Lessons from the Field: Strategies for Forming Strong Partnerships

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In this brief, we highlight the following six lessons from the experiences of two PREIS grantees: (1) research the scope and capabilities of organizations and use existing relation-ships to onboard the right partners; (2) immerse your-self in partners' culture and communication norms; (3) clearly explain the evalua-tion design to partners from the beginning; (4) establish processes and tools that clarify expectations and timelines; (5) communicate regularly with partners to identify successes and challenges; and (6) share data and invite partners to give meaningful feedback on the project's progress.

In 2016, the Family and Youth Services Bureau at the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, funded a cohort of Personal Responsibility Education Innovative Strategies (PREIS) grantees. During the five-year grant period, the grantees provided innovative, adolescent pregnancy prevention programs to youth typically underserved by adolescent pregnancy prevention programming, including youth who are Native American, expectant or parenting, involved in the juvenile justice system, living in foster care or public housing, or expe-riencing homelessness. The grantees also conducted rigorous, impact evaluations of their programs.

This brief describes lessons from two PREIS grantees' experiences forming strong partnerships. These two grantees were University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and The Policy & Research Group (PRG). They both worked with numerous partners to serve their youth populations and conducted randomized controlled trials to assess the impacts of their programs. Table 1 has more information on each grantee.

Both grantees had **implementation site partners** and **community partners**. Imple-mentation site partners were organizations where the program was physically imple-mented (such as schools, community organizations, nonresidential juvenile justice sites working with youth on probation, among others). Community partners were organi-zations that supported the grantee but did not directly host program implementation. These community partners had various roles, including recruiting and enrolling youth, helping keep youth engaged in programming, and collecting data for the evaluation.

This brief draws on information the PREIS grantees provided through written docu-ments and virtual interviews. Mathematica analyzed the data to identify key themes across the two grantees.

For more information on the PREIS grant program, please visit https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/programs/adolescent-pregnancy-prevention/programs/preis.

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Table 1. Overview of the Two Grantees Featured in This Brief

Grantee	Location	Characteristics of youth served	Program description	Summary of partners and their roles
University of California, San Francisco	California	Underserved youth ages 13 to 19, including those who experienced homelessness or unstable housing, were LGBTQ, or were Native American	Six hours of in-person programming and a mobile app with resources and reminders	• One community-based organization was a key partner that helped the grantee recruit youth, implement the program, and collect data. • One technology nonprofit organization helped develop and maintain the app used in program implementation. • Multiple community-based organizations served as implementation sites for the programming.
The Policy & Research Group	West Virginia and New Mexico	Youth ages 14 to 19 who were on formal or informal probation and receiving services at a juvenile justice system site	Four hours of asynchronous sessions completed online and two hours of individual in-person sessions between youth and a facilitator	• Two state juvenile justice departments helped the grantee understand the juvenile justice system and helped create partnerships with juvenile justice sites within each state. • Multiple nonresidential juvenile justice sites working with youth on probation helped recruit and enroll youth. In-person program sessions also often occurred at these sites. • Multiple schools and community-based organizations helped the grantee keep in contact with youth where they were already receiving services; this helped with program retention and achieving higher response rates on evaluation surveys.

Note: LGBTQ= Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning

Research the Scope and Capabilities of Organizations and Use Existing Relationships to Onboard the Right Partners

Before approaching an organization about a partnership, UCSF first identified their own needs from partners and then researched other organizations to better understand the organization's expertise, capacity, and services. Gathering this information helped the grantees focus their efforts to select partners that were the most relevant organizations that could help satisfy the grantees' needs. For example, UCSF first identified they needed a partner to help recruit and enroll a large number of youths. Next, they looked at the capacity of organizations in their community to see who might be able to fulfill that role. Through this research, they identified Fresno Economic Opportunities as an organization that had the capacity to help at the scale needed for the project.

> **Project** refers to the implemented programming and its accompanying rigorous evaluation

PRG worked with their initial partners to identify additional partners for the project. PRG wanted to build relationships with schools and community-based organizations that worked with youth involved in the juvenile justice system (for instance, youth on formal and informal probation). This grantee hoped to develop relationships with community partners so they could reach youth in locations where they were already

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receiving services which could simplify scheduling in-person program sessions and contacting youth for follow-up survey administration. To identify these community partners, PRG worked with their juvenile justice implementation site partners to gather information about other places youth receive services in the community. PRG revisited these conversations with the implementation site partners over time, and as PRG built rapport, the partners suggested more organizations that worked with youth. This enabled the grantee to more easily identify potential community partners to approach for the project.

To reach some partners, both grantees had to be persistent. UCSF drew on their staff's professional relationships with other youth-serving organizations to get a foot in the door when trying to secure partnerships. For instance, UCSF staff knew other organization staff from interactions at conferences, or from serving on an advisory board for adolescent sexual education together. They built on those connections to start the conversations with potential partners. In addition, PRG used their partnerships with state agencies to help onboard implementation site partners. State-level partners described the project to implementation site partners in easy, understandable language. Having the buy-in and support of the state-level partners legitimized the project and enabled PRG to more easily onboard implementation site partners. When trying to form partnerships with organizations they were less familiar with, PRG staff sometimes found success with sending an introductory email to the organization. If they did not get a response to the email, they remained persistent and often found that cold-calling or simply walking into the organization, introducing themselves, and going over the project worked well.

"Onboarding is hard: Get creative, be persistent." — PRG study coordinator

Immerse Yourself in Partners' Culture and Communication Norms

The grantees recognized that learning the language and culture of partners was important for effectively communicating and understanding, and for addressing partners' concerns with program implementation and data collection. PRG learned that the culture was unique at each juvenile justice implementation site partner, so the grantee had to learn over time each partner site's culture. At the beginning of the grant, PRG did not ask about partner organizations' hierarchy and chain of command. With hindsight, PRG recognized they should have asked for this information at the beginning, as it helped grantee staff better understand how partner organizations made decisions. In addition, the PRG team found that juvenile justice staff at the implementation site partners were initially hesitant to allow youth on probation to participate because the youth were experiencing a challenging time in their life, including having many other commitments and requirements from their legal cases. To address some of these concerns, PRG used help from their state partners to describe the project in terms the implementation site partners would understand. The state partners also clarified the benefits of participating in the project for the implementation site partners.

"Partners have their own culture, which can include having a hierarchy and chain of commands. Seek out this information and be respectful of the process." — PRG lead research analyst

Learning about how their partners operated helped grantee staff communicate more clearly with partners about the evaluations. For example, PRG found that juvenile justice partners had different language around privacy and confidentiality. PRG was largely focused on making sure they obtained the necessary parental consent and meeting all the requirements from their Institutional Review Board (IRB) to protect youth's

confidentiality and data. Meanwhile, the partners had less of an evaluation background and were most concerned with how youth's information would be kept private, particularly since the youth were in a vulnerable situation being involved in the juvenile justice system. These perspectives led the grantee and partners to prioritize different aspects of the process of protecting youth's privacy and use different language. However, they ultimately had the same goal to keep youth's information confidential and secure. Once PRG understood the difference in their language, PRG was able to have more productive conversations with partner staff to identify ways the project could fit within the partner's structure and protect youth's privacy.

Clearly Explain the Evaluation Design to Partners From the Beginning

Some partner staff were less familiar with technical aspects of evaluations, so the grantees identified strategies to explain the evaluation design. Both grantees were conducting a randomized controlled trial, in which some of the enrolled youth would be randomly assigned to receive the program and others would be randomly assigned to the control group that would not receive the program. When UCSF initially presented information about the project to implementation site partner staff at community-based organizations, they mainly focused on the program itself, while spending less time on the data collection requirements for the evaluation and mentioning the evaluation design. This approach led to confusion among partner staff, as they did not fully understand the evaluation design. As a result, the UCSF team recommended first talking with partners about the evaluation design so partner staff clearly understood that some youth will not receive the program. After that, grantees could introduce details about the program, data collection, and other logistics. UCSF also originally presented information verbally but realized over time, they needed written materials they could leave with their community-based organization partners. UCSF created a one-pager and printouts of the slides for partner staff to have as a reference. The materials used simple, nontechnical terms and clearly defined more technical terms such as "intervention group," "outcomes," or "privacy." PRG engaged in continual conversations with juvenile justice implementation partner staff to clarify that half the youth would be receiving the program and the other half would not. This helped partners understand clearly what the randomized controlled trial design entailed.

> *"[When talking to potential partners] I should have started with the fact that this was a research project first and explained it from a research perspective, as opposed to starting with the program description first and backtracking every single time."* -UCSF project coordinator

Establish Processes and Tools that Clarify Expectations and Timelines

Working collaboratively with partners to identify the role of each organization helped the grantees set clear expectations and strengthen their partnerships. PRG used consistent tools and processes when onboarding new juvenile justice implementation site partners to the project. First, they discussed the project with implementation site partners and worked with them to complete an implementation plan template before partners started serving youth. The template covered topics such as the site's technology capacity, recruiting procedures, and strategies for following up with youth for data collection. It served as a road map for program implementation at that site, including specific roles and responsibilities of staff at PRG and the implementation

site partner. After the site partner completed the implementation template, PRG staff held in-person meetings with frontline staff at the partner site. During these meetings, PRG and partner staff discussed timelines and expectations in more detail. Partner staff had time to ask questions and suggest changes to the timeline, recruiting strategies, and enrollment processes, if needed. For sites that joined later in the grant, PRG asked staff from existing partnerships to join the meeting to share their experiences and answer questions. The grantee felt the existing partners' perspectives helped alleviate potential concerns from new partner staff, as the new partners could see how other partners had incorporated the project into their work.

Flexibility with timelines and schedules can be helpful for the overall success of the project. UCSF developed a big picture timeline for the project at the beginning of the grant period. Then, they asked partners to develop their own schedules and timelines for their roles on the project, based on the overall project timeline. Over time, the UCSF team realized they needed to revisit the schedule, expectations, and roles, because some tasks took longer than expected (such as developing the app that was part of the program) and some partners had less time than expected for the project. Some partners took on a bigger role to make up for the partners that had less time. The grantee updated and circulated the big picture timeline annually.

"Partners need to be honest about competing priorities so that timelines can be realistic and adapted as needed." -UCSF in their written documents

Communicate Regularly with Partners to Identify Successes and Challenges

Regular, frequent communication with partners was essential to stay on the same page and optimize project processes. For example, UCSF held biweekly calls with each partner individually and in-person meetings as needed, and PRG started with weekly calls and eventually moved to bi-weekly calls with each partner. These frequent calls could be challenging to keep, given partners' busy schedules, but as a member of the evaluation team at PRG explained, the calls "allowed them to keep [the project] at the forefront of mind," which ultimately "made the [project] more successful." Through these ongoing conversations, the grantees heard more about what was working or not working, which enabled them to tweak processes over time. For example, PRG learned staff at juvenile justice implementation site partners were struggling with presenting the project to potential youth participants as part of recruitment efforts. They did not feel confident or comfortable presenting the more technical aspects of the project to youth. To support them, the PRG team developed short video clips that introduced the project to potential youth participants. The grantee felt this was a game changer because it reduced the burden on partner site staff and enabled the grantee to control the language used to present the opportunity to youth, including explaining the rigorous evaluation and randomization process.

The grantees also sought opportunities for more in-depth conversations with partners. For instance, PRG visited juvenile justice implementation site partners in-person semi-annually. The visits lasted about an hour or two and allowed for more in-depth discussion about progress and challenges. PRG tried to involve as many staff at the implementation site partner as possible, such as supervisors, parole officers, behavioral health clinicians, and administrative staff. Hearing from a variety of partner staff offered more perspectives on how the

project was operating at the site and how well the project fit into youth's schedules and other commitments. For example, at one site visit, the PRG team learned youth were facing transportation barriers to attend program sessions. Partner staff suggested offering bus tokens to address this challenge, and PRG implemented this change, which helped with youth attendance and retention. Meanwhile, USCF established cross-partner work groups to focus on specific tasks (such as tracking and following up with youth for data collection and revising the curriculum). These work groups drew on partners' strengths and allowed more time for in-depth discussions about these topics with a smaller group.

Share Data and Invite Partners to Give Meaningful Feedback on the Project's Progress

Both grantees used data to help discuss the project's progress, identify successes, and brainstorm strategies to address challenges with partners. As part of their site visits to juvenile justice implementation site partners, PRG created a one-page snapshot of the project's progress. These snapshots were intended to be accessible and easy to digest, using figures and graphics to present information. In the snapshots, PRG shared data on how recruitment was going in the state overall and at the partner site, so partner staff could see how their site was doing compared with others in the state. While presenting the snapshot, the grantee team solicited feedback and reactions from partner staff, which often helped the grantee better understand issues the partner was facing. For example, through these discussions, PRG learned of barriers to enrollment related to cultural barriers and families' discomfort with discussing sexual health topics with youth. PRG also used this time to celebrate and better understand successes at implementation site partners. At

"I think getting to see the data of how successful each of the sites was at specific components was really helpful because [partners] got to see how their insight was instrumental to the success of the study and … the success of the youth at their sites. People in the room would be invigorated. Buy-in would be higher after the meetings. You could feel some apprehensions being alleviated in the room when they realized that they were part of the success." – PRG study coordinator

sites that were succeeding with enrollment and obtaining parental consent, PRG asked partner staff for more information on their strategies, and PRG shared those strategies with partner sites that were struggling. UCSF shared with implementation site partners data from attendance logs, observations, and evaluation milestones to build a sense of shared investment in the progress of the program. For example, the UCSF team presented data on the number of youths who completed follow-up surveys, by community-based organization partner. Data indicated some sites struggled with their response rates on follow-up surveys. Through conversations with partner staff at those community-based organizations, UCSF learned some youth did not have consistent access to a cell phone. After identifying this challenge, the grantee brainstormed solutions with partner staff and ultimately changed their data collection procedures to alert partner staff before sending texts to youths, so partner staff could help UCSF staff identify which youth had access to a cell phone.

Conclusion

This brief examines the experiences of two PREIS grantees and highlights six lessons for current and future grantees related to forming partnerships. The grantees recommended future grantees invest time in researching and onboarding the right partners to ensure they have chosen partners with the necessary skills, capacity, and expertise to complete their intended role on the project. By immersing themselves in each partner's culture and communication norms, future grantees can build greater understanding across organizations and increase partner buy-in. In addition, grantees can take time to explain the evaluation design to partners early in the onboarding process, so they understand the full implications of the evaluation for youth's experiences. Establishing processes and tools that outline expectations and timelines for each organization creates an environment of openness and accountability. To share successes and solve problems or challenges that might arise, grantees can communicate regularly with partners. Finally, grantees can use data to share information on the project's progress with partners and ask for feedback to inform adaptations to the projects' processes and procedures.