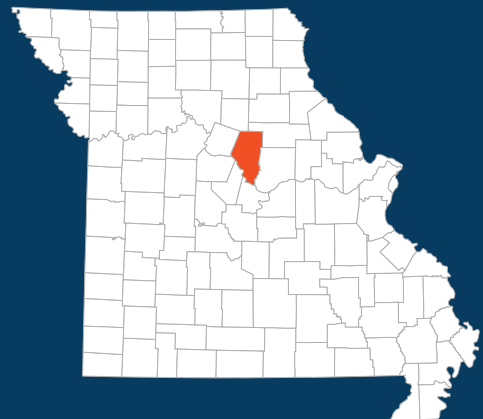


“Although there are some challenges with long-distance collaborations in terms of communication and being present, all of mine have worked out successfully. I’d encourage counties, if the expertise is somewhere else, don’t discount that.”

- Dr. Charlotte Gill, Deputy Director, George Mason University’s Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy

Boone County, Mo.– The University of Missouri

Boone County enlisted the help of the Missouri Prevention Center and College of Education at University of Missouri to identify and implement effective solutions for the 22 percent of youth in Boone County who experience social, emotional and behavioral health issues. Boone County’s interest in addressing behavioral health for youth aligned closely with the research interests of the university. The partnership thus developed the Family Access Center of Excellence (FACE), a cross-sector implementation center aimed at improving access to quality mental health services for families with children (aged 0-19). FACE not only offers family and youth-focused assessments, case management and support to address common needs but also assists local government and private providers through training and technical assistance, creative financing support, quality improvement, progress monitoring and outcomes evaluation.



Be Intentional with Partnership Needs and Requirements

Counties should be intentional and specific when expressing the needs and outcomes they expect from a research project. Counties should also fully understand what the university partner wants out of the partnership. Public policy data is valuable for academics and researchers interested in applied public policy research; by providing access to local data, counties have leverage when negotiating partnerships with universities. For example, a county could offer open access to its databases, however, in return, the university partner must provide data analysis and consultation. Because data collection is conducted using tax dollars, counties should be clear with the researcher about restrictions that come along with this. For example, if data for a project is collected using taxpayer money, counties may be obligated to share these results publicly, be transparent about how money is spent and show how the use of public funds for research meets the needs of the community. County and university representatives should clearly write out expectations, restrictions and requirements in an agreement that aligns with the goals and interests of both parties. When it comes to data, counties should create legally binding contracts to protect the security and privacy of the public, such as memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or data use agreements (DUAs).

Data-Sharing Agreements

Creating a network for information sharing and engaging in effective planning and coordination with universities is critical to building a consensus around what data can and will be shared. Key stakeholders must understand the legal framework for information sharing to design and implement effective criminal justice, health and human service research collaborations. This legal framework can be created in the form of a MOU, DUA or other type of agreement. Data sharing agreements should outline the goal of the partnership as well as specific data points that are allowed to be shared, legal considerations for stakeholders and processes for modification and termination to the agreement. To learn more about agreements and data sharing, visit

www.naco.org/resources/index/using-and-sharing-data.



MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

Keep Communication and Relationships Continuous

Once a county and university have their partnership established, keeping communication open and relationships continuous between the two entities is crucial. The county should designate a staff member to coordinate the relationship with the university; this person should oversee the establishment and implementation of new projects and update county leaders on the progress of research projects. The county point person should have a clear understanding of the reasons and methodology of the research and should develop a common language with the university partner and be able to translate data into policy for the county. Having a designated point person is especially helpful if there is staff turnover at the university.

Communication and collaboration should continue in between bigger research projects to keep the partnership active. Counties should utilize university researchers on smaller projects or for quick consultation, such as providing expertise on a policy decision or researching evidence-based practices for service provision. Keeping the university tapped into county affairs in between more substantial research projects can keep this partner engaged and maintain relationships and collaborative processes for when bigger opportunities arise by reducing the time for coordination or completion of MOUs. Counties can also show university faculty day-to-day affairs of county government to give them a better idea of how the county operates. For example, researchers can be given tours of the county jail or participate in ride-alongs with law enforcement to help them more fully understand how programs work.

Ada County, Idaho - Boise State University

Ada County saw a transformation in its population and demographics from a rural setting to an urban one. The county experienced a 15 percent growth in population over the course of 22 years. In order to keep up with these changes, the Sheriff's Office enlisted the help of the Department of Criminal Justice under the School of Public Service at Boise State University to help analyze the ongoing changes in crime in the community and the performance of community policing. Boise State University developed a tool to survey the residents of Ada County about their perception of crime and the performance of the Sheriff's Office during this period of transition for the community. This public report has guided the county's goal to reduce its jail population by 15 to 19 percent over a two-year timeframe as a part of the Safety and Justice Challenge.



Be Creative with Funding

Many counties also work with universities to apply for grant funding to improve county services and implement evidence-based programming. These grant RFPs, usually from foundations and government agencies, require local governments to partner with researchers to provide technical assistance, data collection and analysis and evaluation of outcomes. Having an established relationship with a university can help counties apply for grants quickly. Counties and universities can keep data-sharing protocols and application materials updated to streamline the application process.

Counties and universities can also seek funding from private donors and corporations to support research projects. Private investors can provide funding for local governments and universities to test evidence-based, innovative programs and policies and reward positive outcomes. Research and evidence-based county services are often relevant to private interests. For example, insurance companies may provide funding to counties and universities to implement and evaluate innovative health programming and services. Counties should make sure that the funder goals align with the interests, needs and restrictions of the county.



Shelby County, Tenn. – The University of Memphis

The University of Memphis's Public Safety Institute (PSI) was created as a joint venture between the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission (MSCC), a non-profit policy organization focused on crime prevention and reduction, and the university. Currently, one of the primary goals of the PSI is to work with city and county agencies to monitor and evaluate progress toward goals outlined in "Operation: Safe Community-3" (OSC3), a 5-year collaboratively developed community plan to reduce crime in Shelby County which is spearheaded by the MSCC. The MSCC has a 50-person board of directors composed of leaders in law enforcement, criminal justice, business, city, county, state, and federal government, local non-profits and the faith community, along with University of Memphis faculty. Collaboration among the MSCC, the PSI and justice stakeholders facilitates the identification of evidence-based practices and solutions, reduction of silos, collaborative grant applications and brings expertise to problem solving in the areas of crime prevention, intervention and reduction.



Realize the Challenges of University Partners

Counties should keep in mind the pressures and challenges university researchers face while working on projects. Professors usually experience a large turnover of students and researchers due to matriculation, and must also attract students to work over the summer, sometimes through paid internships using their own funding. Researchers also need to work on other projects and teach simultaneously, which can take away time from county collaborative projects. In terms of funding, researchers rarely are directly compensated for the full amount of funding designated for their work in a grant because university policies often require some or all of that funding be directed to salary and benefits. Many researchers work at a financial loss on smaller public policy research projects. It is important to reinforce the benefits of university-county collaboration such as access to data, the potential for public policy publications, prospects for projects with higher payouts in the future and press releases highlighting innovative public policy research.



Roanoke County, Va.– George Mason University

The Roanoke County Police Department (RCPD) launched a co-responder program to connect people experiencing a mental health crisis to stabilization and treatment services. The three-year program is a collaboration with the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University and Intercept Youth Services in Roanoke County. The university set up an experimental research design in which police shifts were randomly assigned to regular police response or the co-response model, in which Intercept's 24-hour Crisis One service responded to crisis calls after police stabilized the scene. The goals of the program are to reduce repeat calls for service among people who do not meet the criteria for arrest or emergency custody but may not know how to access needed services, and to reduce the disproportionate amount of time that police spend responding to crisis calls.



Manage Expectations

Counties should be prepared for a lengthy process when it comes to research projects. Establishing MOUs and other legal agreements with a university can take months to finalize. The research process can also take more time than expected and may not deliver outcomes as soon as anticipated. All county stakeholders should be familiarized with the project plan, research methods and timeline and should not expect to see immediate results. Keeping stakeholders aware of smaller victories along the way, such as a new phase of implementation or updates on data collection, can help keep them engaged and involved. County and university partners should continually remember and reinforce the end goal of the partnership to avoid losing interest or being side-tracked by other opportunities.

“The key to sustainability and implementation is managing expectations and getting everyone on the same page about what we should expect out of working together. That’s one of the challenges with our work, things don’t happen overnight.”

- Kelly Wallis, *Director of Community Services, Boone County, Mo.*



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Agree How and When Data Will be Published

Because county data will often include sensitive, individual-level information, sharing limitations and protocols should be thoroughly articulated in the MOU to protect the privacy of residents, ensure public trust is not betrayed and safeguard the integrity of county information. Counties should require the university partner to ask permission to share results to the public or other organizations or have requests for data submitted directly to the county. When sharing data with the public, counties should work closely with researchers to make sure county officials fully understand the results and are properly interpreting what the research actually means to avoid miscommunication. Coordinating press releases, publications and presentations with researchers can help counties ensure that the university is on the same page and that both partners have control over the narrative and validity of the research outcomes.

Sharing county research can be a great way to involve other local stakeholders to solve community issues or improve services and programs within the jurisdiction. Sharing research can also help other counties experiencing similar issues to replicate successful strategies. Counties and their university partners must also decide how they will manage potentially negative information and findings. For example, an evaluation of a jail mental health crisis intervention may show no impact, but this data can be used to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement in jail capacity and staff training. The county may not want this type of unfavorable information to be shared with media or otherwise made available outside of the partnership, so counties and universities should determine at the outset of their partnership how, if and when research and data will be shared publicly or used only for internal purposes.

Cook County, Ill.— The University of Chicago

The large percentage of people with mental illnesses in its jail led Cook County to focus on reentry programs for individuals returning to the community. The county created the Supportive Release Center (SRC), a facility that connects individuals with mental illnesses to services in their communities following their release from Cook County Jail. Cook County partnered with the Health Lab at the University of Chicago to examine the functionality of the facility and how it works to serve the focus population. Through the partnership, the Health Lab is providing design and evaluation support to conduct a randomized controlled trial to evaluate the impact of the SRC on health and criminal justice outcomes and generate evidence that may allow for the replication of this model in jails across the country.



Translate Data into Policy

An important aspect of county-university partnerships is using the data discovered and/or analyzed to make policy decisions. In order for counties to do this effectively, county staff should have a clear understanding of what the data truly means. If possible, counties should have someone on staff with a research background who understands the research methodology, can interpret results and provide easy-to-understand and accurate implications for policy to county stakeholders. This person should be able to work closely with policymakers and provide data and information during the creation and implementation of programs and public services. For counties that do not have the capacity for research personnel, working closely with researchers from the university to ensure a clear understanding of findings as well as making informational material, such as policy briefs and infographics, can ensure that county leaders are correctly utilizing research to enact evidence-based policy.

“It’s about helping the linkage between the people that produce the research and those that have to make the decisions. It is that space in between where people can help translate ‘this’ into options for ‘this,’ which is where local governments usually don’t have the bandwidth.”

- Erik Janas, Deputy County Administrator,
Franklin County, Ohio

St. Louis County, Mo. – The University of Missouri-St. Louis

St. Louis County, through the Safety and Justice Challenge, plans to reduce its jail population by 15 to 19 percent over the next two years. The county did not have data analysis capacity, so leaders sought assistance from the University of Missouri in St. Louis to collect and analyze jail data. Their project seeks to expand a comprehensive pretrial release program for individuals who have been carefully screened for risk to public safety. The county also hopes to identify ways to address racial disparities in incarceration and case processing because it has seen an overrepresentation of African Americans in its justice system. At the end of two years, the county hopes to implement the Public Safety Assessment tool and a population review team that can divert people out of the county jail.



Keep Partnerships Alive

When funding for a research project ends, it can be hard for a county and university to keep their relationship going. However, county and university partnerships should not end when a research project is completed. Partnerships require significant time and resources to establish and should be maintained for other research projects in the future. Universities may want to use valuable public datasets to build upon the original research question after spending time collecting data. This can lead to new information for the county partner without having to start the research process from the beginning.

Counties and universities should ensure that relationships and processes are institutionalized in order to preserve them long term. This can include enacting county policy that requires evidence-based policymaking and evaluations of county programs and services, and designating someone on county staff to maintain open lines of communication with the university. County and university points of contacts can work together to find new opportunities for collaboration by sharing county government needs and university research interests on a regular basis. Having these protocols in place can make it easier for counties to apply for grants and respond to other RFPs. Highlighting past research collaboration experience and success can also give counties and universities an advantage during these application processes. Additionally, when counties encounter new policy dilemmas or identify new research needs, they can easily request assistance from a university already familiar with the community and government.



Franklin County, Ohio – The Ohio State University

Franklin County's partnership with The Ohio State University (OSU) has gone through a series of project and focus changes, beginning with the creation of Thoughtwell, a non-profit organization that coordinated community conversations and projects focused on health, housing, economics, education, workforce development and neighborhood change. Although Thoughtwell has since dissolved, the partnership and connections created through its research projects have helped the county create and evolve a new partnership with the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at OSU. The county and Institute are currently in the process of establishing the Poverty & Race Research Action Council, which will develop a new research project to examine and address the systematic root causes of poverty in the county.



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