

Protecting Vulnerable Families and Children in the Crosshairs of the Opioid Epidemic: A Research-Practice Partnership in Upstate New York

Cornell University and the Cornell Cooperative Extension-Tompkins County (CCE)

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The research agenda proposed here is the result of the community partner, Cornell Cooperative Extension –Tompkins County (CCE-Tompkins), calling the attention of Cornell faculty to the concerning rise in indicated child maltreatment cases in the rural counties around Cornell. Those working closely with these families at CCE-Tompkins have seen many of the new maltreatment cases linked to parental opioid addiction. The increased caseloads, paired with the highly-addictive and devastating nature of opioid addiction, have placed significant pressure on social workers, treatment facilities, and child protective services in rural communities in New York. The examination of local data on trends in child maltreatment and opioid addiction sparked a discussion between the research and community partners about possible reasons for the increase in child maltreatment cases and ways to address this pressing emerging increase in child maltreatment in low-income, rural communities. These conversations informed the research agenda described below.

The grant to Cornell University and Cornell Cooperative Extension – Tompkins County was the first Institutional Challenge Grant awarded by the Foundation. Read the press release [here](#).

The proposal's introduction is included here to provide a brief overview of the partnership's work.

The opioid epidemic has become a national public health crisis; more than 90 Americans die every day from opioid overdoses (Rudd, Seth, David, & Scholl, 2016). In New York alone, the rate of opioid-overdose deaths increased 136% between 2014 and 2015, and particularly affected low-income, rural communities (New York State Department of Health, 2017; Rudd et al., 2016). This trend has dovetailed with another worrisome trend: although the national incidence of child maltreatment has declined over the past two decades, some low-income, rural communities, including upstate New York, have experienced a significant increase in substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect over the past several years.

Policymakers, practitioners, and the American public are increasingly concerned that low-income, rural children are experiencing severe collateral consequences from the opioid epidemic.

Is the rise in opioid abuse connected to the increase in child maltreatment among vulnerable families in low-income, rural communities? And if so, what can be done about it? The proposed project tackles these questions head on by forging a university-community partnership that will build the capacity of both organizations to conduct and use research to support vulnerable parents and children and stem the rise in drug-related child maltreatment in rural upstate New York and beyond. We will do so by pursuing a shared research-practice agenda that seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) Has the opioid epidemic caused an increase in indicated cases of child abuse and neglect in low-income, rural communities nationally and in upstate NY?
- 2) Do Family Drug Treatment Courts, which offer comprehensive whole-family services and intensive judicial monitoring, reduce cases of child maltreatment among families struggling with opioid addiction? If so, what are the mechanisms?
- 3) Does the evidence-based Strengthening Families program improve parent-child relationships and reduce risk-taking behaviors among youth, ultimately reducing the risk of opioid use among the next generation?

[...]

CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The College of Human Ecology at Cornell University is uniquely well-positioned to develop and test new institutional practices designed to support research-practice partnerships. As the Land Grant University of the State of New York, Cornell has a long history of valuing and supporting research and educational missions that engage with and address community needs. The College of Human Ecology is one of four state-funded colleges within Cornell, with a mission of carrying out applied, multidisciplinary research and education that addresses the needs of New York citizens.

As a Land Grant institution, Cornell connects with Cornell Cooperative Extension offices throughout the state. Unlike other Land Grant universities, Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) offices operate as independent non-profit entities, funded and managed locally. As we described in Section B, many of the CCE county offices have robust ongoing relationships with Cornell research faculty in the domains of agriculture and natural resources, but the family and youth development work within the CCE system is significantly less connected to Cornell research and faculty than the agricultural side. We view this grant opportunity as a catalyst for a stronger connection between Cornell researchers and CCE family and youth development specialists, which meshes well with the multidisciplinary expertise of Human Ecology faculty who come from disciplines such as human development, sociology, and economics.

One of the four goals of the Institutional Challenge Grant is to create institutional change to value research practice partnerships within universities. While proposed change strategies may be university-wide, they may also be focused within a school or college. Note that applicants often cite the mission of the university to engage with the local community as central to the proposed institutional change, as is the case here for Cornell, a land grant institution. To learn more about how public and land grant institutions are tackling institutional change, read the APLU's recent report [here](#).

The PI of the grant should be well-positioned to drive institutional change efforts. Learn more about how Dunifon led these efforts at Cornell [here](#).

The Cornell PI on this grant (Dunifon) is uniquely well-suited to carry out institutional change in support of research-practice partnerships. Since arriving at Cornell in 2001, Dunifon has carried out a strong and sustained program of community-engaged work. Much of this work has occurred through the [Parenting in Context Project](#), founded by Dunifon. Parenting in Context provides resources to Cornell Cooperative Extension parent

educators and other community educators throughout New York. This program provides research briefs, hosts a regular in-service training, evaluates parent education programs taking place throughout the state, trains parent educators in evidence-based parenting programs, and fosters connections between researchers and community educators working directly with families.

In addition, Dunifon has a strong history of engaging in successful research-community partnerships. This is most clearly exemplified in the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren project, which was funded by a William T. Grant Foundation Scholars Award (2005-2010) and continues today. This project, which focuses on the well-being of youth being raised by grandparents (“grandfamilies”), provides an excellent example of the mutual benefits of research-practitioner partnerships. The needs of grandfamilies were first brought to Dunifon’s attention through her work with parent educators in New York communities. Dunifon worked with these educators to develop a research strategy designed to gather new information on grandfamilies, to recruit and interview such families, and to interpret the results of this study. Results from this multi-method project have been used to enhance programming for grandfamilies, and also to advance the research literature on grandfamilies (including a forthcoming book from Rutgers University Press). This successful collaboration is ongoing and has provided Dunifon with valuable insights about the challenges and benefits of engaging in research-practitioner collaborations.

Dunifon’s administrative role also makes her well-suited to carry out the institutional change work proposed here. As Senior Associate Dean for Research and Outreach in the College of Human Ecology, Dunifon oversees many of the processes central to undertaking institutional change. These include faculty recruitment, tenure and promotion; oversight of the College’s public engagement mission; supporting faculty research; oversight and support of interdisciplinary research centers; and oversight of graduate education. Dunifon also plays a role on several University-wide committees designed to enhance and coordinate public engagement work across Cornell, including a new Provost-formed leadership committee that is tasked with developing a strategic vision and coordinating activities for extension and outreach activities across campus.

The proposal should explicate the PI’s experience with engaged research and capacity to lead institutional change. At the time of application, Dunifon was in the role of Senior Associate Dean. She became Dean of the College of Human Ecology in the first year of the grant, which further bolstered her ability to institutionalize changes that would be sustained over time. While the Foundation does not require the PI be in a leadership position, they should have the support of university leadership to carry out the proposed change strategies.

This is an exciting time at Cornell and in the College of Human Ecology to develop and test new institutional practices designed to support research-practice partnerships. For example, the College of Human Ecology, through its significant investment in the [Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research](#), is testing new ways of building partnerships between faculty and community. Thus, this is an opportune moment to evaluate newly launched initiatives, determine areas of success and areas for improvement, and think strategically about how to best support institutional practices designed to foster research-practice partnerships. Through this Institutional Challenge Grant we propose several aims and resulting activities that will achieve this.

The proposal outlines three clear aims for advancing institutional change. The newest guidance asks applicants to describe the structural, motivational, and financial barriers unique to their universities to show how the proposed plan will address those barriers. Selection committee members find it helpful to see alignment between identified barriers and strategies for change.

Our first aim is, during the planning period, to **review and catalog current methods of supporting faculty-community partnerships**, both in the College of Human Ecology and across campus. This is an opportune time to do so, given the university-wide discussions on this topic that will be taking place during this period and with which Dunifon is actively involved. This review will result in the identification of gaps as well as possible areas in which efforts are being duplicated and could be enhanced by greater coordination.

Our second aim is to **offer a variety of incentives to support research-practice partnerships and foster the use of research in practice and the use of practitioner insights in research**.

Importantly, our commitment is not just to provide support for these activities, but also to evaluate their effectiveness and adapt our strategies in response. Additionally, we commit to working with partners across campus to launch similar activities elsewhere, relying on the expertise we develop undertaking this work to guide others seeking to do so. While some of the specific activities that we will undertake will result from the review process described in Aim 1, the College commits to a series of other activities designed to support researcher-practitioner partnerships, working through the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research in doing so. First, the College will provide a generous support package for **BCTR faculty fellows**, allowing mid-career faculty to spend time engaging in and learning about partnerships with practitioners and giving them the funds to support a graduate student and to seed their research as they do so. As noted in the budget justification, Laura Tach will be awarded a faculty fellowship to support work on this project.

The application guidance notes that in addition to being specific to the identified barriers, the proposed plan should also be bold and innovative. What can your university do to support and encourage strong researchers to conduct joint research with community partners?

The College will also **fund a postdoctoral fellow** for the first year and half of this project.

Postdocs play a crucial role in serving as a bridge between researchers and practitioners. Faculty benefit from collaborating with a postdoc in conceptualizing and carrying out research, and practitioners can benefit from engaging with a newly trained scholar with cutting edge research skills. Importantly, the postdoctoral fellow him or herself will benefit greatly from what may be the first of (hopefully) many opportunities to develop and carry out a successful research- practice partnership. By training postdoctoral fellows, we can further the spread of this skill set in the academy.

The College will also support a **summer internship for an undergraduate student located in CCE-Tompkins County** and who will conduct research relevant to this project in collaboration with both faculty and the CCE-Tompkins staff. Like the postdoctoral fellow, the

undergraduate summer intern will serve as bridge between the faculty and the community, taking the skills learned in the classroom and gained by partnering with the faculty member on research to the community setting. Through this process the undergraduate intern learns about the

Proposed strategies can be specific to the proposed research, but the proposal should explain how that work can serve as a foundation for engaged research that will be sustained overtime, beyond the funded partnership.

community needs and strengths, the limits in the way that existing research can address those needs, and designing research partnerships that build upon the research and practitioner strengths to address important questions designed to promote the well-being of local families. The intern will bring these insights back to the classroom and back to the ongoing research project with faculty.

A third aim is to **enhance and broaden discussions of how research-practice partnerships are viewed within the academy.** Dunifon will **host a forum on research-practice partnerships and the tenure and promotion process** that will be open to all faculty across the University, drawing on her extensive experience not only carrying out such

research, but also in reviewing a wide range of tenure and promotion files within the College. Additionally, at the end of the three-year project proposed here, **the College of Human Ecology will host a forum using this project as a case study** to discuss research-practice partnerships from the perspective of practitioners, faculty, and students, focusing not just on the achievements of the project, but also on lessons learned and areas for improvement.

Due to Dunifon's involvement in university-wide committees and discussions about Cornell University's public engagement efforts, the work described here can and will be **brought to other Cornell colleges beyond the College of Human Ecology.** Additionally, Dunifon will be able to ensure that the work of this project is in-line with, and responsive to, University-wide priorities and activities, thereby increasing its impact and visibility.

Finally, the activities proposed here are embedded in the **Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research, a structure that represents a significant investment on the part of the College of Human Ecology and serves as a hub for the College's public engagement activities.** Situating the work of this project in an existing and significant structure (the BCTR), the sustainability of this work is ensured as this work can be incorporated into the evolving and ongoing activities of the BCTR. A key factor enhancing this sustainability is the fact that the BCTR has been extremely successful in attracting support from alumni donors, who resonate with its mission of expanding, strengthening and speeding the connection between research, policy and practice. Beyond the College's ongoing and significant support of the BCTR, we anticipate that the current project and resulting activities will also be very attractive to donors, thereby even further enhancing its reach and sustainability.

In her role as Dean, Dunifon raised additional funds to support three Engaged Faculty Fellowships. Notably, the funding will allow the College of Human Ecology's commitment to community-engaged research to be sustained in perpetuity.

References

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