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Case study in academic and industry collaboration: the development of an adolescent targeted sun protection intervention in NSW

Melinda Williams  
*University of Wollongong, mw483@uow.edu.au*

Sandra Jones  
*University of Wollongong, sandraj@uow.edu.au*

Donald Iverson  
*University of Wollongong, iverson@uow.edu.au*

Peter Caputi  
*University of Wollongong, pcaputi@uow.edu.au*

Sofia Potente  
*The Cancer Council NSW*

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Abstract
Academic and industry collaboration is increasingly identified as a critical element in the future health of Australians through linking theory and practice, with the major priority for academic institutions being the identification of new knowledge and the transfer of this knowledge into changes in policy and health services. Collaborations between academia and industry are increasingly encouraged in Australia by research funding schemes such as ARCLinkage and, more recently, NHMRC Partnerships. While a recent US study suggests that such schemes have a moderate effect on academics’ propensity to work with industry (Bozeman and Gaughan, 2007), industry groups have recognised the value of engaging in partnerships with academic institutions in joint knowledge production (Lam, 2007). However, it has been suggested that such collaborations are problematic as the two groups can have diverging agendas (Mitev and Venters, 2009); and differing priorities regarding the dissemination of findings (Welsh et al., 2007).

Keywords
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Case Study in Academic and Industry Collaboration:
The development of an adolescent targeted sun protection intervention in NSW

1 Melinda Williams PhD Student, Professor Sandra C. Jones,
Professor Don Iverson, Associate Professor Peter Caputi, 2Sofia Potente.
University of Wollongong
Centre for Health Initiatives
Wollongong, NSW, 2500 Australia
Email: mw483@uow.edu.au
Phone: +61 2 4221 5811
Fax: +61 2 4221 3370

2The Cancer Council NSW
153 Dowling St, Woolloomooloo NSW 2011
Phone: +61 2 9334 1466
Fax: +61 2 8302 3530

1 Melinda Williams is a PhD student with the Centre for Health Initiatives, University of Wollongong. She has extensive experience in health management in Australia including the last 7 years in management roles in the design and evaluation of population health programs for the private health insurance industry. Melinda’s research interests include health behaviour change, risk and disease management program design as well as evaluation. She also has a keen interest in healthy policy in Australia.
Introduction

Academic and industry collaboration is increasingly identified as a critical element in the future health of Australians through linking theory and practice, with the major priority for academic institutions being the identification of new knowledge and the transfer of this knowledge into changes in policy and health services. Collaborations between academia and industry are increasingly encouraged in Australia by research funding schemes such as ARC-Linkage and, more recently, NHMRC Partnerships. While a recent US study suggests that such schemes have a moderate effect on academics' propensity to work with industry (Bozeman and Gaughan, 2007), industry groups have recognised the value of engaging in partnerships with academic institutions in joint knowledge production (Lam, 2007). However, it has been suggested that such collaborations are problematic as the two groups can have diverging agendas (Mitev and Venters, 2009); and differing priorities regarding the dissemination of findings (Welsh et al., 2007).

Background

The University of XXX’s Centre for XXX has a research focus on social marketing and health. It also has a history of partnership with industry since its establishment in 2004; working with partner organisations to create a shared vision and delivering measurable results for both industry and academia. A significant partner of the Centre has been YYY; YYY was established in 1953 and is the leading cancer charity in NSW. Both organisations share a commitment to an evidence-driven approach to practice. In 2005, the Centre for XXX and YYY established a partnership to explore the use of social marketing theory and practice in campaigns to improve sun protection. A systematic review of the evidence provided the foundation for further collaborative activities. In 2008 the Centre for XXX and YYY jointly submitted and were awarded a second Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grant to develop a social marketing program to improve the sun protection behaviours of NSW adolescents. Using this project as a case study, this paper explores some of the experiences of partnership between academia and industry. As partnerships are increasingly sought between industry and academia, understanding and exploring the experience of existing projects can assist future academics and practitioners in navigating these complex collaborations.

Partnership case study

The partnership between the Centre for XXX and YYY is now in the second year of a three-year commitment to the adolescent sun protection project (2008-2011). Since commencement of the project, both organisations have reassessed and adapted their approaches as organisational, operational and environmental factors have changed.

Organisational Factors

Evidence driven practice has been a clear and consistent commitment by both organisations. The significance of social marketing as a specific strategic priority and approach however has been a key point of negotiation. A critical question to the overall project has been “are we committed to developing a social marketing program?” and this question has, in part, been driven by variations in the use of terminology and changes to the wording of the Strategic Plan of YYY, which now emphasises ‘social change’ (a concept which overlaps, but is not synonymous, with social marketing).

Successfully overcoming any ambiguities in the purpose of the project has been through extensive negotiation and discussion between the partners, primarily though a Management Committee comprised of representatives from both organisations. Clarity of
roles and intent has been greatly facilitated through the establishment of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the organisations. Within the MOU, items including the deliverables of the project, timelines and resources allocated by each party as well as overall intent of the project have been articulated in detail by both parties. While these items were addressed within the original project documentation, it is the ongoing specification and review through the MOU and Management Committee involvement that has been key to the project’s success.

Operational Factors
The most critical operational element for success in this project has been the people. That is, the skill, time and commitment of the people working on this project. Numerous staff changes have occurred in both organisations since the commencement of this project. Critically, however, the commitment at an executive level in both organisations has been unwavering. Recruitment time, training and up-skilling individuals on the project have all required flexibility by both organisations; which has translated to an adjustment to timing of deliverables as well as changes to the allocation of tasks, while still maintaining the overall commitment to the project. The logistics of implementing a program across regions in NSW has also been a key operational factor. Given limited resources, a pragmatic approach has been taken to the allocation of intervention activities between organisations, with the Centre for XXX taking the lead in the communities which are receiving a more ‘traditional’ social marketing intervention; and YYY taking the lead in the communities that are receiving a more policy-oriented environmental intervention via council-driven planning and environmental change. This has enabled both parties to maximise the use of their respective resources and expertise.

Environmental Factors
The impact of environmental factors, such as the global financial crisis (GFC), on this project must also be acknowledged. Increased uncertainty and changing resources within both organisations has been a factor in future planning. The not-for-profit and academic sectors have both been affected by the GFC, meaning that this project has been implemented in a context of global financial uncertainty and insecurity. While the impact on operational factors on a day-to-day basis is minimal, it is an important contextual challenge for the partnership, in particular the way in which significant environmental factors can influence both parties in ways far beyond their control.

Results and Discussion
There is a substantial difference between the nature of the partnership as it was initially conceptualised and as it is today. The influence on the project of organisational, operational and environmental factors has each been significant thus far. This review highlights, however, that the process of partnership is about overcoming, and in some cases living with, the challenges. As an ongoing project, the ultimate success in terms of health outcomes and policy change is still to be determined. However this review highlights the importance of joint navigation by both parties through a complex partnership. The ultimate success of the project is perhaps less about the specific obstacles and challenges in the project and more about a clear commitment to the project and to problem solving as the project unfolds.

Conclusion and Public Policy Implications
Future collaborations between industry and academia should acknowledge organisational priorities, the complexity of the partnership and establish appropriate procedures, throughout the project, that ensure the changing nature of the partnership is captured.
References


