



## Partnerships Prevail: Researchers and Practitioners Unite to Help Youth Development Programs

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Scholars developed a program where undergraduate students learn to conduct research with community practitioners in local counties. Students applied their research skills to address the needs of youth development organizations. Findings show the program helped prioritize community practitioner needs and fostered a synergistic relationship between all partners.

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### INTRODUCTION

One mission of research institutions is to benefit society; even so, universities and their local communities often exist in separate worlds. Research-practice partnerships help bridge the gap between research institutions and community practitioners. By uniting researchers and practitioners, community needs can be highlighted and addressed through scientific pursuits.

Though research-practice partnerships are designed to benefit all collaborators, researchers' outreach goals are often prioritized over practitioners' needs. Also, practitioners frequently report that research is not beneficial for their work. For partnerships to be successful, they must be mutually beneficial and mutual respect, shared goals, and reciprocal trust must emerge among researchers and practitioners.

Community-engaged learning opportunities can foster research-practice partnerships. Guided by university researchers, students can explore real-world problems and conduct research *with* and *for* community-based organizations and associated practitioners. Community-engaged learning gives students experience in collaborative work and addressing real-world problems with applied research.

By integrating real-world experience and coursework knowledge, students often become more engaged in their learning which can improve other outcomes. Most colleges offer few

opportunities, however, for students to participate in community-engaged learning.

#### **Research-Practice Partnership**

Long-term collaboration and sustained relationships between researchers and practitioners who collectively work to study and address problems of practice

#### **Community-Engaged Learning**

Students apply skills they learn in the classroom by engaging in activities with the world outside the university that may also benefit community partners

### THE STUDY

The goal of this study was to identify successes and areas for improving a research-practice partnership centered on community-engaged learning.

Scholars at Cornell University developed the Program for Research on Youth Development and Engagement (PRYDE). The goal of PRYDE is to bring together researchers and youth-development organizations to help improve children's lives. PRYDE specifically works with 4-H Youth Development programs which are non-for-profit organizations that provide children and adolescents opportunities to engage in hands-on educational experiences year round. Cornell researchers reached out to 4-H practitioners in New York. Practitioners from four counties were interested in partnering with the researchers through PRYDE.

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<sup>1</sup> I created this brief because I believe the ideas in it may help researchers, practitioners, students, and community members understand the benefits of creating and sustaining partnerships. This brief represents my best attempt to summarize and interpret the ideas presented by Agans et al. (2021). All errors or misunderstandings are my own.



Interested Cornell undergraduate students can participate in a two-year fellowship with PRYDE. In the first year, students are paired with faculty, take research courses, and are introduced to local 4-H programs. In the second year, students use their research skills to design and implement a collaborative project with participating 4-H practitioners. This study focused on partner experiences during the second year of PRYDE.

## METHOD

At the start of their second year in PRYDE, students met with participating practitioners, and together, determined that a project evaluating 4-H programs would be beneficial. Guided by faculty, students and practitioners collectively developed and refined surveys to assess each 4-H program. Practitioners administered the surveys to 4-H youth participants. Students analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and presented to the practitioners. Practitioners gave the students feedback throughout every step of the study. Students also created and shared a spreadsheet with practitioners with the survey questions, scales, and outcomes. The spreadsheet was designed so practitioners could continue analyzing program data after students finished their PRYDE fellowship. At the end of the year, students wrote their study in a research paper and submitted it to practitioners and faculty partners.

The published paper reporting all partner experiences was written collectively by Cornell researchers, students, and practitioners.

Open-ended survey questions were sent to all PRYDE partners to understand their satisfaction with the partnership. Questions addressed how initial expectations differed from the reality of the collaboration, perceived program successes, and areas for improvement. This study addressed partner perceptions of the collaboration and did not focus on 4-H program assessment results.

## FINDINGS

Neither students nor practitioners knew what to expect, but both thought the program was successful. Students and practitioners reported positive relationships with one another. Partners noted that everyone was highly invested in prioritizing practitioners' needs.

The only challenge students reported was that they felt they could have been clearer communicating with practitioners; however, practitioners reported being highly satisfied with communication throughout the study. Practitioners' main reported challenge was timing. Timing of data collection did not fully align with the needs of the program; but practitioners stated that the students' research paper and spreadsheet would be very helpful for evaluating their program in the future. Students also mentioned that they developed communication skills and were proud of their work.

"We all wanted the best possible deliverable and it was a paper that each of us was proud of, maybe the best paper I've written in college." --Student

"Everyone [was] on-board about prioritizing the need of the practitioners." --Student

"We were able to share feedback and give input on the project from the beginning. It was nice to develop something alongside a researcher rather than be handed a packet and expectations to 'go do.'" --Practitioner

## IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that a research-practice partnership centered on community-engaged learning benefits research, students, and practitioners. By working *with* and *for* practitioners throughout the conceptualization and implementation of research, applicable and relevant research products can be created; students can develop important skills; and community practitioners can gain resources and skills that they can use in the future. Designing programs similar to PRYDE may help bring researchers and practitioners together in other communities.

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