



The Role of Research Centers on University Campuses

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Abstract

Academic-practitioner partnerships can be beneficial for both parties, with researchers able to design and test theoretically supported policies, and practitioners benefiting from rigorous research methodology and evaluation necessary for their entity to request and sustain outside funding. However, there is a distinct lack of consistent literature on “best practices” on these partnerships themselves, particularly in formal research partnerships involving central research centers on university campuses. The current project reviews two current initiatives, one a comprehensive research center and the other focusing specifically on issues related to crime and public safety, both on the same university campus. This review first provides some context for the necessity for research centers within the university’s broader city, gives a timeline for each center’s formation, and then offers some lessons learned regarding implementation, potential barriers, as well as new directions for research centers to add to academic-practitioner partnerships as a whole.

Keywords Academic-practitioner partnerships · Societal issues · Research centers

Introduction

Universities provide valuable resources, including knowledge, research expertise, and human capital, positioning them as key drivers in addressing pressing societal challenges (Saaïda, 2023). Beyond individual faculty, research centers within universities can foster a more interdisciplinary culture by bringing together researchers from diverse specialties (Öztürk, 2022). Given the valuable resources and interdisciplinary potential within universities, fostering collaborations among researchers, community partners, and stakeholders becomes even more crucial, as these collaborations promote the development of fairer, more relevant, and widely accepted interventions (Hoekstra et al., 2020; Shelton & Brownson, 2024). In this context, col-

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laboration between academics and practitioners can significantly enhance the impact of research, bridging the gap between theory and real-world application to address societal issues more effectively.

For both sides, the partnership between academics and practitioners can be beneficial. For practitioners, strong and meaningful partnerships between academics and practitioners are essential for the development of best practices. For academics, working with practitioners in the policy arena provides the opportunity to direct program development and implementation. University-based research centers can be a way of coalescing academic-practitioner partnerships into one central unit. University affiliation offers credibility for practitioners in providing a recognizable name, while also drawing from both internal university and external resources. Research centers may include faculty and non-faculty researchers with advanced degrees and expertise in qualitative and quantitative methodologies, both in formal staff roles and in contracts with centers while retaining faculty lines in academic units. These centers can serve as neutral, third-party entities when practitioners in the outside community are looking for evaluation, best practices, or partners on funded and non-funded projects. While there is a wealth of work on partnerships broadly, the added role of the university research center remains largely unknown.

The current research provides a review of two research centers, both located on a university campus based within a larger urban city in the MidSouth. Drawing from the development and implementation of these centers at different time points, missions, and organizational structures, the study provides a commentary for how these centers can work, gain buy-in from community partners, face particular barriers, and provide new direction for academic-practitioner partnerships at large, within the social sciences.

Review of Literature

This section reviews the research on research conducted on and off university campuses, outlines specific types of partnerships, and possible areas of focus.

Research on Campus

Researchers in the social and policy sciences have shown that disseminating research in accessible formats increases the likelihood that science will be utilized and have an impact on communities (Dilling, 2007; Gibbons et al., 1994). Scientific research can create impact through various routes and mechanisms, depending on the type of knowledge utilization and productive interactions desired (Muhonen et al., 2020). Many universities have established large-scale interdisciplinary research centers to address these issues (Biancani et al., 2018). Research centers have emerged as vital hubs in the scientific community, dedicated to addressing the complex challenges faced by communities and societies.

Research centers present a unique advantage in supplementing the traditional academic-practitioner partnerships. In particular, research centers that draw from faculty and researchers across a variety of disciplines may increase new ties and enhance

research collaboration (Biancani et al., 2018; Kabo et al., 2014). Interdisciplinary work can incorporate theories and applications from disciplines that typically don't overlap in traditional department-based settings and enhance the overall quality of work (Boardman & Corley, 2008; Bozeman & Boardman, 2003; Stahler & Tash, 1994). On the academic side, they boost faculty productivity, as faculty affiliated with these centers tend to be more productive than their non-affiliated peers (Sabharwal & Hu, 2013). On the practitioner side, research centers facilitate the process of transferring knowledge, technologies, and innovations generated through academic or scientific endeavors into partner organizations, such as industrial companies, governmental bodies, and other collaborative institutions (Philbin et al., 2014). Such activities can involve tailoring research outcomes to meet the specific needs of stakeholders, supporting partnerships, and implementing mechanisms for effective knowledge exchange and capacity building. Engaging stakeholders involving gathering the knowledge, experience, perspectives, and values of individuals representing various interests in an issue, fostering shared understanding, and enabling informed, transparent, and effective decision-making can be a specific asset of research centers (Deverka et al., 2012). This also can enable the commercialization of research (Rasmussen et al., 2006), and its impact on the broader economy (Feldman & Kelley, 2003), as well as the use of academic knowledge to guide areas like policymaking and regulation (Holmes & Clark, 2008).

Types of Partnerships

While academic-practitioner partnerships can take a number of different forms, some common ones involving research centers in particular include funded research and projects; developing fact sheets and reports; and obtaining internships, postdoctoral scholar roles, and positions for students upon graduation. One element in which academic-practitioner partnerships particularly shine is in funded research and programming projects. Academics are well versed in writing long justifications for research to be conducted, replicated, and sustained. This is especially true for research-oriented grants, where faculty may use output from these projects to submit for publication in scholarly outlets and include as evidence of productivity for tenure and promotion purposes. For practitioners, having academics on board often means having assistance in writing and implementing the grant, while also benefitting from the increased funding for staffing, programming, and expansion of existing services. Even in the case of research grants, a well-structured evaluation can provide the basis for later application for state and federal grants with more of a focus on programming.

A significant portion of funding for academic research centers comes from public organizations like the NSF and NIH (Cozzens, 2000). The National Science Foundation (NSF) evaluates grant proposals based on intellectual merit and broader impacts, allowing applicants to select from various options that include both scientific and societal benefits (Roberts, 2009), highlighting the broader 'public value' of science beyond just scientific achievements or commercialization (Bozeman & Sarewitz, 2011; Bornmann, 2013). Additional funding may also come from government and nonprofit agencies in particular areas of focus, such as the Office for Victims of Crime and National Institute of Justice for criminal justice-focused projects.

Areas of Focus

While the research direction and output of a research center is primarily driven by faculty, visiting scholars, and doctoral students, with essential contributions from support staff, its overarching goal is to foster collaboration among these groups and industry to advance research, innovation, and knowledge sharing (Kumar, 2016). Bloemert et al. (2020) emphasize the value of involving students in research through various roles, noting that students bring unique insights as data sources, collaborators, or initiators, rather than solely focusing on student-initiated projects. In general, research centers unite researchers from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to tackle complex scientific and social problems that span multiple disciplines (Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972; Stokols et al., 2008). Research centers involving academic-practitioner partnerships may also tailor their areas of focus based on the needs of the practitioners themselves.

Whatever their area, these centers, in order to survive, must strive to address all aspects of collaboration while facilitating long-term sustainable relationships between industry and academic institutions (Sinnewe et al., 2016), despite the inherent differences in institutional logics and priorities that can exist between these two sectors (Hall, 2003). In this regard, health disparities, poverty, community development, societal inequalities, and other related issues are critical challenges that require extensive research to understand and address. Health disparities, for instance, are increasingly being studied across various societies, with an emphasis on identifying the factors that contribute to differences in health outcomes (Burgard & Chen, 2014). Similarly, poverty remains a central topic in social science research, with ongoing discussions about its causes, consequences, and potential solutions (Vu, 2010). In the realm of community development, there is growing interest in scientifically measuring community well-being and success to guide more effective interventions (Zautra et al., 2008).

In the social sciences, research centers also focus on areas such as crime, delinquency, and other related issues. Specific to criminal justice, research centers can be used to drive best practice assessment and evaluation in terms of law enforcement patrol and resource distribution, as well as sanction-type research such as domestic violence programming as part of probation and parole agreements. In this realm, the role of academics can structure not just data collection and output, but also bring theoretically appropriate policies driven by sociological and environmental factors such as poverty and deprivation, psychological and individual-level factors such as stress, impulsivity, and so on.

Challenges and New Directions Facing Research Centers

Research centers leverage diverse expertise to address a wide range of challenges, driving innovative solutions that empower communities and enhance societal well-being. However, while research centers are flexible and multifaceted, balancing focus with external engagement and intersecting diverse interests, they are not a one-size-fits-all solution, their success depends on aligning collaboration, strategy, and goals.

Consequently, without this fit, centers are likely to have only a limited impact on societal challenges (Mattsson et al., 2024).

However, research centers are experiencing growth both in number and in the quality and nature of their studies. Each center focuses on various topics and areas, aiming to address a wide range of issues within its specific domain. As research centers become integral in articulating issues and providing solutions, it is essential to understand the specific areas in which these centers are involved and the types of challenges they have addressed or may address through their research outputs. Understanding this will first elucidate the areas of science and knowledge that have received significant attention from research centers. Additionally, it will highlight other research areas that may lack sufficient engagement from these centers, revealing potential issues that remain unaddressed.

Examples of Research Centers

The current project reviews two examples of research centers, both housed on the same university campus, including their organizational structure, area of focus, and current and prior projects.

Context of Locale

As of the 2021 Census, the [City] was comprised of roughly 628,118 residents. Memphis and the larger [County], [State] are regions that have historically been underserved and marginalized, facing significant socioeconomic inequities and high levels of crime and violence. [City] has the second-highest poverty rate nationally, with an overall poverty rate of 27.8% and 43% of its population living in a high-poverty neighborhood (Benzow & Fikri, 2020). Within the area, [City] also has higher poverty rates than [County] as a whole (Delavega & Blumenthal, 2020). Poverty here is endemic, in that close to half of the city's total census tracts have experienced persistent poverty (Benzow & Fikri, 2020). Poverty rates are highest for the non-White population, with Hispanic and Black populations experiencing the highest rates of poverty in the city, the latter of which are the majority demographic in the area (Delavega & Blumenthal, 2020).

The [City], and [County] as a whole, also lead [State], and the nation, in rates of violence. According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports data, in 2020, [City] had the highest major violent crime rate (i.e., reported murders, rapes, robberies, and aggravated assaults) in the nation, and the third highest major property crime rate (i.e., reported burglaries, motor vehicle thefts, and other felony thefts). By 2024, the major violent crime rate in [County] increased by 6.3%, and the major property crime rate rose by 15.8%. Finally, the rate of adults reporting Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in [County] is nearly twice the rate in other areas of [State], as well as nearly double the rate nationally ([Blinded for Review], 2015).

Serving a community affected by these issues is especially pressing for local researchers. In a city with high crime, one would expect services to be congruent with the level of need, but this is not always the case. In cities with high poverty and

deprivation, ineffective and siloed organizational partnerships mean that the needs of the community are not always met. While outside factors, such as budget constraints and political dynamics, rather than research findings, often drive criminal justice programming and initiatives federally and at the state level, this is not usually the case at the local level. Here, partnerships between academics and practitioners are less driven by the divide between political parties and are more representative of the personal relationships that exist between residents of the same community. The opportunity to make meaningful impact for the community can drive both academics and practitioners to work to better their own lives, even indirectly.

[University], a major research institution, has a strong commitment to community engagement and social impact. The university has extensive experience in planning, developing, implementing, and managing criminal justice-related programs at the local, state, and national levels. University faculty have built partnerships and collaboration with government agencies and nonprofit organizations across the metropolitan area. However, the specific impact of projects involving faculty and researchers working collectively on these efforts, has yet to be reviewed.

Overview of Research Center 1

The [Research Center 1] is a nonprofit research center housed at the [University]. [Research Center 1] primarily connects faculty and practitioners in the [City and County] community on funding and research opportunities to drive academic-practitioner partnerships, centered around program development, evaluation, or best practices research on issues related to public safety. As a hub for research and innovation in public safety and criminal justice, the center has the ability to leverage interdisciplinary expertise to address complex social issues. The institute's work includes collaborations with law enforcement agencies, community organizations, and policy-makers to develop evidence-based solutions for improving public safety and justice outcomes. The institute's interdisciplinary approach leverages expertise from various fields, including criminology, public health, and social work, to develop comprehensive strategies for enhancing public safety. The institute's established relationships with local law enforcement agencies and community organizations will facilitate the effective implementation of the proposed project.

[Research Center 1] was formed in 2016 in partnership with and primarily funded by the local crime reduction-focused [Nonprofit] to help ensure a seamless research-practice partnership between local leaders in the law enforcement, criminal justice, business, government, the non-profit community, and faith communities. The [Nonprofit] president also serves as the Executive Director for the Center. In this format, the research center incorporates a practitioner focus, wherein the Executive Director works directly with practitioners in the criminal justice community, and an academic focus, wherein the Research Director brings in faculty from across campus to build an interdisciplinary approach to crime response and prevention, public safety, and larger societal issues related to poverty and deprivation.

The research center includes its Executive Director, the former County District Attorney and current Head of [Nonprofit]; a Research Director, an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology at the University; a Senior Research Devel-

oper; two research assistants; and an executive assistant. The center also contracts directly with university faculty on specific projects to fund them in specialized areas on evaluation and assessment. The center's work primarily falls within one of three areas: (1) defining and conducting research tied to the local [Nonprofit] Safe Community Plan, which is updated every five years; (2) applied research related to program implementation requested by practitioner partners; and (3) funded work from state and federal grants across a broad range of criminal justice and public safety issues. The center has extensive experience in planning, developing, implementing, and managing criminal justice-related programs at the local, state, and national levels.

One of the hallmarks of this collaborative approach is to bring academic rigor to the assessment of crime prevention and reduction efforts. It regularly collects and analyses criminal justice and public safety data, works to identify research-driven best practices, assesses program processes and implementation outcomes, regularly presents findings to key stakeholders and the public through the media, and provides information to key stakeholders to assist in their decision-making. Current and projects involve strategic planning of a Downtown Safety Plan; planning and implementation of a domestic violence coordinated community response; and assessment and evaluation of criminal justice, social service, hospital-based violence intervention, and community youth programs. Other work includes an assessment of the [City] violence intervention program, [Children's Hospital] for violence intervention, focusing on youth who receive treatment at the hospital for gunshot wounds and youth in the Juvenile Court system charged with gun-related acts, evaluation of a program involving intensive supervision and services for serious youthful offenders, an assessment of the local Boys and Girls Clubs, and research on best practices and other criminal justice topics.

As a grant partner, the [Research Center 1] can serve one of three roles to a criminal justice or social service entity, such that it can (1) serve as a solicitation applicant, with one or more community partners serving as support; (2) serve as a research or academic partner on an application, with the community partner as the applicant and primarily benefitting from the grant funding; or (3) serve as the grant writer for the project without official involvement. In this way, the center acts as a university resource to outside parties and does not charge a consulting fee to act in this capacity. This is largely due to the center's funding structure, which owes its stability to a three-year grant issued by the local [Nonprofit], of which the Executive Director also currently heads.

Overview of Research Center 2

The [Research Center 2] was founded in 2020, the formalization of five years of efforts conducting external evaluation services at the [University]. The Center started as a small unit operating out of the [Department] on a contract with a partner from the [External Location] to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, interventions, and economic sustainability related to both health and education in the region. The [Research Center 2] now operates out of the [College] at the [University] and provides services to academic and non-academic partners alike. The mission of the [Center] is to provide interdisciplinary social science research and evaluation support for commu-

nity-based projects. The center assesses outcomes across a broad spectrum of issues related to society and community, to help local organizations and on-campus units leverage the full power of data to collect information, develop programming, and determine impact.

[Research Center 2] conducts evaluations for over thirty programs within the [Local Nonprofit], including two cradle-to-career and several public health initiatives in the [City and County]. As a key partner in the NIH-funded Partnership to Optimize Equity in Maternal and Infant Health, the center plays a critical role in implementing and assessing structural interventions aimed at improving maternal and infant health outcomes in the region. In the field of criminal justice, [Research Center 2] evaluates the bail and bond system in [County] and the [City] Police Department's Crisis Intervention Team. Additionally, it administers the Economic Development Administration's [Funded Project], which focuses on providing rapid credentialing programs to enhance labor force readiness. The center has also contributed to workforce development by producing a comprehensive report for the [State] Business Leadership Council, detailing the status of the state's labor force.

[Research Center 2] provides comprehensive social scientific expertise for projects of all scales, offering support ranging from full-scale program evaluations and population-level surveys to targeted expert advice. Its involvement spans multiple domains: proposal development, including grant writing, evaluation plans, needs assessments, performance indicators, literature reviews, program design, and power analysis; research design, covering everything from simple pre-test/post-test surveys to robust experimental or quasi-experimental studies tailored to stakeholder needs; and data science, employing advanced tools like R and Python for dashboard development, automated data pipelining, computational GIS, Spatiotemporal analysis, and predictive analytics, including machine learning. Its expertise extends to survey implementation, designing valid, reliable instruments for population-scale data collection using multimodal approaches. [Research Center 2] also integrates mixed-methods research, leveraging qualitative tools like focus groups and interviews to complement and contextualize quantitative findings. Finally, it prioritizes data visualization and reporting, producing white papers, academic articles, interactive dashboards, and maps to make findings accessible to stakeholders, and offers consulting services to strengthen the scientific capacity of local community organizations.

Notes from [Research Center 1] and [Research Center 2]

[Research Center 1] and [Research Center 2], while both university-affiliated research centers, each offer their own lessons for academic-practitioner partnerships. First, both research centers highlight the necessity of funding organizations to consider funding academic-practitioner partnerships. As Ou et al. (2024) noted, research funding serves as a critical driver for advancements in science and technology. Policymakers frequently leverage funding to accelerate the production of scientific knowledge, promote excellence in research, and influence the strategic direction of scientific endeavors (Aagaard et al., 2021). Currently, both of these research centers have grant funding at various government, nonprofit, and private entities. These resources have increased the "buy in" for community partnerships, particularly in terms of funded

evaluations in which the partners submit their program metrics and internal data collected on the clients or population they serve. For example, [Research Center 1] is currently funded in a state grant coordinating community response to domestic violence, an opportunity in which participating agencies have agreed to submit their data on referrals between agencies and on client engagement in services. Even in program-focused grants which offer funding for staff hiring and expansion, [Research Center 2] has provided ongoing assistance for agencies in keeping track of grant spending and reporting. [Research Center 1] has also used funding opportunities for entities, particularly nonprofits, to develop logic models specifying internal program metrics defining and linked to program success, create a template database for data tracking, and conduct process and outcome assessments for program fidelity, implementation, and outcomes.

Second, having traditional faculty serve as research center staff and affiliates can benefit both the academics' career trajectories as well as their practitioner partners. For example, the Research Director at [Research Center 1] is an Associate Professor, but the evaluations translating to publication, conference presentations, and funding opportunities stemming from the role will likely provide a successful foundation for an application for Full Professor in the years to come. Similarly, the Director of [Research Center 2], while already a full Professor, recently was named to Department Chair of the home department in which [Research Center 2] resides. [Research Center 1] also offers a pool of internal funding for affiliate faculty to work on grant applications, program evaluations and assessments, and general collaborations with community partners, to encourage partnerships across campus.

Discussion

Research centers can provide a valuable tool to bring academics and practitioners together on projects. However, there still remains much work to be done to ensure these entities remain long-term resources available to agencies and individuals throughout the community. First, funding must remain consistent for research centers to offer some sense of longevity. In this regard, [Research Center 2] is primarily funded on grant awards; without continued grant success, their staffing capacity could be greatly reduced. One avenue may be to pursue adding research centers to the University's line-item budget in fiscal years moving forward. In addition, funding opportunities must also be vigorously pursued at local, state, and federal level from a variety of avenues and incorporate faculty and other researchers from multiple disciplines to offer additional avenues in terms of agencies that will fund these efforts.

Second, the research centers reviewed here highlight a need for additional faculty and researchers to provide a more comprehensive infrastructure for university-community partnerships. [Research Center 1] aims to incorporate more affiliated faculty within its funded and nonfunded projects, but this remains a work in progress. Towards that end, academic researchers in the broader setting must be aware of the benefits in taking this approach while working with community partners. One avenue for expansion is the ability to pool resources between research centers on campus. [Research Center 1] and [Research Center 2] have collaborated on several projects,

including federal funding applications evaluating the local Crime Victims Center and an assessment of community climate and criminal justice system experiences across the spectrum of gender, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation, as well as a proposed creation of a [County] Criminal Justice Data Clearinghouse as a model to establish interoperability across data sources, calculate common performance metrics, and remediate existing data reporting deficits, using technology to combine data from multiple entities involving individuals charged with criminal offenses. In addition, the Centers have shared staff across multiple funded projects, which has aided in the use of often-limited campus resources. Discussions remain underway for new project possibilities and collaborative efforts, as long as both Centers remain funded by local government and nonprofit entities, as well as grant funding awards.

Conclusion

While there is an increasing call for research agendas aimed at reducing societal inequality, there are still few clear frameworks for how social scientists can actively pursue these goals (Nalani et al., 2021). Research centers focused on social science, such as the ones reviewed here, have the potential to play a crucial role in addressing these issues. By concentrating on multidisciplinary research and utilizing rigorous methodologies, these centers can have a direct impact in addressing these complex issues, advancing knowledge, and shaping policies that lead to tangible societal change. However, while this review provides some examples of research centers within this area, it is not a formal evaluation of either research center. In addition, the review of these centers is also limited to the context in which they operate. Given their location on a singular university campus, and within a major metropolitan city, the research centers here may not represent how research centers across the state or country can operate. Here, the lack of capacity to access available resources, particularly in a city already struggling to serve a disadvantaged population, means that research centers can fill a unique need in a way where centers in more advantaged areas or with easily accessible resources may not. Further work is needed to determine more specifically the contexts under which research centers can most successfully operate.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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