

**REPORT ON THE WEST VIRGINIA RURAL HEALTH
EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS: FINDINGS FROM THE
NATIONAL STUDY ON PARTNERSHIP FUNCTIONING**

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2000, The Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health at the New York Academy of Medicine undertook The National Study on Partnership Functioning, funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Thirteen of the West Virginia Rural Health Education Partnerships (WVRHEP) participated in this national study; these thirteen included twelve local partnerships and the state partnership. The national study was developed with a multidisciplinary panel of partnership researchers and evaluators as well as people who participate in partnerships, and was designed to identify factors that have the greatest influence on the ability of diverse people and organizations in partnerships to achieve high levels of synergy. In the Center's work, partnership synergy is defined as the extent to which a partnership combines the perspectives, resources, and skills of its partners to accomplish objectives that individual partners are unable to bring about alone. Thus, synergy refers to the combining power of collaboration, and it is through synergy that partnerships may gain a unique advantage over single agents in addressing health and health system issues.

Based on the literature on partnership functioning, the Center's prior work on collaboration, and qualitative interviews with people in partnerships, we hypothesized that the following attributes of a partnership would be most closely related to its ability to achieve high levels synergy: effectiveness of the partnership's leadership, effectiveness of the partnership's administration and management, efficiency of the partnership, sufficiency of resources, challenges with partner participation, and challenges related to the community in which the partnership is working.

METHODS

Study Sample

Partnerships were eligible for the study if they: 1) had been in existence for 2 years or more, 2) had at least 10 partners, and 3) were bringing together diverse groups of people and organizations to promote health and well-being in their communities. Potentially eligible partnerships were identified through existing contacts using snowball sampling techniques. Sixty-six partnerships from all regions of the country were recruited for the study. All partnerships in the WVRHEP initiative were eligible and recruited for the study except one, because it did not have at least 10 partners. Survey instruments were mailed to the partnership coordinator in each partnership and to the partners who were knowledgeable about the partnership as a whole, as identified by the partnership coordinator. The number of knowledgeable partners in each partnership who received surveys ranged from 8 to 39, with an average of 17; the average number across the West Virginia partnerships was 14. Partners identified as knowledgeable about the partnership included both people representing an organization and individual partners who represent the perspective of the community or a particular group in the community. In order for a partnership to be included in the data analysis, the response rate from its partners needed to be at least 65%. Sixty-three partnerships (95%), including all West Virginia partnerships, met this criterion.

Description and Development of the Survey Instruments

Slightly different instruments were created for partnership coordinators, organizational representatives, and individual partners. All three instruments were self-administered and took between 20 and 30 minutes to complete. Almost all of the questions were close-ended; however, a number of open-ended questions gave respondents an opportunity to clarify their answers and provide additional information. Development of these instruments was guided by a review of the existing literature and instruments, input of experts who work with partnerships and qualitative interviews with people in partnerships. Once the instruments were drafted, they underwent two rounds of cognitive interviewing with partnership coordinators and diverse kinds of partners. These efforts assured the relevance and interest of the instrument content to respondents and the consistent interpretation of questions across respondents.

The instruments were designed to measure variables related to our key hypothesis as well as to gather important descriptive information about the partnerships and their partners. As indicated above, variables related to our key hypothesis include: synergy, effectiveness of the partnership's leadership, effectiveness of the partnership's administration and management, efficiency of the partnership, sufficiency of resources, challenges with partner participation, and challenges related to the community in which the partnership is working. Psychometric testing established the validity and reliability of the scales used to measure these variables. Descriptive information collected from partnership coordinators include the history and activities of the partnership and the partnership's structure. Descriptive information collected from both coordinators and partners include information about their roles, level of satisfaction with the partnership, perceptions about decision-making processes, and benefits and drawbacks experienced.

RESULTS: THE WEST VIRGINIA PARTNERSHIPS

Quantitative data were analyzed using the statistical software SPSS 9.0 for Windows. Because there were only 13 West Virginia partnerships in the study, there was not enough statistical power to use regression analysis to determine the factors most closely related to synergy in this group. Consequently, most of the results for the West Virginia partnerships are descriptive. When appropriate, however, a one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) test was used to determine whether significant differences exist between the West Virginia partnerships and the other partnerships in the national study.

General Description of the West Virginia Partnerships

All 13 West Virginia partnerships report that they are implementing their programs in rural areas, and almost all of the partnerships (85%) have been in existence for over three years. Ten out of the 13 partnerships are formalized legally, according to the partnership coordinators. Within these 10 partnerships, most of the coordinators reported that their partnership's legal status is "an organization created by government such as a commission, public authority or

council.” The other type of legal status mentioned by the partnership coordinators is a “non-profit organization such as a 501(c)3 or a community foundation.”

Each of the West Virginia partnerships involves diverse partners; in all 13, there are individuals who participate as community members as well as a number of different types of organizational partners. Most of the partnerships have organizational partners that are businesses, colleges and universities, community-based organizations, health departments, hospitals/health systems, medical practices/clinics, and schools below the college level. In addition, some partnerships also have organizational representatives from advocacy groups, foundations, government agencies, media, neighborhood associations, professional associations, religious organizations, and voluntary health organizations.

Description of Respondents from the West Virginia Partnerships

A total of 127 respondents from the 13 partnerships participated in the study; this represents a response rate of 71%. Of these 127 respondents, 13 are partnership coordinators, 61 represent organizational partners, and 53 are individual partners from the community. All but 2 of the respondents are white; 55% are female, 86% are over 40 years old, and 60% have a degree from a graduate school.

Almost all of the respondents (80%) have been involved in their partnership for over three years. There were only 3 respondents who have been participating in their partnership for less than one year. In addition, over two-thirds of the respondents have experience participating in other partnerships.

On the whole, the respondents from the West Virginia partnerships feel very positive about the goals of their partnership. When asked about the importance of the goal of their partnership, 80% responded that they believe it is “Very important,” 20% believe it is “Somewhat important” and only 2% believe it is “A little important.” No respondent answered that the partnership’s goals are “Not at all important.” The comment of one organizational representative supports this finding: “The partnership provides opportunities to share one’s passion for rural people and rural places. The partnership provides opportunities to link people of diverse backgrounds for the common goal of a healthier community.” Similarly, a partnership coordinator wrote: “I have enjoyed working with all of the partners involved. Our community involvement has been excellent. We have formed lasting relationships and have seen students return and stay in our rural communities.”

Synergy

The synergy scale is comprised of 9 items; together, these items measure how well the people and organizations in a partnership are working together to accomplish objectives that no one partner could accomplish alone. Each item is scored on a four-point scale with one being the lowest score and four being the highest score. The overall synergy score for each partnership is the average score across the 9 items; the average synergy score for all 63 partnerships in the

study is 3.24. The mean for the 13 West Virginia partnerships is 3.27, which is just slightly higher than the mean of 3.22 in the non-West Virginia partnerships; this difference is not statistically significant.

Mean scores for the each of the 9 synergy items indicate that these partnerships are strongest at incorporating into their work the perspectives and priorities of the population of interest (see Table 1 below). The synergy areas that partnerships tend to be weak on include documenting the impact of the partnership’s actions and clearly communicating how the partnership’s actions will address problems that are important to people in the community. These are areas in which the other 50 partnerships in the study tend to be weak as well.

Table 1: Synergy (Range 1-4)

	<i>Mean</i>
Agree/Disagree: The partnership is better able to carry out its work because of the contributions of diverse partners.	3.32
How much has the involvement of different kinds of partners led to new and better ways of thinking about how the partnership can achieve its goals?	3.36
How much has the involvement of different kinds of partners enabled the partnership to plan activities that connect multiple services, programs, or systems?	3.34
Agree/Disagree: The partnership has developed common goals that are understood and supported by all partners.	3.20
Agree/Disagree: The partnership has clearly communicated how its actions will address problems that are important to people in the community.	3.13
How much support has your partnership obtained from individuals, agencies and institutions in the community that can either block the partnership’s plans or help move them forward?	3.24
How much does the partnership incorporate into its work the perspectives and priorities of the population of interest to the partnership?	3.44
How successful has the partnership been in carrying out its plans?	3.34
Agree/Disagree: The partnership has done a good job of documenting the impact of its actions.	3.13

Leadership

Respondents were asked about whether they provide either formal or informal leadership in the partnership. All of the West Virginia coordinators, 79% of the organizational partners, and 64% of the individual partners responded positively to the question. Overall, 75% of the WVRHEP respondents believe they play a leadership role in their partnership. WVRHEP appears to provide plenty of chances for participants to be leaders. As one individual respondent commented, “This was my first experience as a leader. I am usually just a worker.”

The survey instrument also measures the effectiveness of leadership in the partnership; this leadership effectiveness score is based on a scale comprised of 10 items designed to capture attributes of leadership that may be critical to achieving high levels of partnership synergy. Each

item is measured on a five-point scale, with one being the lowest score and five being the highest score. As with synergy, the scale score is the mean score across all 10 items. In the 63 partnerships, the mean leadership effectiveness score is 3.68. The average score for the West Virginia partnerships, 3.71, is slightly higher than the average score for the non-West Virginia partnerships, which is 3.67. This difference is not statistically significant.

The leadership in the 13 West Virginia partnerships appears to be particularly effective in taking responsibility for the partnership – this item has the highest average score across all 13 West Virginia partnerships (see Table 2 below). The leadership is also rated highly on its ability to foster respect, trust, inclusiveness, and openness, and on its ability to create an environment where differences of opinion can be voiced. The areas within leadership effectiveness that need the most improvement include resolving conflict among partners and helping the partnership be creative and look at things differently. The other 50 partnerships in the study demonstrated need for improvement in these areas as well.

Table 2: Leadership (Range 1-5)

<i>Please think about people who provide either formal or informal leadership. Based on your experiences in this partnership, please rate the total effectiveness in each of the following areas.</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Taking responsibility for the partnership	4.04
Inspiring or motivating people involved in the partnership	3.64
Empowering people involved in the partnership	3.66
Communicating the vision of the partnership	3.69
Working to develop a common language within the partnership	3.63
Fostering respect, trust, inclusiveness, and openness	3.89
Creating an environment where differences of opinion can be voiced	3.82
Resolving conflict among partners	3.55
Combining the perspectives, resources, and skills of partners	3.69
Helping the partnership be creative and look at things differently	3.52

Administration and Management

Close to half (46.5%) of the partners responding from the West Virginia partnerships report that they are either “Somewhat involved” or “Very involved” in administration and management activities in the partnership. All partners and coordinators are asked to rate the effectiveness of the partnership’s administration and management. The administration and management effectiveness scale is a composite measure of 10 items; each item is measured on a five-point scale with one being the lowest score and five being the highest score. The administration and management effectiveness score is the average of all 10 items. In the National Study on Partnership Functioning, the average score for the 63 partnerships is 3.55. The mean for the 13 West Virginia partnerships, 3.68, is somewhat higher than the mean of 3.52 for the non-West Virginia partnerships, although this difference is not statistically significant.

The West Virginia partnerships are most effective at coordinating partnership activities, performing secretarial duties, coordinating communication among partners, managing and

disbursing funds, and preparing materials that inform partners and help them make timely decisions (see Table 3 below). As is the case with the other partnerships in the national study, the administration and management activities that need to be strengthened in the West Virginia partnerships are providing orientation to new partners and evaluating the progress and impact of the partnership.

Table 3: Administration and Management (Range 1-5)

<i>Based on your experiences in this partnership, please rate the effectiveness of this partnership in carrying out each of the following activities:</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Coordinating communication among partners	3.85
Coordinating communication with people and groups outside the partnership	3.48
Coordinating partnership activities, including meetings and projects	3.88
Managing and disbursing funds	3.85
Applying for and managing grants	3.69
Preparing materials that inform partners and help them make timely decisions	3.83
Performing secretarial duties	3.87
Maintaining databases	3.59
Providing orientation to new partners as they join the partnership	3.07
Evaluating the progress and impact of the partnership	3.38

Tangible Resources

The tangible resources scale consists of three items and measures the degree to which a partnership has the money, space, and equipment and goods that it needs to work effectively and to achieve its goals. Each of the items is scored on a three-point scale, with one being the lowest score and three being the highest score. The mean tangible resources score for the 63 partnerships in the National Study on Partnership Functioning is 2.18. The West Virginia partnerships have a mean of 2.45, which is significantly higher ($p < .05$) than the mean of 2.11 for the other 50 partnerships in the study.

Upon examination of the individual items that comprise the tangible resources scale, money is clearly the item with the lowest mean. The mean score for money across the 13 partnerships is 2.31; the mean score for space is 2.51 and the mean score for equipment and goods is 2.52. Qualitative data support the finding that additional funding is needed to adequately support the activities of the West Virginia partnerships. As one respondent wrote, “We need additional funds to continue and improve our consortium’s effectiveness. We are fortunate to have one of the best site coordinators, but fear losing him due to no increase in budget to provide him with salary increases.”

Intangible Resources

There are many intangible resources that may be very important for partnerships to work effectively and to achieve their goals. The intangible resources scale is comprised of six items that are measured on the same three-point scale as the tangible resource items. The six

intangible resource items include skills and expertise, data and information, connections to target populations, connections to political decision-makers, endorsements that give the partnership legitimacy and credibility, and influence and ability to bring people together for meetings and activities. In the national study of 63 partnerships, the mean tangible resources score is 2.31. The mean for the West Virginia partnerships is slightly higher than the mean for the non-West Virginia partnerships (2.38 vs. 2.29), but this difference is not statistically significant. For the 13 West Virginia partnerships, all of the intangible resource items have means between 2.25 and 2.40; no one area stands out as particularly strong or weak.

Efficiency

The efficiency score is the mean score across three items, each of which is measured on a four-point scale. The efficiency scale includes questions about a partnership's ability to make good use of partners' financial resources, good use of partners' in-kind resources (such as skills and expertise, information and data, connections and influence, space, equipment, and goods), and good use of partners' time. The mean efficiency score for the 63 partnerships in the national study is 3.20. The mean scale score for the West Virginia partnerships, 3.29, is significantly higher ($p < .05$) than the mean of the non-West Virginia partnerships, which is 3.17. The efficiency of the West Virginia partnerships is exemplified through the comments of one partnership coordinator, who noted: "Partnerships are constantly evolving processes. You try your best to take nothing personally, see the best in others, and utilize the partners for what they do best."

The efficiency item with the highest mean score across the 13 West Virginia partnerships is making good use of partners' in-kind resources. The mean for this item is 3.38. The mean score for both the partnership's ability to make good use of partners' financial resources and the partnership's ability to make good use of partners' time is 3.24.

Challenges

The survey also measures a broad array of challenges both internal and external to the partnership. Internal challenges pertain to the partners, processes, or resources in the partnership. External challenges relate to the community and agencies outside the partnership. The challenges are measured on a four-point scale, from one to four, where one means that a challenge was *not* experienced by a partnership, and four means that a challenge was experienced *a lot* by a partnership.

The internal challenge that gives the West Virginia partnerships the most difficulty is recruiting essential partners. The mean for this item is 2.70 across the 13 partnerships. The next greatest challenge for the 13 West Virginia partnerships is obtaining financial resources (mean = 2.38). As expressed by one respondent, "This partnership has a tremendous challenge in meeting the health needs of the rural, isolated area I serve. It is difficult to see results with so limited amount of resources." The internal challenges faced by WVRHEP are very similar to the rest of the partnerships in the National Study on Partnership Functioning. For all 63 partnerships in the

study, recruiting essential partners and obtaining financial resources are the most significant internal challenges.

The greatest external challenges to WVRHEP are difficulties bringing partners together due to safety issues, long distances, or lack of transportation (mean = 2.29) and problems with categorical funding or program requirements (mean = 2.24). The other 50 partnerships in the study tended to experience difficulties bringing partners together much less than the West Virginia partnerships (mean = 1.64). However, in terms of the latter challenge, the West Virginia partnerships are not unique – the 50 other partnerships in the study report that their greatest external challenge is problems with categorical funding or program requirements (mean = 2.29).

The internal challenge that is least troublesome for the 13 West Virginia partnerships is difficulties with relationships among the partners (mean = 1.45). The external challenge that is least problematic for the partnerships is little history of cooperation or trust among people, groups and organizations in the community (mean = 1.47). These findings are supported by the comments of one coordinator, who wrote: “Our partnership is at a place where I see our challenges very much as opportunities. I don’t feel the partnership is ever threatened by disagreements. The commitment is solid from all partners – we’ll find solutions every time rather than worry over the disagreement ‘hurting’ the partnership.”

Benefits and Drawbacks

Participants in the West Virginia partnerships receive important benefits from involvement in their partnerships. When questioned about the importance of the benefits received from participating in their partnerships, 77% of the respondents feel that they are either “Very Important” or “Extremely Important.” Table 4 shows the benefits most frequently cited as received by respondents, with the percentage of people who report receiving each benefit.

Table 4: Benefits Most Frequently Received

Types of Benefits Received	% of Respondents Who Received the Benefit
Ability to make a contribution to the community	99%
Development of valuable relationships	98%
Acquisition of useful knowledge about services, program, or people in the community	95%
Ability to have a greater impact that I could have on my own	91%
Acquisition of new knowledge and/or skills	89%
Enhanced ability to meet the needs of clients or constituency	86%
Increased use of expertise or services	85%

Qualitative data support the findings shown in the above table. One respondent reported: “It is indeed a pleasure to work with this group. Things are definitely happening and I feel the people

in our area are being benefited.” Another respondent noted, “I have done and seen so much that I would never have been able to do otherwise.”

There are also some drawbacks that respondents may experience as a result of participating in partnerships. The drawbacks listed in Table 5 below are those drawbacks that were experienced by at least 30% of the respondents in the West Virginia partnerships. The remaining drawbacks listed in the survey are mentioned less than 15% of the time.

Table 5: Most Frequently Experienced Drawbacks

Types of Drawbacks Experienced	% of Respondents Who Experienced the Drawback
Diversion of time and resources away from other priorities or obligations	53%
Frustration or aggravation	38%
Pressure to commit more time than I would like	32%

When asked about the level of concern about the drawbacks experienced, 54% of the respondents report being “Not At All Concerned.” Overall, respondents feel very positive about their experiences in their partnership. For 55% of the respondents, the benefits of participating “greatly exceed” the drawbacks and for 36% of the respondents the benefits “exceed” the drawbacks.

Satisfaction with the Partnership

Participants in the West Virginia partnerships generally have high levels of satisfaction with their involvement. Table 6 depicts respondents’ satisfaction levels with various aspects of their partnership.

Table 6: Satisfaction with the Partnership

Items Measuring Satisfaction	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	A Little Satisfied	Not At All Satisfied
How satisfied are you with.....				
• the way people and organizations in the partnership work together?	58%	34%	6%	2%
• your influence in the partnership?	56%	36%	6%	2%
• your role in the partnership?	68%	24%	6%	2%
• the partnership’s plans for achieving its goals?	52%	42%	6%	1%
• the way the partnership has implemented its plans?	51%	40%	7%	2%

Respondents were also asked about their satisfaction levels with the leadership in the partnership. Seventy percent of the respondents report being “Very Satisfied,” 27% report being “Somewhat Satisfied” and only 3% feel “A Little Satisfied.” No respondents chose the “Not At All

Satisfied” answer category. The survey instrument also asks about levels of satisfaction with the administration and management of the partnership. The results are similar to those reported for leadership. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents feel “Very Satisfied,” 28% feel “Somewhat Satisfied,” 2% feel “A Little Satisfied,” and 2% feel “Not At All Satisfied.” Partnership coordinators tend to have lower levels of satisfaction with leadership and administration and management than the individual or organizational partners.

Decision Making

Respondents are asked several questions about the decision-making processes in their partnership. Generally, respondents report feeling positive about the decision-making processes, and there is little difference among the individual partners, organizational partners, and coordinators. When respondents are asked about the portion of decisions made by the partnership that they support, 26% respond “All of Them” and 66% respond “Most of Them.” No one chose the “None of Them” category. When asked about comfort with the way decisions are made, 60% felt “Very Comfortable” and 33% felt “Somewhat Comfortable.” Almost all respondents (90%) report that decisions in their partnership are made in a timely manner.

CONCLUSION

The 13 West Virginia Rural Health Education Partnerships in the study demonstrate relatively high levels of synergy, which suggests that they are effective at combining the perspectives, resources, and skills of their partners to accomplish objectives that individual partners are unable to bring about alone. The partnerships appear to successfully incorporate the perspectives and priorities of the population of interest into their work and provide opportunities for different kinds of partners to have a voice. These partnerships have good leadership and administration and management, although there is still room for improvement in these areas. The West Virginia partnerships tend to use partners’ resources efficiently. The partnerships are also generally adept at keeping partners satisfied, which is critical for maintaining involvement and commitment. Additionally, the goals of the West Virginia partnerships are very important to the partners.

It is clear that the benefits of participation in these partnerships far outweigh the drawbacks for the partners and coordinators. Nonetheless, the partnerships do have some trouble recruiting essential partners. More effective communication of how their actions will address problems that are important to people in the community, and better documentation of the impact of their actions could begin to address this problem. The quantitative and qualitative data further suggest that lack of adequate funding remains a barrier to fully meeting the needs of the areas served. As one partner from the community noted, “We have had a lot of good influence, but have a long way to go.” Additional funding would help these partnerships continue to build on their tremendous strengths and fully maximize their potential.