

10 Lessons for Partnering with Researchers to Build Evidence that Matters

1. Policy & Program Decisions Must Drive Research

Aims: Research will only be impactful if it helps to answer questions that will inform policy and program decisions. Researchers can uncover an endless number of interesting questions that merit exploration, but you must stay true to what information is most needed for decision making.

2. Understand Researchers' Incentives: Many academic researchers want their work to have impact, yet they work within a system where incentives don't always align to that. Currency for most academic researchers is in studying novel questions with interesting data and rigorous methods that result in academic publications. "Desk research" usually isn't of primary interest. Consider how projects and other resources can help align their incentives and your needs.

3. You are a Necessary Member of the Research Team:

Active participation by government staff is vital for a relevant and impactful research project. Nurture a culture and seek partnerships where everyone is seen as a researcher and all relevant expertise is respected.

4. Transparency Confers Respect: Shifts in budget, policy, implementation, or other real-world constraints can, and likely will, interfere with the best-laid research plans. Be as transparent and as timely as possible with researchers about these constraints and shifts.

5. Your Community Connections Matter: Governments are accountable to and have the most durable connections to community. Many researchers trained in quantitative methods aren't well equipped to work directly with community. Be prepared to remain in the lead on engaging community partners and ensuring equity considerations are part of the research design. Engaging with community is needed to help define relevant outcomes and ensures the research addresses the priorities of those being served and is trusted by them.

6. Be Prepared to Embrace Negative & Null Results:

Unexpected results present the most valuable learning opportunities. Seek research partners who are committed to collaborating with you beyond the findings – to analyze and communicate the results so that you understand what is behind the them and how to improve.

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7. Nurture Continuous & Rigorous Learning: Many benefits of a research project come not at the end, but along the way. Build processes that help to regularly lift up and utilize these learnings. Use real-time data and frequent communication to allow for timely adjustments and improvements to interventions based on research insights.

8. Work Toward Long-Term Partnerships: Building a sustained partnership with a researcher or research org creates significant benefits. The work becomes easier, and more beneficial for each party. Each subsequent project within a strong partnership builds upon previous knowledge, accelerating the learning process and fostering innovation.

9. Tackle Procurement & Contracting Barriers in Advance: Governments' typical approaches to contracting and data sharing don't always align well to support research partnerships. Think through and reach out to internal partners in advance to develop pathways. Lean on other governments' examples to support. Starting with a grant-funded research project can help to alleviate some of these barriers.

10. Timing is NOT Everything: Designing and implementing a rigorous research project is complex, even when you start with a seemingly simple question. It is rare that you will be able to align a research project's timing with key deadlines or decisions. Be prepared for the process to take twice as long as you expect. Following the other lessons here will help ensure you gain great benefits from the process!