The Parents Matter! Program: Building a Successful Investigator-Community Partnership

Laura A. Secrest, M.S., Shana L. Lassiter, B.S., Lisa P. Armistead, Ph.D., Sarah C. Wyckoff, M.P.H., Jacqueline Johnson, M.Ed., Winona B. Williams, Ph.D., and Beth A. Kotchick, Ph.D.

We examine the issues involved in creating and maintaining a successful collaboration between university-based researchers and community members when designing and implementing the Parents Matter! Program (PMP). The roles of focus groups, community advisory boards, and community liaisons are highlighted. PMP provides an illustration of the ongoing process of collaboration between investigators and community members and the benefits and challenges of such a partnership.

KEY WORDS: Parents Matter! Program; community; research; collaboration; prevention; intervention.

The literature identifies two approaches to collaborative work between university researchers and local communities: (1) involvement of community members in all aspects of the development and implementation of a research protocol; and (2) presenting a research project in its early stages for community approval and input. The Parents Matter! Program (PMP) illustrates an example of a collaborative, community-based research project that combines elements of both these approaches. Specifically, PMP provides an example of the methods by which university-based investigators have established and maintained a successful collaboration.
partnership with communities in three diverse sites (i.e., Athens, GA, Atlanta, GA, & Little Rock, AK). The result has been a cooperative effort to develop, implement, and evaluate a family-based program designed to support parents in their efforts to promote health and prevent HIV risk exposure in children and adolescents.

The establishment of community-based HIV-prevention initiatives (e.g., the Chicago HIV-Prevention and Adolescent Mental Health Project [CHAMP], San Francisco’s Center for AIDS Prevention Studies [CAPS]) has led to considerable discussion about how and why such programs are successful (e.g., Fullilove, Green, & Fullilove, 2000; Madison, McKay, Paikoff & Bell, 2000; McCormick et al., 2000; Sanstad, Stall, Goldstein, Everett, & Brousseau, 1999; Schensul, 1999). The success of programs like CHAMP and CAPS is often attributed, at least in part, to the researchers’ ability to engage and maintain the trust of community members. As a result, there is general consensus among researchers that community involvement is a positive and crucial aspect of successful community-based prevention science. However, cultivating collaborative relationships between research institutions and community members is not always easy. There is a significant and historically justified mistrust toward the research process on the part of minority communities, as discussed in Murry et al. (2004), that may interfere with community-researcher partnerships. In addition, researchers face many challenges in developing and implementing a theory-driven and methodologically sound intervention study while also meeting the needs and incorporating the input of local communities. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the strategies employed by PMP in establishing a very successful community partnership that has produced an intervention program that is highly valued in all three communities, while also remaining true to a rigorous research methodology.

In delivering and testing prevention programs, researchers must balance the desire to disseminate carefully crafted, theory-driven interventions with the need to develop programs that will meet the needs of a particular service population (i.e., African American parents and school-age children). With respect to the latter, the field of community psychology, focused on the well-being of individuals in the context of higher order influences (e.g., community, society and culture), provides a framework for meeting community needs and promotes the use of program development models that include community members “from the ground up.” This approach is grounded in two principles. The first principle, citizen participation, calls for citizen involvement with decision-making in agencies and programs that influence one’s life (Wandersman & Florin, 2000). The second principle calls for a collaborative strengths-based approach, involving a decreased focus on deficits, bi-directional transfer of knowledge, and shared decision-making responsibilities (Prillelensky & Nelson, 1997). Although these two principles are often associated with social and institutional change initiatives, they are also applicable to successful program development and implementation, which relies heavily upon the maintenance of a collaborative, empowering atmosphere.