


Chapter 6

Interprofessional Collaboration and Health Disparities in Public Health Interventions: An Exploratory Leadership Framework

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ABSTRACT

Addressing complex and systemic problems like health disparities require interdisciplinary, translational, and team-based approaches that take account of the social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors contributing to the persistence of such problems. By crossing disciplinary boundaries, researchers and stakeholders can integrate multiple perspectives into comprehensive solutions that can be translated into practice with a higher likelihood of reducing health disparities. Successful interdisciplinary collaboration hinges upon effective communication and leadership practices. In centering communication as a foundation for successful interdisciplinary and translational activities, this chapter considers the ways in

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which leadership—enacted through the design of strategies, processes, messages, and structures—may enable collaborative research efforts that productively address health disparities. The exploratory framework introduced in this chapter can help to inform the design of future initiatives for addressing health disparities across disciplines and with communities.

INTRODUCTION

Addressing intractable problems, such as health disparities, requires interdisciplinary and translational approaches that take account of the social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors contributing to the existence and persistence of such challenges. The interplay of these factors contributes to complex problems that must be explored through meaningful engagement with diverse stakeholders and the crossing of disciplinary boundaries in pursuit of applied research. These efforts require collaboration among individuals from different disciplines, the integration of different methods or propositions from various areas of study, or even the creation of new hybrid interdisciplinary fields (Klein, 2017). More broadly, translating scientific and operational observations from laboratories and clinics to effective healthcare and public health interventions requires working with the communities who ultimately receive the care (Gilliland et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). Given the need to integrate contributions from numerous constituencies, higher education institutions and academic health centers are uniquely situated to design, implement, and lead such efforts (Karpf, 2019).

The growing research on interdisciplinary and translational science continues to highlight communication as a critical ingredient for successful collaboration—and this emphasis on communication has become especially pronounced in response to the investigation of recent public health challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Leading a diverse network of collaborators and stakeholders is more effective and strengthened by the thoughtful design of engagement strategies, structures, processes, and messages that are grounded in communication theory and that reflect the underlying assumptions associated with effective communicative practice (Aakhus, 2007; Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015). Despite the many opportunities for interdisciplinary research and collaboration, the barriers are abundant, and failure to consider individual and collective communication practices can negatively impact efforts to address healthcare disparities. This paper explores how leadership, which we view as “the design and implementation of messages, strategies, processes, and structures to facilitate social influence” (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019, 2021), enables interdisciplinary and translational activities for addressing health disparities.

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