



Guest Editorial

Partnerships for progress in active living: From research to action

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1. Partnerships for progress in active living: from research to action

The theme for the 2011 Active Living Research Annual Conference was “Partnerships for Progress in Active Living: From Research to Action.” The rationale for this theme was simple: no person is an island. The theme recognizes that partnerships are essential to identify and implement solutions for community-engaged active living research. Our intent was to highlight the importance of researchers, professionals, and community members/organizations from diverse disciplines working collaboratively to address childhood obesity and promote active living.

For some, the very nature of their research question requires partnerships. For example, the Walking School Bus pilot study described in this issue (Mendoza et al. (2012)) and elsewhere (Mendoza et al., 2011; Mendoza et al., 2010), necessitated a partnership with the local school district which endures to the present, despite the end of grant funding. Other partnerships from that project have become largely inactive, given each organization's current projects and the multitude of competing priorities. The resulting partnership discontinuity resulting from both investigator inaction and a lack of partnership infrastructure at the institutional level creates inefficiencies and potentially engenders mistrust among target communities that remain under-represented in health research (Yancey et al., 2006). Based on this and similar community-engaged projects, three areas in the academic research enterprise merit careful consideration by multiple stakeholders.

How does an individual investigator, especially a junior investigator, establish and maintain partnerships, given the intense pressure to “publish or perish” and the unpredictable nature of grant funding? Certainly investigators themselves must take responsibility to establish and maintain partnerships, regardless of funding status. Simply keeping in touch by email, telephone, or by brief in person meetings may be sufficient for some

partnerships to remain intact. Beyond that, volunteering in an advisory capacity for partner organizations may be a mutually beneficial solution that could lead to further collaborations. Investigators must take a long term outlook on partnerships rather than project by project.

What is the role of academic institutions? Undoubtedly, structural changes to academic institutions' promotion and tenure policies are necessary to recognize that community-engaged researchers produce a variety of scholarship products beyond traditional peer-reviewed publications (Calleson et al., 2005). As others have noted previously, stable funding for maintaining partnerships, especially at the organizational level, would be very helpful in sustaining partnerships over long periods of time (Clinical and Translational Science Awards Community Engagement Key Function Committee, 2009; Roussos and Fawcett, 2000). Not only would these long term partnerships be of benefit to researchers, but they arguably could also serve as exemplary community outreach and public service by the academic institutions.

Funding agencies could play a large role to encourage partnerships for community-engaged research. For example, previous funding opportunities by Active Living Research of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, have encouraged the formation of research teams from diverse disciplines, including community partners and policy makers, to participate in the research process. The US National Institute of Health's (NIH) Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA), a program designed to accelerate the pace of clinical and translational research, has designated one of its core requirements as community engagement in CTSA research. This and similar programs could drive fundamental changes to the academic research enterprise and ensure the opportunity for community partner involvement throughout (Michener et al., 2009). Despite community engagement as a core CTSA requirement, a recent survey of community engagement at one institution's CTSA reported a minority (42.6%) had any community engagement activities, and only 17.2% reported substantial involvement of community

partner(s) throughout the research process (Hood et al., 2010). These data suggest that it remains a significant challenge for researchers to step away from the ivory tower and take meaningful steps to partner with community members and organizations to formulate and pursue research questions. Requiring partnership infrastructure by academic institutions through CTSA, Program Project Grants, or similar funding opportunities to support community partners in the long term may be necessary to establish enduring relationships and trust (Roussos and Fawcett, 2000). One infrastructure example is a community council, in which community representatives and researchers regularly discuss and plan many, if not all, phases of research projects. Clearly, funding for partnership infrastructure and impact on community-engaged research is a promising area that merits further evaluation.

The evidence for community-engaged research with robust partner involvement appears favorable (Israel et al., 1998; Viswanathan et al., 2004). Best practices for community engaged research developed from a series of CTSA workshops have been published (Clinical and Translational Science Awards Community Engagement Key Function Committee, 2009). Theoretical frameworks, methods, and interventions for partnerships and community-engaged research have been proposed and evaluated (Foster-Fishman and Behrens, 2007; Peirson et al., 2011). Many active living researchers already rely on partnerships for their community-based research projects. As the value of enduring partnerships to the academic research enterprise is realized, robust engagement of community partners will hopefully move from being the sole responsibility of individual investigators to a shared model with academic institutions and supported by funding agencies. It appears that those wishing to bring about systems change (Foster-Fishman and Behrens, 2007) may first have to change the system for health research.

2. The 2011 active living research conference

The active living field is defined by combining the diverse knowledge, skills, and perspectives required to understand the environmental and policy drivers of physical activity, then apply that understanding to make communities better for active living. The breadth of engaged disciplines and sectors continues to grow, as we learn about more research needs and create new opportunities for changing policy and practice. The theme for the 2011 Active Living Research (ALR) Conference, *"Partnerships for Progress in Active Living: From Research to Action,"* acknowledges that to advance the field we need to expand and improve partnerships in research teams and between research teams and other stakeholders.

The eighth ALR Conference was designed to contribute to all of ALR's goals. The first goal is to build the evidence to support environmental and policy changes to increase physical activity, and the second goal is to build a strong and diverse field of researchers. ALR is the only conference that brings together investigators from dozens of disciplines. The third goal of using research to inform policy change is achieved by having policy makers on the program, attracting policy maker and practitioner attendees, and giving an annual Translating Research to Policy Award. As background, ALR funds research on environments and policies that support active living for children and families, contributing evidence to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's commitment to reverse childhood obesity by 2015, with a focus on groups at high risk (Sallis et al., 2009).

Jonathan Lever delivered the Keynote Address on partnerships, providing vivid examples of how the YMCA of the USA is partnering with researchers and community groups to deliver evidence-based health programs through their large network of facilities (Lever, 2012). The featured panel expanded on the partnership theme by illustrating approaches to integrating the evaluation of partnerships

into research and practice. Leon Caldwell gave an overview of the National Think Tank for African American Progress, based on his scholar-activist model, which is organizing partnerships of community groups and researchers in multiple cities. Stergios Roussos gave an overview of his review of the evaluation of partnerships and his own studies on the topic. Janice Johnson Dias provided examples of how her work builds and studies partnerships. A clear lesson from the keynote and panel was that using research to improve partnerships could lead to improvements in the quality of community-based research and the translation of research to policy. Another lesson was that long-term commitment to building and sustaining partnerships is needed to achieve research and community change goals.

The ALR "Translating Research to Policy Award" recognizes groups or individuals engaged in policy and/or advocacy work who used research in the process of policy or environmental changes related to youth physical activity or obesity prevention. It just so happened that the award winner was an outstanding example of effective partnerships. The New York City Active Design Guidelines were a joint project of multiple New York City agencies, private sector partners, and academics. Each guideline explicitly labels its evidence base, and the guidelines are written for practitioners in architecture, city design and planning, and transportation (Lee, 2012).

The conference was packed with oral presentations and slides, selected from the record 199 abstracts submitted. Abstracts from all research presented and slides from panels, workshops, and oral presentations are available online (<http://www.activelivingresearch.org/conference/2011>).

The ALR Conference is a laboratory for creating an active meeting. Standing tables were positioned around the edges of the plenary room. In addition to short activity breaks after plenary sessions, extended activity breaks included yoga, walking, running, and African dance. Now an ALR tradition, every presenter received "active applause" or a standing ovation that benefits both presenters and the audience. Apropos to the 2011 conference being in the Hard Rock Hotel, we had a dance concert in the Woodstock Tent. Theo and Zydeco Patrol got everyone moving to the rhythms of Louisiana. Then, talented conference attendees performed as the ALR Rock and Soul Review. At intermission, ALR grantee Kevin Nadal and local Filipino American students got the audience involved in a cultural dance. You can see samples of this active evening on the ALR YouTube Channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/ActiveLivingResearch>).

3. Highlights from this special issue

In this ALR special issue of Health and Place, there are themes and lessons learned that should be useful for researchers, practitioners, and advocates. Several studies focused on safety, injury prevention and physical activity in children and youth. Pollack and colleagues (2012) reviewed evidence of associations between children's common physical activities and injury risk. While an active living goal is for most children to walk or cycle to and from school each weekday, increased active transport results in increased exposure to traffic and associated injury risks. As highlighted by Pollack "Place and space are important for promoting activity and preventing injury, thus there is a need for collaboration across those fields promoting active lifestyles and those promoting the prevention of injuries" (Pollack et al., 2012, p. 110). Such exposures, and ensuing safety concerns relating to children's walking and cycling, are major issues for mothers as shown in the study by Olvera et al. (2012). Interestingly, Hispanic children's perceptions of safety were significantly less than those of their mothers, which is consistent with previous research of

Australian children and their parents (Timperio et al., 2004). Olvera et al. (2012) also reported that compared with children's perceptions, those of their mothers were more strongly associated with children's physical activity, suggesting that parents place restrictions on their child's active transport behavior because of safety concerns.

As argued by Pollack et al. (2012), ideally the development of active transport and other physical activity initiatives for youth would focus on safety and injury prevention in addition to promoting physical activity. Three papers in this special issue report on the effectiveness and uptake of strategies to facilitate children's safe and active transport to school. Having previously reported effectiveness of the Walking School Bus program in promoting children's active transport to school as well as increasing their overall physical activity (Mendoza et al., 2011); Mendoza et al. (2012) take their analyses further by examining the feasibility of assessing children's street crossing pedestrian safety behaviors (e.g., stopping at the curb, crossing at the corner/crosswalk), thus integrating safety and active living goals.

In another child pedestrian safety and active transport to school initiative, uptake of the 2005 US Safe Routes to School program is also reported. Cradock et al. (2012) examined the realities of implementing state-based changes in policy and practice in relation to children's active transport. By 2009, only 44% of the funds received for the US Safe Routes to School program had been allocated by states. Perhaps not surprisingly, states that had a history of implementing other federal active transport initiatives were more likely to have commenced a Safe Routes to School project. In a similar state-level study, Chriqui et al. (2012) reported on associations between state laws to improve child pedestrian safety (particularly around schools, such as sidewalks, crossing guards, speed zones, hazardous route exemptions, etc.) and active transport to school policies and practices in US public elementary schools. The authors concluded that state laws developed to enhance child safety, particularly the requirement for crossing guards, may also result in active transport policies and initiatives in schools. Illustrating the variety of policy approaches that seem to be effective, Bocarro et al. (2012) reported that the presence of physical activity policies within schools was significantly associated with youth physical activity.

In addition to regulatory approaches to facilitate physical activity in the population, several studies reported on the effectiveness of neighborhood design for promoting physical activity in children and adults and the process of achieving such designs (Dunton et al., 2012; Almanza et al., 2012; Hoehner et al., 2012). Hoehner et al., (2012) provided valuable insights into the challenges and successes of the partnership process involved in neighborhood redevelopment in Missouri. Dunton et al. (2012) and Almanza et al. (2012) reported beneficial associations with children's physical activity levels among those living in smart growth compared with conventional neighborhoods using ecological momentary assessment techniques. In another setting, the incorporation of outdoor exercise equipment (fitness zones) in 12 parks in Los Angeles was found to increase use of parks and park-based physical activity as well as being cost-effective (10.5 cents/MET), particularly in parks where few facilities were present (Cohen et al., 2012).

Other papers in this Special Issue provide evidence about the potential for other policy and environment changes to contribute to improvements in youth physical activity in a variety of settings. The commentaries complement the full papers in this issue of Health and Place. For example, the commentary on reviews of studies of built environment and youth physical activity documents the rapid growth in this literature, reveals findings that can be acted on, yet makes clear the continuing challenges in creating evidence-based solutions to childhood inactivity and obesity

(Ding, Gebel (2012)). Though most of the papers came from a US context, two commentaries illustrate very effectively that partnerships in the active living field are essential for creating change. Effective and innovative partnerships from Brazil (Matsudo, 2012) and Australia (Giles-Corti & Whitzman, 2012) both echo some lessons from the US (Lever, 2012) and provide additional strategies that are likely to have international applicability. Though each context has unique qualities and a need for tailored solutions, our field will benefit from identifying principles of environmental design, policy, and the change process that can be applied across diverse contexts and countries to achieve solutions to youth inactivity and obesity.

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