

Training Community Leaders to Serve as Equal Partners in Research: Penn Community Scholars Program, 2015–2023

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An implementation and effectiveness evaluation of the Community Scholars Program was conducted at the University of Pennsylvania to enhance community capacity to collaborate with academics in mutually beneficial, equitable, and transformative research. Mixed methods were employed using administrative data, surveys, and key informant interviews. Participants expressed high satisfaction, valued interactive learning, and identified areas for improvement. The program increased knowledge and self-confidence in research-related skills and trust in the research process. The program serves as an institutional model to create long-term, mutually beneficial community-academic partnerships. (*Am J Public Health.* 2024;114(3):284–288. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2023.307549>)

The Penn Community Scholars Program is an intervention aimed at enhancing the research capabilities of community-based organizations. The program equips community partners with skills to become equal contributors, leveraging their unique insights and fostering equitable collaboration by understanding and engaging effectively in the research process.

INTERVENTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

The program consists of 12 two-hour evening training sessions over two academic semesters, covering topics related to community-academic partnerships and steps in the research process focusing on community-based participatory research. The lead facilitator, a community resident with a long

history of family activism and knowledge of community needs, collaborated with a public health practitioner and faculty member to develop training. These sessions were iterated from 2015 to 2018 with community input. Each session includes skill-building activities, group interaction, and expert facilitation. The program engages content experts, provides networking opportunities among peers, and conducts individual coaching sessions. The program culminates in participants presenting their project idea and research questions in an oral pitch at a public symposium. The pitch serves as a blueprint for future proposals; participants have been successful at receiving funding ranging from institutional \$10 000 pilot grants to larger foundation and federal grants (e.g., Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute).

PLACE, TIME, AND PERSONS

The Penn Community Scholars Program was implemented in 2015 out of an academic institution in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and has provided training to 76 individuals representing 65 community-oriented organizations, all of which serve local communities in Philadelphia. Overall, the majority of participants (73%) are female and approximately half of the participants are Black or African American (48%), followed by White (42%). Approximately 48% of organizations have fewer than 20 employees, 29% are medium organizations with 20 to 50 employees and volunteers, and 23% are large organizations with over 50 members.

Most organizations focus on serving minority populations living at or below

the poverty level, representing different racial and ethnic groups. By design, organizations center their efforts on a broad range of topics largely around the social determinants of health, such as education, housing, employment, food security, unintentional injuries, and violence. Program sessions are in a hybrid format, occurring both virtually and in person at the institution.

PURPOSE

For community-academic partnerships to be effective, community organizations need the capacity to actively participate in and colead research collaborations.¹⁻³ Moreover, the establishment of trust is imperative for fostering meaningful partnerships, especially in light of the historical mistrust that has persisted among communities regarding participation in research.^{4,5} To address these challenges, the program was designed to bridge knowledge and skills gaps, foster trust, and enhance the community's

ability to colead the research process. Central to the program's purpose was recognition of the value that community members bring, including unique insights into local needs, concerns, and cultural nuances.^{5,6} Furthermore, the program recognized that investing in training and skill development for community members could lead to effective and sustainable community-academic collaborations, ultimately advancing health equity and improving community health.

EVALUATION

The evaluation focused on both the implementation and effectiveness of the program. The evaluation does not encompass the initial two years (designated as pilot years) or the year 2020, which was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Outcomes at the individual level included participation, satisfaction, knowledge, attitudes, and self-confidence (Figure 1). At the organizational level, the evaluation examined changes in

research infrastructure and the growth of academic partnerships. Surveys were conducted after each session, as well as a pre- and postprogram survey and key-informant interviews. Surveys measured self-reported increases in knowledge and self-confidence across various aspects of community-based participatory research and program components, such as taking the lead in the research process, partnering with academics, developing goals, and creating an oral funding pitch. Surveys also measured attitudes (e.g., trust), beliefs (e.g., importance), desires, and behavioral intentions to conduct research. Participants' self-reported variables were based on a five-point Likert scale, with 5 being the most favorable.

Overall, participants reported high satisfaction, with an average satisfaction score of 4.7 out of 5. Participant feedback highlighted several positive aspects of the program, including learning, interactive sessions, networking opportunities, feedback from

Community Scholars Program

Goal: Enhance the community's ability to collaborate with academics in research that is mutually beneficial, equitable, and transformative.

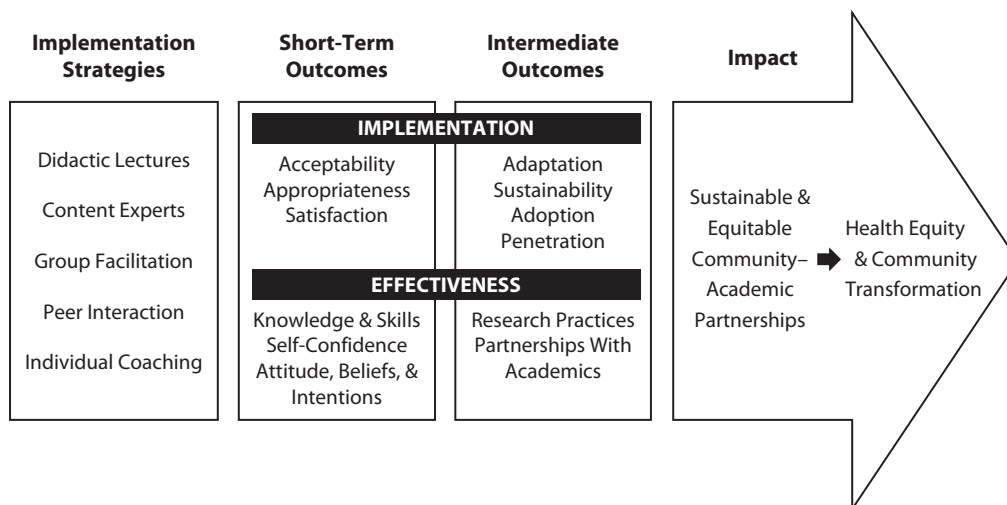


FIGURE 1— Conceptual Framework for the Penn Community Scholars Program: Philadelphia, PA

facilitators, and the expertise shared by speakers. They found the information provided to be practical and applicable to their work. Areas for improvement included a need for more time, structured feedback systems, clearer instructions and objectives, increased collaboration and networking opportunities, more advanced content, and sustained interactive elements throughout the course.

There were statistically significant pre- to postprogram increases across all variables related to knowledge, self-confidence, attitudes, and beliefs (Table 1). The largest increases in knowledge were seen in developing specific aims (mean difference = 2.4; 95% confidence interval [CI] = 1.6, 3.2) and pitching a proposal (mean difference = 2.2; 95% CI = 1.6, 2.8).

There were also positive changes in self-confidence, with the largest increases in developing specific aims (mean difference = 2.1; 95% CI = 1.4, 2.5), navigating the institutional review board (mean difference = 1.6; 95% CI = 1.0, 2.2), and partnering with an academic (mean difference = 1.4; 95% CI = 1.0, 1.9). Increases were also observed in participants' attitude toward

TABLE 1— Short-Term Effectiveness Outcomes in Self-Reported Knowledge, Confidence, Attitudes, and Beliefs Before and After the Penn Community Scholars Program: Philadelphia, PA, 2018–2023

	Mean Response		Mean Difference From Pre- to Postsurvey (95% CI) ^a
	Presurvey	Postsurvey	
Self-perceived knowledge			
Developing a research question	2.8	4.4	1.6 (1.1, 2.0)
Navigating the IRB	2.7	3.8	1.1 (0.4, 1.7)
Data collection approaches	3.1	4.1	1.0 (0.3, 1.5)
Partnering with an academic	2.9	4.1	1.2 (0.7, 1.7)
Communicating findings	3.1	4.0	0.9 (0.5, 1.4)
Identifying funding mechanisms	2.9	3.8	0.9 (0.3, 1.5)
Developing a logic model	2.5	4.5	2.0 (1.2, 2.7)
Developing a MOU	2.1	4.1	2.0 (1.2, 2.9)
Developing specific aims	1.5	3.9	2.4 (1.6, 3.2)
Pitching a proposal	2.6	4.8	2.2 (1.6, 2.8)
Self-perceived confidence			
Developing a research question	3.2	4.3	1.1 (0.7, 1.6)
Navigating the IRB	2.4	4.0	1.6 (1.0, 2.2)
Data collection approaches	3.0	4.2	1.2 (0.7, 1.7)
Partnering with an academic	3.0	4.4	1.4 (1.0, 1.9)
Communicating findings	3.6	4.6	1.0 (1.0, 2.2)
Identifying funding mechanisms	2.8	4.1	1.3 (0.6, 1.9)
Developing a logic model	2.9	4.2	1.3 (0.8, 1.9)
Developing a MOU	3.0	3.5	0.5 (−0.1, 1.1)
Developing specific aims	2.0	4.1	2.1 (1.4, 2.5)
Pitching a proposal	2.9	4.2	1.3 (0.9, 1.7)
Attitudes and beliefs			
Importance of research to fulfill organizational needs	3.7	4.7	1.0 (0.5, 1.4)
Desire to partner with an academic in research	3.8	4.4	0.6 (0.2, 1.0)
Trust in academic partnerships to support organizational mission	3.3	4.3	1.0 (0.1, 1.9)
Trust in research process to support organizational mission	3.5	4.1	0.6 (0.1, 1.1)

Note. CI = confidence interval; IRB = institutional review board; MOU = memorandum of understanding. Survey items were based on 5-point Likert scales for each category from 1 = not at all (knowledgeable, confident, important, desirable) to 5 = extremely (knowledgeable, confident, important, desirable). The sample size was n = 40.

^aAll P values are < .001 based on paired 2-sample for means t-test.

the importance of research to fulfill organizational needs (mean difference = 1.0; 95% CI = 0.5, 1.4) and trust in academic partnerships to support their organizational mission (mean difference = 1.0; 95% CI = 0.1, 1.9).

The majority (80%) of organizations (n = 65) expressed an interest in partnering in research after completing the program. Based on available data, 18 of all participating organizations (28%) have formed community-academic partnerships since completing the program. These partnerships encompass a range of activities, including recruiting study participants, serving as data collection sites, assisting with outreach and dissemination of results, providing input on outreach procedures, and serving as coinvestigators on grants.

SUSTAINABILITY

The program's sustainability relies on continuous institutional support and has shown consistent demand from community organizations. After being founded with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson foundation, it is currently offered annually with funding from the University of Pennsylvania Office of the Vice Provost of Research (OVPR) through June 2024. Advanced programing is currently being developed to enhance sustainability by streamlining the partnership process, making it easier and more efficient for community organizations to collaborate with academics after completing the program. This initiative, named REACH (Research and Equity in Academic-Community Partnerships for Health), is also funded by the OVPR and was launched in October 2023.⁷ With continued institutional support and improved infrastructure,

the program demonstrates promising signs of long-term success in fostering collaborations and addressing health disparities. However, to fully assess its lasting impact, additional evaluation will be required to measure the program's effects over an extended period.

PUBLIC HEALTH SIGNIFICANCE

The Penn Community Scholars Program plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration and strengthening the capacity of community organizations to be equal partners in research. By building the capacity of these organizations and recognizing their unique contributions to research, the program enables more inclusive and impactful outcomes. This is particularly important because an increasing number of funders now require such partnerships, emphasizing the importance of equitably involving communities in the research process. To increase the program's impact on public health and promote health equity and community transformation, it is essential to advance institutional practices and academic training in the field of equitable community-academic partnerships. This will contribute to strengthening the foundation for collaborative research efforts.

Working toward a robust evaluation and continuous improvement, the Penn Community Scholars Program serves as an evidence-based model for other academic institutions interested in supporting impactful community-academic partnerships. *AJPH*

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CONTRIBUTORS

S. R. Solomon drafted the manuscript, performed analysis, and played a pivotal role in conceptualizing and organizing the article's content. S. R. Solomon and N. A. Thomas co-direct the training program. N. A. Thomas contributed to the article's conceptualization, offering valuable insights and ideas that shaped the direction of the study. She also played a significant role in reviewing and refining the article, ensuring its accuracy, clarity, and relevance. Additionally, her contributions enriched the analysis and discussion of the training program's implications. A. Belfiglio made substantial contributions through his detailed review and editing of the article. His efforts ensured the article's coherence, consistency, and adherence to academic standards. He also assisted in creating clear and effective data visualizations, enhancing the paper's presentation. L. Tuton played a supervisory role throughout the article's development, providing guidance and oversight to the team. Her expertise ensured the article's alignment with scholarly standards and its contribution to the field. She also provided edits, refining the paper's language, structure, and overall quality.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

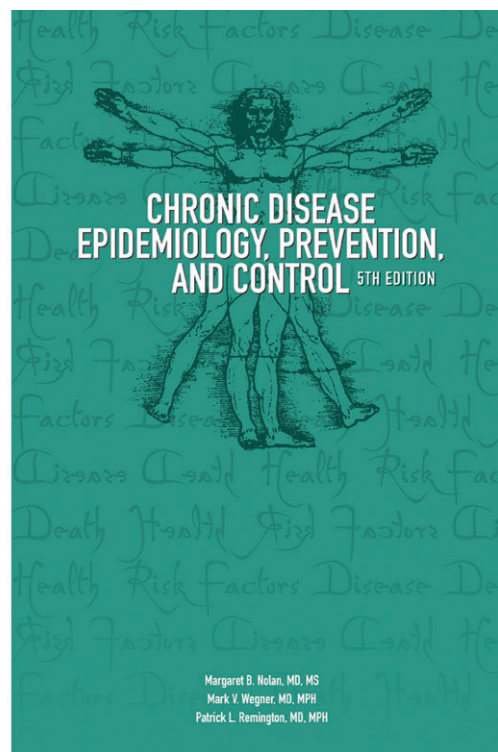
The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

HUMAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

All data in this analysis were deidentified and therefore exempt from institutional review board review.

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