WORKING ACROSS FAITH AND SCIENCE TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Marilyn A. Laken, PhD, RN; Sara Wilcox, PhD; Rosetta Swinton, BSN

BACKGROUND

Health disparities result from complex interactions among sociocultural, economic, and political factors. To begin to address the complexity underlying these disparities, community-based organizations and academic institutions are working together to translate research theories and practice into the lives of the people who are affected. The goal is to develop interventions that are more effective because they are culturally based and specific to the population in need. Achieving this goal requires sharing power and resources between community and academic groups, often a new experience for both.

This paper describes how a large faith community and two research-intensive universities worked through cultural differences to develop a partnership that addresses their missions and interests. The aim is to summarize the nature of the partnership, the lessons learned, and some of the unique products created to spur interest in forming community-academic partnerships. The partners met on two occasions to share perceptions of the relationship. Three questions structured those discussions: 1) How are the three groups involved alike? 2) How are they different? 3) What are some areas of tension and how to work through them?

CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Academic Framework

The concepts of applied and action research have deep roots in academic theory and practice. The disciplines of anthropology and public health, specifically, require field work in and with the community to understand the phenomenon in question from the perspective of the individuals affected—the real experts. Recently, some have taken this concept further to a true collaboration, with an emphasis on service learning. Frameworks such as community campus partnerships and community-based participatory research (CBPR) share many traits, including equal power in decisions regarding all components of the research, from conceptual development and proposal writing to publishing, building on strengths of the partners to create a plan of action that involves setting priorities and including representatives of both groups. The aim is to promote an environment of open communication and trust. We used the CBPR framework to guide our collaborative partnership.

Mission of the AME Church

The 7th Episcopal District African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) has >600 churches throughout South Carolina, many in rural areas with congregations that include retirees in poor health. Church doctrine advocates “access to health as a right not a privilege,” and it “seeks to make our denomination a healing faith community.” To accomplish this, the district promotes a network of interrelationships characterized by trust, cooperation, concern for others, compassion for the poor and needy, and volunteerism. The Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) and University of South Carolina (USC), two state-supported academic institutions, have missions that stress the importance of fostering the health of citizens of the state. The universities and church leadership encourage community-based work in the areas of practice, education, and research.

From the College of Nursing, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston (MAL); Department of Exercise Science, Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina, Columbia (SW); 7th Episcopal District AME Church, Charleston (RS), South Carolina.

Address correspondence and reprint requests to Marilyn Laken, PhD, RN, Office of Special Initiatives, Medical University of South Carolina, 159.5 Rutledge Ave, PO Box 250218, Charleston SC 29425; 843-792-2110; 843-792-7476 (fax); lakenm@musc.edu

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The 7th Episcopal District African Methodist Episcopal Church represents 23% of African Americans in South Carolina. We describe lessons learned when a large faith community and two research universities collaborate. In 2001, the bishop of the 7th Episcopal District and the president of the Medical University of South Carolina signed a memorandum of understanding on how to collaborate, including the principles of sharing resources, credit, and responsibility. Planning and research committees, with representatives from the church and university, designed and evaluated a website to reduce health disparities and encourage the use of the internet. In 2002, with the University of South Carolina as a new partner, we obtained a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to promote physical activity. Open communications and trust are keys to a successful partnership. This partnership requires people who are dedicated to the principles in the memorandum of understanding, are open to new ideas, and have positive attitudes. Culture clashes present opportunities to strengthen partnerships and new activities to achieve mutual goals. (Ethn Dis. 2007;17[suppl 1]:S1-23–S1-26)

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