BUILDING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIONS ACROSS ACADEMIA & COMMUNITIES:

INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCHING WITH COMMUNITIES

PRIORITIZE STRONG RELATIONSHIPS FROM DAY ONE

IMPROVE CAPACITY TO SUPPORT PARTNERSHIPS

COMMUNICATE AND MOBILIZE TO MOVE RESEARCH INTO ACTION
ABOUT RESEARCHING WITH COMMUNITIES, A CIFAR CHANGE MAKERS SYMPOSIUM:

CIFAR’s Change Makers dialogue “Researching with Communities” was held with United Way Toronto and York Region on November 26, 2015 in Toronto. Robin Cory, strategic advisor to non-profits and foundations across Canada and member of CIFAR’s IdeasExchange Advisory Council moderated the event. The four speakers were West Neighbourhood House Executive Director, Maureen Fair; Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services Executive Director, Axelle Janczur; CIFAR SIIWB Associate Director and Senior Fellow, Philip Oreopoulos; and SIIWB Advisory Council member Kim Matheson. Leaders from United Way member agencies, CIFAR fellows and other researchers from across the Greater Toronto Area discussed how to build effective collaborations and achieve greater impact together.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIONS ACROSS ACADEMIA AND COMMUNITIES: 
INSIGHTS FROM CIFAR’S SYMPOSIUM 
“RESEARCHING WITH COMMUNITIES”

This document is intended to guide community organizations and academics seeking to collaborate together towards developing meaningful and effective partnerships that have the greatest positive impact for communities. These insights were drawn from CIFAR’s Researching with Communities symposium, held in Partnership with the United Way Toronto and York Region in November of 2015, including key points from speakers’ presentations and reflections from community leaders and academics from across the Greater Toronto Area. You can learn more about CIFAR’s Change Makers event series here: www.cifar.ca/change-makers/

PRIORITIZE STRONG RELATIONSHIPS FROM DAY ONE

Take advantage of organizations and systems in place that connect researchers and community organizations, matching research interests of academics with needs of community organizations. For example, ResearchImpact (RIR) is a pan-Canadian network of 11 universities committed to maximizing the impact of academic research for the social, economic, environmental and health benefits of Canadians. Similarly, Research Insights at Ryerson’s Faculty of Community Services highlights the research work and collaborations that the faculty have with other researchers internal and external to the Ryerson community. These platforms may provide an opportunity to identify potential collaboration opportunities.

Consider building relationships with researchers outside of traditional academic institutions, such as research hospitals and think tanks. Different institutions will have different capacities, interests, and methods of engagement with partners.

Take time to build a relationship and engage as early as possible in the process of research project design. Build time into project plans in order to familiarize and learn about each other.

Funders should be sensitive of the process of relationship building necessary to create effective collaborations.

Establish a clear framework upfront for what the collaboration will look like between the partners. Work to make explicit the needs of each group in the partnership or collaboration. Ensure that there are clear explanation of roles, time commitments, resource requirements, shared research agenda and ownership of process, data, results, etc. Share any key organizational documentation between relevant parties (e.g. Research Ethics, Conflict Resolution Policy). It needs to be recognized that the job of academics is to conduct research, but in community organizations, this role is often in addition to an already full workload.

There should be an understanding of a shared responsibility for integrity, including a commitment for checks and balances on each other’s work in order to protect the credibility and effectiveness of the research. Each partner has different and complementary roles in gathering and using evidence to change public policy in order to make best use of the positive attributes of each sector. For example,
community organizations are well placed to identify the issue, the research question and sometimes appropriate researchers most relevant for community that they serve.

**It is important to discuss the possibility of negative results at an early stage,** what this will mean for the partnerships and the program or organization under study. These conversations may be time intensive but are a necessary first steps towards gaining trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit.

**Determine a common definition of success between partners.** This could include influence on policy change, useful validation of program or service model, knowledge sharing or translation to the community, or that additional partners join the project. Ultimately, there should be an explicit shared goal of improving conditions for the community being researched.

**When establishing collaboration, think about how to build research studies off of existing programs or projects** in a way that will both benefit the interests of the researcher and will support the work of the community organizations.

**Academics are an important resource and have critical expertise that help to determine methods for data collection, theoretical frameworks and so on.** Researchers, in the longer term, should be aiming to develop new theoretical frameworks or improve existing ones (e.g. critical race theory, social determinants of health) to help academics and communities talk to each other. Such frameworks provide an important tool through which organizations and academics can examine relevant issues in partnership with each other.

**Both academics and community organizations should engage community members most affected** and should work to include community members as contributors to the research with their lived experience.

**IMPROVE CAPACITY TO SUPPORT PARTNERSHIPS**

**Create and share a framework for research** that is relevant to the community organization. Include such things as Vision & Values, Research Ethics, Evaluation Protocol, and a vetting process for selecting partners. Academics should request these documents at the beginning of any partnership in order to best understand the expectations and requirements of potential community partners.

**Both community organizations and academics should support the training of project staff** with the research, data literacy, and evaluation skills necessary to successfully implement the project and communicate the findings emerging from the collaboration.

**Use evaluations as opportunities for continuous learning.** Determine which evaluation method is best for your organization or project, such as Formative Evaluation, Summative Evaluation and Developmental Evaluation. For example, Developmental Evaluation supports the creation of innovations, program ideas, and community initiatives through timely information to improve and develop programs. This type of evaluation is suited for dynamic and changing environments, with the aim of evaluating to reflect complexity, flexibility, and systems thinking. Community organizations should determine if this method is appropriate for their organizations and academics should explore how their research can inform such an evaluation process.

**Consider creating an interorganizational or interdisciplinary steering committee to guide collaborations.** Invite academics to sit on the board of community organizations or include leaders of community organizations on academic boards in order to effectively guide research and collaborations.

**Consider time and human resources needs,** not only funding, especially for smaller organizations doing cutting-edge work. Ensuring appropriate time and human resource
capacity is as important as financial resources. Also consider how working with student researchers will impact capacity in a community organization (e.g., oversight capacity and the sustainability after students leave).

Consider how grants can support the development of effective academic and community collaborations. Funders have an important role in shifting the way academic institutions and community organizations view and value participatory action research, creating incentive to promote true collaboration. The structure of grants can influence the amount of time given to building relationships, the support for human resources related to the research project, and the ability to prioritise knowledge mobilization and dissemination to communities and policy makers.

COMMUNICATE AND MOBILIZE TO MOVE RESEARCH INTO ACTION

Build into any new project sufficient time to undertake knowledge mobilization activities. Work to identify which stakeholders would find the information useful and consider the most effective ways to reach them. With research findings in hand, community organizations can engage the public and advocate to decision-makers on behalf of their community. Community organizations could include outcomes of research projects in their evaluations and reporting to funders.

Create a knowledge synthesis report that aims to change policy, where relevant. Academics and community organizations should work together to communicate these findings in as clear language as possible. Work with advisory groups consisting of academics, community organizations and policymakers during the process of creating these reports to add important value and expertise, with the potential to effectively ground the recommendations. Consider contracting out the creation of these reports if the internal capacity to do so is not present.

Concurrently, both academics and researchers should celebrate and disseminate positive changes, or learn from and re-strategize when there is news of setbacks and failures, while monitoring the implementation of any changes to programs or policies. Academics can continue to add their expertise by evaluating the outcomes of any program or policy change, or by providing knowledge-based recommendations for alternative strategies.

When reporting to funders, community organizations should endeavour to tell the whole story through both quantitative and qualitative measures of success. Negative results provide an opportunity for improvement and can be nuanced through multiple methods of evaluation.

Both partners should reach out to allies in the media. Aim to be present on social media to share findings and connect with similarly oriented organizations. Write 3 blog posts and 1 Op-ed piece per year; be an active Tweeter, ‘Liker’, and ‘Sharer’.

LOOKING FOR MORE?

Videos from each session of this symposium are available at https://vimeo.com/cifar/. You can learn more about the Change Makers event series, including information on upcoming events, at http://www.cifar.ca/change-makers/