

### Practitioner-Researcher Partnerships:

# Partnering for Productivity

By Linda G. Smith, Richard Tewksbury and Roberto Hugh Potter

**T**he creation and work of partnerships between corrections professionals and researchers is an oft-cited, important and valuable goal, yet relatively few seem to exist. In an era where correctional agencies recognize the importance of “evidence-based” strategies for programs, policies and budget issues, these partnerships are taking on more importance. Although correctional agencies collect vast amounts of information, taking the step from information to development of data for policy, program planning and evaluation can be a challenging process. This is where practitioner-researcher partnerships can play a significant role in turning information into useful data. Even if some correctional agencies have their own research staff, they sometimes establish partnerships with outside researchers to obtain objective (third-party) evaluations/assessments and to help with the agency’s burgeoning research workload.

This article explores ways to develop these partnerships such as building internal research capacities, collaborating with universities and colleges or partnering with nonuniversity-affiliated researchers. The “best” way to form partnerships will vary according to agency/researcher needs. Recognizing those needs can be a key part of developing a successful joint venture. Practitioners generally come to the partnership with a problem in mind. These can range from the effectiveness of programs to human resources issues. For example, a prison administrator may want to know if institutional faith-based programs reduce recidivism after release from incarceration. A jail administrator may question whether a recruit training program is decreasing

the turnover rate among officers. Correctional administrators are also interested in research that tells them how their ongoing efforts can be improved and/or enhanced.

Researchers may come to the partnership from a different viewpoint. They may be interested from a theoretical perspective, a personal research interest, because of requirements for tenure/promotion or simply to have the opportunity to get out in the field and “get their hands dirty” in real-world data. For many researchers, having an opportunity to work in a correctional environment is an exciting and professionally rewarding experience.

Why a corrections practitioner partners, with whom a practitioner partners and how a practitioner partners are influenced by the types of problems that need addressing, the resources an agency can offer, the expertise and experience researchers have, the time frames in which to operate, the degree of control over the process each party wants, and the expected final outcome for both parties. Although neither practitioner or researcher has been particularly experienced in creating partnerships, there are some basic approaches that can be used to easily and fruitfully establish a joint venture. Below are four models for creating such a partnership.

## Contractual Partnership

One approach to establishing a practitioner-researcher partnership involves the correctional agency contracting directly with the researcher either as an individual or through his or her affiliated agency/university. Most correctional agencies require a bid process if the amount of the contract exceeds a certain amount of

money (e.g., in some states, it is \$10,000 and in others it is \$2,500). This will require writing a request for proposals (RFP) (also referred to as request for bid or invitation to bid) identifying the problem to be studied and the work to be done. The correctional agency or its funding source will usually outline the criteria that must be included in the proposal (see the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency Web site for an excellent example ([www.pccd.state.pa.us](http://www.pccd.state.pa.us))). In some cases, agencies can forego the bid process by providing justification for sole-sourcing the contract. This is sometimes a difficult process and is usually done when the researcher has a high degree of specialization that meets an agency’s specific need. The advantage to correctional agencies in submitting an RFP is that it gives them an opportunity to examine several proposals and to select the one that they feel is the highest quality. The advantage to the researcher is that it provides a description of the work to be accomplished. The advantages of a contractual agreement to both are that it outlines the expectations required of both parties, establishes a time frame for work to be completed and eliminates a lot of misunderstandings that can occur in more informal partnerships.

## Student Collaboration

A second model for a practitioner/researcher partnership is to identify and collaborate with a student. Ideally, this should be a graduate student, and one with training, experience and/or special interest in corrections. Graduate students are typically interested and in need of research opportunities. An offer by a correctional agency granting access

to a research opportunity/setting can be a windfall for such students. Graduate students are easy to identify. Simply contacting a nearby university (preferably one with a graduate program in criminal justice, social work, sociology, public administration or some other related discipline) and informing those responsible for coordinating a graduate program or those who are actively engaged in research that a research opportunity for a student is available is the best approach for generating a productive contact.

Working with a student researcher has the advantages of bringing to an institution or program an energetic, young researcher who is excited about the opportunity, and who is generally trained in cutting-edge methodological approaches and state-of-the-art understanding of current issues. Students also come at no financial cost, a definite advantage for partnering with them.

The down side of working with student researchers is that they typically do not have the ability to control their research questions and interests. In addition, if they are enrolled in a conscientious and high-quality program, a more accomplished faculty researcher usually provides close supervision over their activities. This can have benefits, but is likely to add layers of the bureaucracy of completing a project.

## Grants

A practitioner-researcher collaboration in the submission of grants (usually for federal funds or from private foundations) for either research or programs can be a fruitful endeavor or offering a third model to establishing a partnership. Both governmental and private funding sources today want to know if the research money they are awarding is going to have practical application and support from correctional administrators who will implement policies or programs impacted by the funds.

A practitioner-researcher partnership is mutually beneficial in that it strengthens applications for grants and brings both practical and academic perspectives to a proposal. While grant funds can bring new resources

into a correctional agency, they can also bring resources to academic institutions and nonprofit agencies by providing funds for research opportunities for professors/staff. Certainly, the writing skills of researchers can be beneficial to busy correctional agencies that often do not have the experience in composing and submitting grants. However, it is also beneficial to researchers in that it provides an opportunity to demonstrate their success in grant writing — an important talent sought by not only academic institutions but nonprofit and for-profit agencies as well. An added benefit to working collaboratively on grant submissions is that in the process of writing grants and looking at the problem to be addressed (statement of the problem is a major criteria in grant applications), new ways of thinking about old problems can surface even if the collaboration does not result in an award for funding.

## Professors on Leave Or Sabbatical

A fourth approach to establishing a productive research-practice partnership is to associate with a professor from a university who is on sabbatical or leave. This arrangement, an informal one that can be done at no cost, allows a correctional facility/program to secure the services of an experienced full-time, on-site researcher. A professor benefits from having projects that fulfill requirements for leave from the university and also allows time to work in a correctional setting. This not only provides research benefits, but also may refresh and reinvigorate researchers as to the content domain of their specialty. One of the common criticisms of university professors teaching and writing about corrections is that they are too removed from the real world of their areas of specialization. Providing a structure in which professors can “come back” to corrections enables them to reconnect with the daily world of facility/program operations. They can then bring this experience to the classroom to inform their students and give them a more realistic view of corrections. This practitioner-

researcher connection offers opportunities for both parties to engage in research experiences they might not otherwise have.

## Benefits of Partnerships

Partnerships between practitioners and researchers can be mutually beneficial in many ways. Practitioners can provide researchers with critical insight, support and opportunities for the examination and study of important problems. Researchers can offer valuable support to correctional administrators by providing assistance in obtaining funding for research, as well as taking information and turning it into useful data that will assist practitioners in making informed decisions about security operations, staff issues and inmate programs through evidence-based research. In addition, having someone from “outside” the organization present the findings generated by research efforts can bring additional credibility to a correctional agency. Together, practitioners and researchers can offer policies and programs that provide the best practices and the most effective and efficient appropriation of limited funds in environments where correctional budgets are constrained. Moreover, few would dispute the value of being able to demonstrate to legislators, administrators and even the general public the positive contributions that the corrections field’s efforts yield.

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*Linda G. Smith, Ph.D., is a research consultant who has worked for more than 25 years in the corrections field as a practitioner, researcher and professor. Richard Tewksbury, Ph.D., is professor of justice administration at the University of Louisville. Roberto Hugh Potter, Ph.D., is a public health adviser with more than two decades of experience as an applied researcher with criminal justice and family welfare agencies, as well as an academic researcher.*