CURA Conversations

Summary Notes & Lessons Learned

Saturday June 25th, 2011, 8:30am-5:00pm
4th Floor Lounge, Sobey Building
Saint Mary's University
Hosted By:

CoastalCURA
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Summary Notes

A. RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC RESEARCH MANAGEMENT QUESTIONS

1. Defining problems

The CURA program demonstrated that a wide range of different types of communities want relevant research. The range of academic disciplines that participated in the CURA program also suggests that communities have a very diverse set of problems and research needs and have encouraged academics to work together and across disciplinary silos. That *diversity has enriched research questions* but also required skill at integrating diverse skill sets into a coherent program of research.

The collaborative defining of research problems requires good working relationships between academics and community partners. This in turn relies on *a long time frame* to build relationships, trust and long-term commitment. Particularly in First Nation contexts, negotiating partnerships is extremely difficult due to past consequences of opening their communities to outside researchers.

It is important then that funding structures and rules for disbursement of funds do not form a barrier to building relationships and trust within the research partnership. *Flexibility* in the program funding structure is key. Among the CURA Conversations participants, there were many cases where the funding structure constrained what people were able to do.

Funding flexibility is particularly needed in terms of how the funds can be disbursed. University administrators should have the flexibility to work around local conditions, for example, travel advances for community partners who cannot afford to support the cost of travel claims. Other examples involved the complexities introduced when matching funds are required from industry.   While the problems under investigation sometimes made corporate funding sources a good match, some research partnerships were impossible under such constraints.

2. Maintaining the Involvement of all Research Partners

It is important to recognize at the outset that *long-term research partnerships will evolve and change over time*, in terms of focus, participants and concrete activities. Shared values may be more important than concrete objectives – people will be more likely to remain involved if they feel their *values are respected*. However, given problems of burn-out and staff turn-over, research participants will change. Mechanisms should be in place for *good institutional memory*.   Some participants

discussed the value of "research champions" in the community; others spoke of the importance of *good data management and warehousing*.

3. Project decision-making structures

Most participants reported that their projects were *consensus-based* with some form of collective decision-making body plus a smaller management group for day-to-day decision making. However, some groups were structured with a more top-down approach, which was useful for some problem areas (especially in larger or international CURAs). The participants recognized that collaborative research projects are *a form of political engagement*, and will involve a great deal of internal and external politics. Thus, both formal and informal channels can be used for decision-making. Throughout the life of the project, governance of the project must be *an iterative process*. There will be conflicts, and there should be a process in place to manage those. Tools for managing conflict and political problems included outcome mapping, formal research protocols, signed agreements. But in all cases, all such protocols will have to remain flexible.

4. Comparing graduate student roles and experiences

Both graduate students and community partners may be vulnerable given the research time frame and participatory approach often involved in collaborative research. CURA partnerships may give students an entry to communities, but student expectations may not be realistic given the balance needed for group versus individual (thesis) outcomes. Student flexibility is needed if student research ideas are to remain open to community needs and changing priorities. Students must also understand *the research ethics* of doing research inside communities, including sharing data, leaving something behind and contributing to change. *Flexible research agreements* may help with many of these issues. Participants were encouraged to share their research agreements, publication authorship agreements, and methods for creating space for individual student research questions. There has been a wealth of learning during the CURA process, and this should be documented.

5. Comparing methods for evaluation

Some participants stressed the importance of *reflective and iterative evaluation* throughout the project lifespan. Various methods were discussed including developing indicators to assess effectiveness of outcomes. Others pointed out that several kinds of evaluation are possible – outcome evaluations (effectiveness, efficiency, outreach) and process evaluations (partnerships strengthened, partner satisfaction, collective learning enhanced).

B. KEY MESSAGES FOR SSHRC

Our CURA Conversations invitations went out to CURAs that were focused on questions around the governance of natural resources. There was a common thread among the participants in that we were all *dealing with livelihoods* and all working in rural and sometimes in remote communities.

For this group of research partners, the loss or reinvention of the CURA program has large implications for how these community/university projects may function in the future. We feel strongly that there is *a recognized and continued need for collaborative work with communities in the area of resource management*.

Governance is changing and evolving to include more complex partnerships among civil society, non-governmental actors, economic agents and various levels of government. As a result, *interdisciplinary collaboration* is needed more than ever, not only to study problems and their solutions, but also to examine these governance partnerships and to improve their functioning. The Tri-Council must find a better way to work with networks.

Questions are complex and require multiplex collaboration; therefore we need to know how to collaborate. *Sharing of best practices* will help us do this successfully in the future.

However, equally important is a funding structure that meets our complex needs. With recent changes in SSHRC program architecture, most participants were concerned that there is *no longer the explicit focus on communities* and/or livelihoods, nor explicit acknowledgement of what we have learned from 11 years of CURA projects. In particular, we do not want to lose the focus on place-based communities and on livelihood issues, which community partnership helped to bring to the forefront. Several differences between the old CURA and the new Partnership model concerned participants. Why the change to the CURA program? Was there something that was not working? The change to Partnership funding means establishing matching contributions. Right now it is still possible to partner with communities through contributions of time, but many community partners cannot afford to contribute financial resources and are concerned that this is the direction SSHRC is taking.

Universities and SSHRC need to communicate more effectively with researchers and community partners about *barriers to effective project organization and facilitation*. Academics often get good support while seeking the funding, but there is often a disconnect between what the funding program is designed to do and what the academic institutions feel free to do. This is also a problem in NSERC. Rules of disbursement of funds can be a problem and there were disagreements among participants about how funds can flow to partners. It seems there is a different procedure for the different

academic environments. The lack of ability to have community members in CURA as co-PI was also mentioned.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Full-scale review CURA for lessons learned and best practices in research collaboration
- Careful management of replacement programs to ensure similar opportunities
- Increased emphasis on flexibility in funding structures and on working with academics to solve problems (perhaps an ombudsman for dealing with program structural problems?)

D. POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS

- Circulate this summary for review.
- Send to other CURAs for comment.
- Perhaps make a firm declaration, summarizing our overall concerns.
- Distribute summary to SSHRC President, Line People, and ask for other names for further distribution.

E. SUGGESTED BIBLIOGRAPHY & WEBSITE

- Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change -Adam Kahane
- Boundaries Partners – Susan Earl (website available?)
- Leslie Harris Centre at MUN – YAFFLE– community research needs partnering with researchers