

# Backgrounder

## About the Impact Study

### Measuring the Impact of Community-University Research Partnerships

#### Research Partnerships are Proliferating

Research partnerships between universities and community organizations or groups are proliferating in Canada and elsewhere. They have long been an important strategy for health promotion and community development (Gillies, 1998). Funding for community-linked research initiatives is growing (Boutilier, Mason, & Rootman, 1997). Many research granting agencies currently sponsor research programs that explicitly require research to be conducted collaboratively by university and community partners (Eakin & Maclean, 1992).

#### What are Community-University Research Partnerships?

The general aim of these partnerships is to foster research linkages between communities and universities in order to promote multidisciplinary endeavours focusing on important real-world issues and problems. The term “community” encompasses the lay public, practitioners, and other stakeholders—the intended users or beneficiary groups (Eakin & Maclean, 1992). These community-university research partnerships provide an infrastructure from which research projects that address shared interests develop, and findings are shared.

#### How Have Partnerships Been Evaluated?

It is generally assumed that research partnerships are beneficial. They are thought to produce knowledge that informs community members and leads to greater understanding, more efficient service delivery, more effective clinical programs, and enhanced community development. There is, however, little concrete evidence of these benefits. Consequently, the real-world impacts of research partnerships are largely unknown. Impact has most often been examined (a) using traditional measures of research productivity such as publications and citations or (b) by taking the perspective of the internal partnership team.

#### Why is a Generic Impact Measure Important?

Although impact in the university setting is often measured by the number of publications and presentations, little is known about how to measure impacts from a community perspective. There are a variety of potential community impacts (e.g., enhanced social or health services, improved community collaboration). We need to be better able to articulate and demonstrate the benefits of research partnerships from the perspective of community members. People in partnerships need external guidance and an indication that they are on the right track. They need to demonstrate their accountability to advisory boards, funders, and communities. Within the university, researchers often obtain benefits from partnership that are less tangible than the number of publications, and these impacts are often ignored.

#### What Should a Generic Measure of Impact Take into Account?

A comprehensive search of the literature (including the topics of health promotion, community development, and research utilization) uncovered no standardized, generic measures of types of impacts that reveal the real-world relevance of research partnerships for both researchers and community members. Sensitive, accurate, and acceptable measures of the community impacts of research alliances do not exist (Illback, Kalafat, & Sanders, 1997). The main conclusions drawn from a review of the literature are as follows:

- The **phenomenon of collaborative research impact is complex** and requires a multidimensional assessment of different types of impacts (Buxton & Hanney, 1996). Impact can be conceived in terms of **stages** such as awareness, use, and consequences of information, **levels** such as outputs, applications, and final outcomes, or **recipients/systems** such as individuals, organizations, and communities.
- The current view of research utilization stresses the **multiple uses** of research evidence and ideas. Research information is useful (a) instrumentally

(e.g., to make services timely or effective), (b) strategically or politically (e.g., to advocate for new services or demonstrate accountability), and (c) conceptually (e.g., to conceive of, plan, or refine services or approaches).

- Program evaluation studies have examined the effectiveness of community partnerships for **health promotion interventions** (such as substance abuse programs). Program evaluation methodologies provide important information about the utility of a specific health promotion program, but are time-consuming and do not permit comparisons across partnerships.
- The impact of **multidisciplinary research partnerships** requires study (Eakin & Maclean, 1992). Evaluation studies in the health field have assessed the payback of research and development programs, using a combination of traditional outcome measures (e.g., publications) and community-based indicators (e.g., changes in individuals' behaviour or service delivery), but have not used generic tools.
- The various **types of community impact** have not been clearly articulated. Important community impacts to capture include (a) behavioural change in individuals, (b) service level changes, such as improved social or health services/programs, and (c) community, social, or system level changes, such as enhanced community capacities, stronger community networks, better service integration, or greater accessibility of services in a region.
- The various impacts of engaging in research partnerships **on researchers** have not been clearly articulated. Important university impacts include (a) impact on curriculum, (b) an enhanced multidisciplinary perspective, and (c) utilization of different research approaches.
- Different **stakeholder groups** (e.g., students, practitioners, managers) may value different outcomes from research partnerships, including personal knowledge, skill development, improvements in planning programs and developing policy, and community development (Boutilier et al., 1997).

## Development of a Generic Impact Measure

Researchers from five community-university partnerships have joined together to develop a reliable and valid survey measure of the community impacts of research partnerships between universities and community agencies that address social or health issues.

The focus will be on mid-term impacts—the influence of partnerships on individuals, partner agencies, and target communities or systems. The intended users or beneficiaries (community members) of the partnerships' knowledge sharing and education efforts will complete the measure.

This 3-year project will benefit members of research partnerships who wish to evaluate their effectiveness and adjust their activities to meet community needs. The instrument also will allow community stakeholders and advisory boards to capture the success of their collaborative research initiatives.

**This publication has been brought to you by the Impact Study Team.**

### The Impact Study

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