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Author(s): Elizabeth K. Anthony and Michael J. Austin

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The Role of an Intermediary Organization in Promoting Research in Schools of Social Work: The Case of the Bay Area Social Services Consortium

Elizabeth K. Anthony and Michael J. Austin

The multifaceted role of research in social work education and practice requires innovation to respond to the broader mission of the university and the needs of the community. Building research capacity and supporting infrastructure for research thus demands new approaches to effective collaboration between stakeholders. Intermediary organizations such as the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) respond to the directive to bridge research and practice in social service delivery. This article presents BASSC as an example of a modern intermediary organization, discussing in turn the development of the training, policy, and research agendas and the challenges associated with implementing and maintaining the collaboration. The article concludes with a discussion of the unique contribution of intermediary organizations such as BASSC to supporting the multifaceted roles of research in schools of social work.

KEY WORDS: *evidence-informed practice; intermediary organizations; mediating structures; research capacity; schools of social work*

Efforts to enhance the research capacity and infrastructure of schools of social work are linked to the research mission of the university as well as social work education and practice. Over the past decade there has been increased interest in connecting the evidence of service outcomes with the improvement or redefinition of practice. Evidence related to the design and outcomes of interventions seeks to validate existing interventions when appropriate, challenge and discourage ineffective interventions, and develop and test innovative approaches to service delivery.

Public and private universities and colleges are increasingly under scrutiny for their ability to remain relevant in a changing social, economic, and political climate. Challenges to the ivory tower reputation of the university and growing financial pressures urge university administrators to promote different approaches to traditional research. Responding to the research mission of the university thus requires a greater emphasis on community partners and collaborations that stretch faculty members to use

new strategies to respond to changing community needs.

Social work research is often conducted in the interest of practice and yet a considerable divide exists between the research and practice communities. Agencies are increasingly at the mercy of funding sources and demands to demonstrate improved outcomes and yet capacity to measure progress varies from agency to agency. To complicate matters, the demands of daily practice do not lend themselves to addressing complex research questions that require immediate response. Certainly, the traditional research process does not proceed anywhere close to the fast pace of practice. In addition, dissemination and utilization of research that is most critical to practice often receives lower priority among researchers given the minimal rewards for work beyond peer-reviewed publications in the academic system (Shafer, 2006).

Innovative approaches to effective collaboration are needed to ensure that social work research is relevant to practice. Alongside efforts to increase

research infrastructure through federally funded institutes, effective partnerships with agencies enhance the research resources of schools of social work by diversifying funding sources and establishing relationships for shared research. Mediating structures, or intermediary organizations, can serve as models for facilitating collaborative relationships. Mediating structures or institutions can be viewed as platforms to bring together two or more sets of collaborators to address shared concerns to bridge the connections between research and practice as well as policy and practice (Austin et al., 1999).

Intermediary organizations have emerged in a variety of fields (for example, education; workforce development; and social services for children, youths, and families) to support individual and group empowerment and to avoid isolation so as to connect practice and policy (Wynn, 2000). Intermediary organizations may serve a variety of functions, including the following: engaging, convening, and supporting critical constituencies; promoting quality standards and accountability; brokering and leveraging resources; and promoting effective policies (Blank et al., 2003). Intermediary organizations further function as "change agents" to build capacity at individual, relational, and organizational levels (Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005).

Lavis (2006) suggested that intermediary groups may "work at the interface between researchers (that is, the producers of research evidence) and users of research evidence . . . to play critically important roles in knowledge translation, in addition to using research evidence to inform their own activities" (p. 37). In the United Kingdom and more recently in the United States, such groups have taken various forms. For example, both the Cochrane and the Campbell Collaborations operate as international nonprofit and independent organizations to promote the assessment and dissemination of research through the development of systematic reviews of health care and social service interventions, respectively. Now that a number of systematic reviews have been conducted, there is a growing interest in dissemination and utilization to make the reviews useful to practitioners and policymakers (Lavis, Davies, & Gruen, 2006).

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE BAY AREA SOCIAL SERVICES CONSORTIUM

The Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) represents an intermediary organization between

universities, social service agencies, and foundations that is horizontal in its interorganizational relationships. Rather than brokering between the government and individuals, BASSC operates as a think tank that facilitates interaction between organizations with shared interests and diverse resources. As a result, BASSC is able to launch and sustain research, training, and policy projects that would be difficult for its members to accomplish on their own. A brief description of the history of BASSC frames the discussion of this unique intermediary organization.

A group of county social service directors in the San Francisco Bay Area met informally over lunch in the 1980s with the shared mission of improving policy and practice in the public sector. At the same time, Dean Harry Specht of the University of California, Berkeley, School of Social Welfare was reshaping the mission of the school to reflect a commitment to the public social services. Recognizing the need for collaboration, Dean Specht in 1987 facilitated a dialogue between agency administrators, university educators, and foundation representatives around the need for regional training programs. As a result of these early efforts to focus on in-service training for staff in public social service agencies, the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) was created in 1990 to address preservice social work education that was supported by foundation and federal training funds. CalSWEC is currently the nation's largest state coalition of social work educators and practitioners, serving California's 18 accredited graduate schools of social work in collaboration with county departments of social services and mental health as well as the California chapter of NASW and the California Department of Social Services.

In 1992, BASSC members began to define the role of the consortium as a think tank enabling initiatives in the three broad areas of training, research, and policy development. County human service directors, foundation representatives, and deans or directors of the graduate schools of social work began to meet bimonthly in day-long think tank sessions that provided the physical and mental space to discuss and strategize about pressing issues and possible responses. Over time, BASSC members have generated an array of approaches to some complex problems. For example, recognizing the need to recruit more women and minorities into senior management positions, BASSC developed a mul-

ticounty Executive Development Program (EDP) to foster talent from within the agencies. Promising upper and middle-management staff members participate in an innovative program that involves county directors as teaching faculty. The EDP is now 13 years old with more than 300 graduates.

In addition to addressing the pressing needs for senior management training, BASSC members pursued issues related to policy and research. BASSC's efforts in the policy arena reflect a commitment to analyzing current public policies, seeking alternatives to existing public policies, and deriving lessons learned from public policy implementation. The multiple challenges facing the county directors led to a continuous stream of BASSC policy reports as well as four policy groups composed of senior managers from each county that assist in policy development in the three primary service delivery areas of child welfare, adults and aging, and welfare-to-work. A fourth group, the Bay Area Human Resources Policy Group, emerged during the implementation of welfare reform from the concern around the retraining of staff (Farrar & Austin, 2007).

Alongside training and policy issues, BASSC members reflected a shared concern about the lack of in-house research capabilities in county social service agencies. As a result, BASSC launched the Research Response Team (RRT) in 1995 within the Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Social Welfare to respond to the research priorities of the county social service agencies.

BASSC currently consists of 11 Bay Area county human services agency directors (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Monterey, Napa, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San Francisco, San Mateo, Solano, and Sonoma), five deans and directors of schools of social work (California State University, East Bay; California State University, Monterey Bay; San Francisco State University; San Jose State University; and University of California, Berkeley), and two foundation representatives (Van Loben Sels Rembe Rock Foundation and Zellerbach Family Foundation). In addition to the deans and directors and the principal investigator (PI), each year approximately three to five faculty members from the universities are involved as PIs, consultants, and collaborators on research projects. Finally, CSSR provides administrative oversight for BASSC and houses the research unit, which involves an additional five to six post doctoral-, doctoral-, and master's-level researchers each year.

Outcomes and Challenges of BASSC Research

The evolution of BASSC research can be captured in three major phases. During the first five years of the RRT, a series of county-specific exploratory studies was conducted in response to the priorities of individual BASSC counties. Early exploratory studies served the purpose of examining the complexities of county-specific issues in program development and service delivery. For example, one county conducted a homeless needs assessment and another examined service use and service needs among long-term Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients. With the goal of increased collaboration and more rigorous research designs, the focus in the next five years shifted to multicounty exploratory studies of a shared topic such as the needs of foster children in public schools and child welfare and the courts. Multicounty studies acknowledged both the shared issues among urban and rural counties and the benefit of pooling resources to accomplish more together than was possible for any individual county. In addition to these obvious benefits, the research collaboration reinforced the think tank process of using research to identify the implications for modifying policy and practice.

An evaluation of the effect of BASSC exploratory research identified several factors related to the dissemination and utilization of research findings (Dal Santo, Goldberg, Choice, & Austin, 2002). First, staff involvement in the selection of the topic, collaboration on the scope of work, and involvement of an operational manager positively influenced research dissemination and utilization in the agencies. Second, the exploratory studies led to informed decision making, while also lowering the level of controversy around particular issues (for example, placing foster children with gay and lesbian parents). The integration of county staff into the BASSC research process was pivotal to promoting dissemination and utilization.

By continuing to respond to the changing needs of practice, the research focus shifted in 2004 to the pursuit of evidence for practice in the form of structured literature reviews on a variety of pertinent topics while maintaining integration of county staff. BASSC members found that many important research studies in the areas of child welfare and welfare-to-work programs were being conducted elsewhere in the country. Reports about these studies were piling up in the offices of

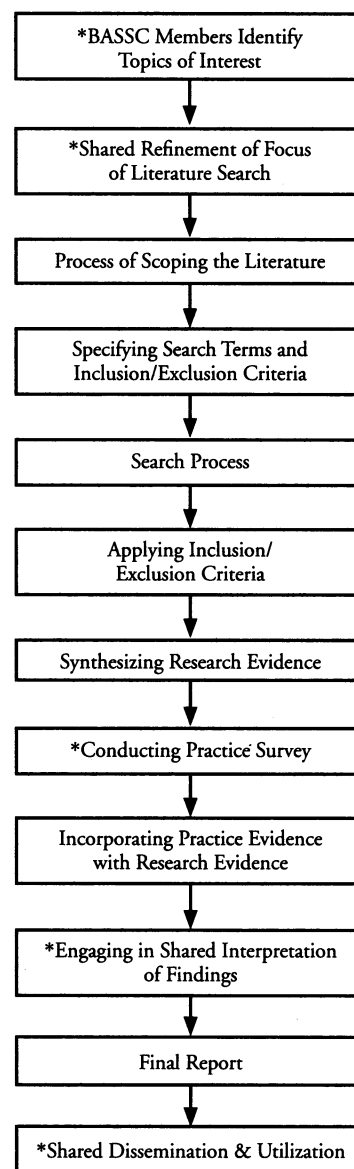
county directors, who had little time to read—let alone assess and disseminate—the findings and the implications. Rather than focusing efforts on small exploratory studies, BASSC members made the decision to annually examine the literature in three priority areas to identify implications for practice as well as dissemination and utilization. By maximizing agency resources for research, this approach allows agency directors to leverage money for research investigations on the basis of knowledge of the relevant literature and the areas for additional research. This shift in the research focus from exploratory studies to structured reviews of the literature led to an increased focus on evidence-informed practice at both the direct service and management levels of the organization.

The most significant difference in the research agenda for BASSC since 1995 is the increased focus on the dissemination and utilization of evidence for practice. A flowchart of BASSC's structured literature review process is provided in Figure 1. Unlike a narrative literature review, a structured review involves a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable process of obtaining and synthesizing empirical research. A structured review seeks to identify the "best evidence," a particular challenge in the child welfare field given the limited number of studies that have been based on randomized controlled trials. Clearly, funding for research in child welfare needs to be expanded to respond to the demands of evidence-based practice for rigorous methods (Austin, 2008).

Although researchers are skilled in the process of information gathering and synthesizing, BASSC recognizes the limited capacities of researchers to identify relevant implications for practice. Therefore, the research process includes consultation with practitioners to identify ways to integrate research findings into everyday practice. Research advisory groups composed of direct line workers and middle managers have been used by the BASSC research team to identify major implications, areas that needed further clarification, and suggestions for promoting dissemination and utilization.

Recognizing the increasingly demanding schedules of county representatives, the RRT began to use Web-based practice surveys on the basis of the process developed by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (2004). A practice survey seeks to capture the perspectives of agency staff with respect to the issues identified in the literature review. Much

Figure 1: Flowchart of BASSC Structured Review Process



Note: BASSC = Bay Area Social Services Consortium. Asterisks denote shared activities between practitioners and researchers. Adapted from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (Coren & Fisher, 2006).

like the way that literature reviews are designed to synthesize current research, practice surveys seek to identify the views of practitioners related to current practice, customs, rationales for professional activity, information gaps in current practice, and gaps in the knowledge base of practice (SCIE, 2004). For example, the RRT recently conducted a Web-based

practice survey of Adult Protective Services staff and supervisors in 11 counties ($N = 90$) to obtain their perspective on items identified in a structured review of the literature related to elder abuse assessment tools. Depending on the nature of the research findings and questions identified by the literature review, other methods for gaining practitioners' views include focus groups and interviews with key informants. Findings from one or more of these methods are included with the literature review in the final report. In essence, the literature review seeks to capture the past, whereas the practitioner survey seeks to capture the present.

Dissemination and utilization have become the focal point of a growing initiative in the BASSC county human service agencies to promote the organizational changes needed to improve service delivery through the use of evidence-informed practice. Researchers publish online (<http://www.bassc.net/>) the lengthy full reports, which include detailed methodology and executive summaries, in addition to using traditional means of dissemination (for example, peer-reviewed journal publications and local, national, and international conferences). Agency directors and BASSC members share the executive summaries with colleagues and staff for the purpose of exploring implications and the potential for modifying current practices. Recently, the focus has been on transforming county human service agencies into learning organizations by using information from within the organization, such as administrative data, and information external to the organization, such as evidence for practice. Specifically, BASSC members are in the process of incorporating the principles of knowledge management into the process of promoting evidence-informed practice. Knowledge management seeks to capture tacit knowledge that exists in the minds of staff and explicit knowledge that has been captured and codified into manuals, procedures, and rules so that they can be disseminated (Nonaka, 1994).

A critical element of research dissemination is the organizational culture and its readiness and capacity to support evidence-informed practice. The challenge is to find ways to embed into practice the explicit knowledge derived from research with the tacit knowledge rooted in practice wisdom and experience. Knowledge management also requires increased collaboration between the knowledge producers in universities and knowledge users in agencies. As an intermediary organization between

universities, agencies, and foundations, BASSC and organizations like BASSC are ideally suited to help facilitate the transformation of public human services organizations from traditional bureaucracies to learning organizations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENHANCING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

The current BASSC research and practice agenda reflects some of the advantages of an intermediary organization as it expands its regional platform for promoting change in the conduct of university research and agency practice. BASSC's ability to adapt as an intermediary organization requires considerable attention to the needs and resources of all members (university researchers, county directors, and foundation executives). As a result, it is important to reflect on the lessons learned over the past 12 years of collaborative research activity (funded by the 11 counties at \$100,000 per year) and the implications for social work research and education.

As an intermediary organization, the BASSC influences research and practice by serving several distinct functions, including the following: enhancing research resources, using a network of relationships to promote creativity and innovation, and providing a regional forum to address statewide policy issues. By linking the existing resources within individual Bay Area counties, foundations, and universities, counties are able to combine their limited financial resources to conduct research that no individual county could afford to conduct on its own and to leverage for larger funds from other stakeholders. For example, alongside a BASSC structured review of the literature (Anthony, Vu, & Austin, 2008), a multicounty study was launched to investigate the characteristics and needs of children and caregivers in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (Speigman, Bos, & Ortiz, 2007).

From the university perspective, research resources are enhanced by the relationships established by BASSC. Faculty members from participating universities engage in funded research activities that lead to scholarly productivity via peer-reviewed publications and opportunities for proposing larger studies with rigorous designs. Each year doctoral- and master's-level students are involved in the BASSC research studies as graduate research assistants, and their involvement exposes them to a unique research-policy-practice partnership that significantly complements their fieldwork and

course work experiences in addition to building publication records. Alongside the scholarly and academic rewards for funded research, faculty involvement also helps to bring practice issues into the classroom. This process can promote evidence-based curriculums related to current service delivery issues.

Another distinct function of BASSC is the use of a network to promote creativity and innovation. Like the pooling of financial resources, the think tank process brings together the intellectual resources, experiences, and values of its diverse membership drawn from the worlds of research and practice. Innovations that have emerged from think tank deliberations range from experimenting with new ways of delivering services (for example, welfare reform implementation), improving stakeholder communication with public officials (for example, redesign of child welfare services), and moving beyond the isolation associated with county-based social service delivery (for example, BASSC EDP) (Austin, 2004; Austin et al., 1999; DeMarco & Austin, 2002). Given the considerable influence of county-administered social services in California and the shared needs and interests of the social services community in the Bay Area region, BASSC plays a unique role in generating and sustaining creativity and innovation. As a network, BASSC encourages each constituent group to maximize its talents.

Finally, BASSC provides a regional platform to address statewide policy issues and to mobilize the resources of the members that exceed those of any individual. Since the beginning of BASSC, state and national policies have had a profound effect on the delivery of social services, and BASSC has served as a forum for assessing the implications of policy implementation. Although the Bay Area counties reflect different political climates and perspectives, BASSC members seek to find common ground on which to educate the public about major issues that affect services for children, adults, and families.

Modern intermediary organizations play a potentially important role in promoting the multifaceted role of social work research and enhancing research infrastructure. Stable support from the BASSC members for funded research activity enables faculty members and graduate students to conduct research that is relevant to daily practice and contributes to the growing knowledge base on public human services. In addition, county funds diversify the funding streams that schools of social work pursue

and can be used to leverage federal, state, and local stakeholders for funding.

The ability of intermediary organizations like BASSC to enhance research resources, promote creativity and innovation, and educate opinion leaders is critical to the sustainability of social work research. Ultimately, social work research seeks to improve practice through increasing knowledge about complex social problems and potential solutions. The growing interest and investment in evidence-informed practice by the social work profession suggests the need for innovative approaches to bridge the divide between research and practice. Intermediary organizations supported by schools of social work are a promising approach to engage in applied research that ensures the relevance of social work research in relationship to the changing needs of clients and practitioners. **SWR**

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Elizabeth K. Anthony, PhD, is assistant professor, School of Social Work, Arizona State University; **Michael J. Austin, PhD**, is Milton and Florence Krenz Mack Distinguished Professor of Nonprofit Management, School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley. Address correspondence to Elizabeth K. Anthony, Arizona State University, School of Social Work, 411 North Central Avenue, Suite 800, Phoenix, AZ 85004; e-mail: elizabeth.anthony@asu.edu.

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