

Concept for strategic initiative: Community Partnerships in Research  
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One of the fundamental problems faced by the Smith community is that of access to diverse populations that are willing to participate in our curricular and research efforts. Many communities have had the repeated experience of researchers with grant funding coming into a community with predefined research goals, making promises of community collaboration and involvement, and after collecting their data, leave and are never heard from again. This abuse of trust has led many communities to an understandable reluctance to provide access to outside researchers. This occurs at a time, unfortunately, when research questions increasingly require access to these populations both because of topical focus (e.g., health disparities in underrepresented groups), and because of federal regulations that require fully representative sampling as a condition of funding.

Recognizing this problem, the National Institutes of Health issued a call for proposals to establish "community partnerships" to address identified health disparities among minority groups. Smith became eligible to participate in this program because of our funded partnership with NIH that established the Office of Research Development. We located our specific proposal to NIH within Educational Outreach because the target "disparity" of most interest to our community of researchers concerned literacy. Building on previously established working relationships, we targeted our proposals at identifying barriers to community literacy in the North End of Springfield, one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in all of Massachusetts. Over the last year, a team of Smith researchers has worked closely with members of this community to identify these barriers and to begin addressing them with specific community initiatives. Our goal through these efforts, beyond identifying and addressing barriers, is to elaborate specific research questions, working closely with community members, which might then lead to further applications for support from NIH. This approach to community partnership in research is novel for NIH and they are heavily vested in the outcome of this endeavor.

I think it safe to say that those involved with the effort have been delighted with the progress made thus far. Moreover, community members share this enthusiasm and welcome the opportunity to help define and deploy the research agenda. In addition, the partnership opens an array of research, teaching, and volunteer opportunities for students that were not fully anticipated as we began this work. Much of that is documented in Gail Scordilis' description of the initiative to expand the scope of the Office of Educational Outreach.

From the perspective of the Office Research Development, it is critical and strategic that the College commit to and prepare to maintain this valued community partnership. Not only does the partnership provide our researchers with access to the type of population diversity that we continuously struggle to find, but it provides numerous opportunities to extend our teaching and curriculum outside the classroom to view real world challenges. Most importantly, it provides researchers and students with a new model for thinking about research problems, informed not so much by the top-down theories of prior work, but the bottom-up real life experiences and challenges of the communities where the work is imbedded. Additionally, because of their interest and commitment to the Community Partnership model, this relationship provides us with a strategic linkage to NIH that will benefit any future funding efforts resulting from this work. In the highly competitive world of grant funding, the value of this linkage cannot be underestimated.

At present, we are in the second year of the three-year Community Partnership Award from NIH. Annual funding for this effort is \$30,000 and attests to the considerable payoff of this work in contrast to its meager cost. However, we are facing the end of the grant next year, and there is no formal mechanism yet for extending funding from NIH. For that reason, it is essential from both a research development and community relations standpoint that we formulate a plan for how we would like to see this effort proceed, clarifying what we see as the College's role in the partnership and how we intend to support this effort. Such a plan could be imbedded in the initiative to expand the scope of the Office of Educational Outreach, but it should not depend on the progress of that effort. The hard work of a large number of Smith faculty, crossing numerous departmental and disciplinary boundaries, have laid the foundation for a productive community research partnership in the North End of Springfield. Clarifying and expanding that partnership would buttress many of the strategic directions defined for the College over the next 10 years.