



Understanding the Role of Academic Partners as Technical Assistance Providers

Results from an Exploratory Study to Address Precarious Work

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What was the issue?

Today's economy is increasingly shifting away from standard, full-time jobs with benefits towards non-standard arrangements, such as temporary jobs, contract jobs, and gig work. Non-standard work arrangements often mean precarious working conditions which can adversely affect workers' health and that of their families. Precarious working conditions include low wages, uncertain or varying schedules, lack of benefits, a lack of protection from termination, and unsafe working conditions. Many workers in precarious arrangements also experience labor abuses such as wage theft and racial discrimination. Health promotion programs and policies targeted to improve the health of workers in precarious arrangements are difficult to design and implement due to these structural and systemic barriers. Health promotion programs that create policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes offer more promise for those who are precariously employed than traditional health and wellness programs focused at the individual level. PSE programs are found to be most effective when they involve diverse stakeholders who understand the systemic and structural barriers to health and are willing to act together to create change. Organizations from different sectors of the economy may benefit from each other's perspectives and experience in shaping change, but too often are siloed.

This study examined how a university can support partnerships among worker advocacy organizations, employers, community groups, non-profit organizations, workforce development organizations, and health providers to develop interventions that address precarious work.

What did we do?

In 2016 the University of Illinois in Chicago (UIC) Center for Healthy Work (CHW) was developed to address programs and policies that improve the health and safety of workers in precarious work arrangements. The Center for Healthy Work is one of six Total Worker Health® Centers in the U.S. In the spring of 2018, the CHW designed an action learning project called the Healthy Work Collaborative, which brought together public health and labor organizations to explore PSE change initiatives that might address factors that create and perpetuate precarious work conditions. These organizations had existing relationships with the university from collaborations on previous research and education projects, but many had little or no familiarity with each other. Together they participated in six action learning sessions over the summer. The aim of the sessions was to help health care organizations better understand the dimensions of precarious work and the structural barriers to health, in order to design action plans together with labor organizations to improve the health and wellbeing of precariously employed workers. UIC researchers provided technical assistance (TA) by facilitating sessions and leading action learning activities. Labor TA providers focused on content—sharing their experiential knowledge about precarious work. UIC also checked in with participants in between sessions: pointing them to resources, clarifying content from the sessions, and encouraging them towards action steps.

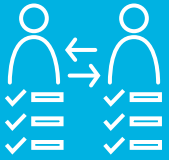
How did we do it?



The UIC research team conducted focus groups and interviews to find out how all of the participants in the learning collaborative perceived the project they were engaged in together: the health organization TA recipients, the labor TA providers, and the UIC TA providers.

What did we find?

Several themes emerged from the data:



- 1** UIC was successful in **bringing together organizations from two different spheres**--labor and health-- who had limited interactions with each other in the past to engage in an action learning process.



- 2** The **previous experiences that participants had with UIC were key** in building a trusting relationship with the university. Without that foundation of trust neither the labor organizations nor the health organizations would have agreed to participate in this project. The trust was based on the university's respect for the organizations and the organizations' expectations that they would receive something meaningful in return from the university for their involvement.



- 3** UIC TA providers were successful in helping health care organizations understand the dimensions of precarious work by **introducing them to labor representatives who have experience and insight** about barriers to health faced by workers in precarious work arrangements. The action learning sessions afforded an opportunity to explore the challenges of precarious work, which stimulated a desire to partner with labor organizations on developing interventions.



- 4** TA recipients thought that **UIC TA providers were helpful in coaching and guiding them** and keeping them accountable for the next steps. UIC TA providers concurred with this finding in their self-reflection about the process.



- 5** Time was a major limitation of this project. TA recipients thought **there was not enough time** to absorb the content provided at the sessions and to develop subsequent plans for interventions. UIC TA providers also thought there were challenges in what TA recipients were able to accomplish in the time allowed for this process. Everyone agreed that it would have been better if the timeline for the project had been longer.

What does this mean and for whom?



The challenges that workers face in today's changing economic landscape to achieve health and well-being for themselves and their families demand innovative and comprehensive solutions. Universities, Total Worker Health Centers, and affiliates can play an important role by bringing together diverse stakeholders in a process to address the dimensions of major societal problems such as precarious work. If the university has fostered an adequate level of trust through longstanding partnerships with stakeholders, and if stakeholders can expect reciprocity for committing their time and resources, they are willing to build relationships with others in order to learn, reflect and develop action steps together. Continued contact beyond the scope of a project can be helpful in strengthening relationships between stakeholders and between academia and stakeholders.

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