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Creating Equitable Research Collaborations

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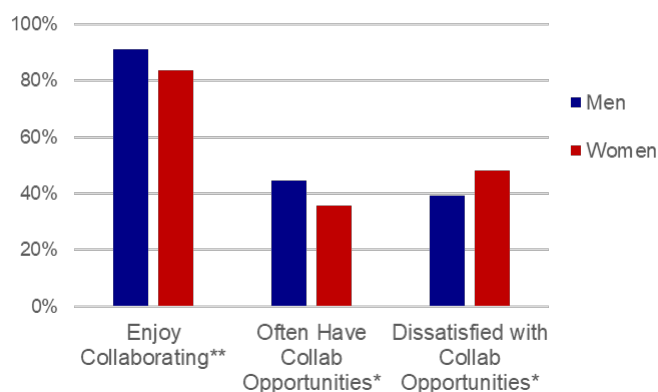
CREATING EQUITABLE RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS

This tool—**Creating equitable research collaborations**—is part 1 of a three tool series for embedding equity into all phases of research collaboration. See also **Continuing equitable collaborative relationships (part 2)** and **Crediting collaboration equitably (part 3)**.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES TO CREATING EQUITABLE RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS?

Finding collaborators is a challenge to many faculty members. Research collaboration is increasingly important to successful bids for external grant support needed for scholarly pursuits. Figure 1 below shows that there are gender disparities in how satisfied faculty are with opportunities to collaborate on our campus. Creating more diverse and inclusive research collaboration teams will support faculty equity.

FIG. 1: Gender & Research Collaboration Experiences



WHY EQUITY IN RESEARCH COLLABORATION?

Universities and research centers actively promote collaboration among faculty, and federal policy also supports team science. However, faculty experiences with research collaboration vary by race and gender. The majority of faculty enjoy collaboration; however, women report having fewer collaboration opportunities than men, and women, particularly women of color, are more likely to report being dissatisfied with those opportunities.

The UMass ADVANCE program works to ensure greater equity among faculty members through the power of collaboration. This tool is for faculty members, to guide discussions among members of research teams about how to consider equity and inclusion from the start of collaborations. Mentoring around equitable collaboration is critical.

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Research shows that more diverse teams—when resources and decisions are distributed equitably—are more innovative. Creating equitable teams boosts creativity.

Time is a critical resource necessary to creating new collaborations. Faculty members need opportunities to interact, informally as well as formally, to develop ideas, and work well together. Developing shared language is especially necessary for interdisciplinary collaborations. Institutional seed funding or microgrants support this process. Discuss timelines for the research, even if those timelines may need to be adjusted later.

Inclusion matters in collaborators treating each other's insights with respect, identifying the contributions diverse collaborators can make, and in budgetary equity. Interdisciplinary grant reviewers often notice when budgetary commitments do not match statements about inclusive teams.

Good communication and trust characterize the most successful research teams. While funding opportunities sometimes require developing new collaborations quickly, teams that have already developed strategies for working together effectively, and can specifically outline their collaborative approaches and successes, are more likely to win funding.

MENTORING JUNIOR FACULTY IN RESEARCH COLLABORATION

Research collaboration should be included in [faculty mentoring plans](#). As a mentor, colleague, or chair/head, consider having conversations with junior colleagues about collaboration opportunities on campus.

- Discuss potential collaborators and collaborative research opportunities (including those outside of the department) with mentees and junior faculty members. The [ADVANCE program](#), the [Office of Research and Engagement](#), and the [Office of Faculty Development](#) can help faculty develop connections leading to research collaboration, often through [mutual mentoring groups](#).

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- Provide new faculty with information about [interdisciplinary scholar programs](#) to connect them with the broader university research community. Discuss [internal seed grant funding](#) opportunities. Seed funding helps newly developed collaborations get off the ground, building proposals for external funding.

We outline key barriers that arise in developing collaborations, using evidence-based case studies to highlight difficult situations. Peer Mentors and Chairs can read and discuss Case Study 1 below to think through some issues in supporting junior faculty in collaboration decisions.

CASE STUDY 1: THE MENTOR'S ROLE?

Gabriella is untenured, having been recently hired as part of the university's Latinx Cluster initiative; she is the only person hired through this initiative in her college. Her department chair has encouraged her to collaborate with colleagues to expand her publications, but Gabriella is the only faculty member in the department specializing in her subfield, and it is not clear that the department plans to hire additional scholars in her area. It takes time for Gabriella to build the trust needed to initiate collaborations with colleagues. In the past, she has relied on her advisors vouching for people as collaborators, but she has no mutual connections in her department.

How would you mentor Gabriella on this topic of research collaboration if you were her peer mentor? If you were her department chair? How might Gabriella build opportunities for collaboration given the paucity of close colleagues in her department and college?

HOW CAN FACULTY MEMBERS DEVELOP FAIR AND EQUITABLE COLLABORATIONS?

Have clear conversations about expectations, roles, and responsibilities up front. Teams must articulate a fair and equitable distribution of resources, workload, and credit. Senior team members should ensure that junior scholars' work is recognized, based on their expertise or the collaboration's structure.

Collaborators should discuss whose skills are needed at different stages of the project, who from the team might be the PI or co-PI on any grant proposals, and strategies

for authorship on the papers that emanate from the project. While these conversations can be awkward, aligning expectations early in the collaboration ensures that there are no misunderstandings.

Figure out the norms your team will have for regular communication. Some collaborators develop Memorandums of Understanding, written documents laying out expectations for contributions to writing proposals or papers, carrying out research, access to instruments, and other details.

WHAT SHOULD FACULTY MEMBERS CONSIDER BEFORE JOINING COLLABORATIONS?

Collaborations can increase opportunities and productivity, but they can also be demanding. Faculty members should consider some key factors before committing to a collaboration.

1. How does this opportunity move their research agenda forward? How does it move them toward specific goals? This might be related to substantive content, methodological expertise, or connections to new research partners.
2. How does this project fit into their professional development goals and research narrative (for example, on a personal statement)? Pre-tenure faculty members should be selective, only engaging in collaborations that clearly fit into their research agenda and help establish their research strengths. Faculty may pursue some collaborations immediately, and others at a later stage or not at all.
3. What resources are necessary to engage in this collaboration effectively? If resources are not in place, the collaboration is less likely to be effective. Leading a large research team, for example, may require reducing other responsibilities or asking for administrative support.
4. What input will they have regarding intellectual direction and production for the team? When considering collaborating with a senior researcher, it can be useful to consider their record collaborating with others. These conversations should not replace conversations among the research team about how *this* collaboration will be structured.

INITIATING COLLABORATIONS with INTERSECTIONAL EQUITY

Some faculty, such as women faculty, foreign-born faculty, BIPOC faculty, first-generation faculty, or trans/nonbinary faculty are less likely than other groups

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of faculty to have developed collaborative relationships in graduate school. These groups are also more likely to report negative experiences in collaborations. Intersectionally, these statuses come together, so that, for example, foreign-born women of color are particularly vulnerable, and may learn to protect themselves by collaborating with people they know and trust, at times avoiding collaboration due to prior negative experiences – which further limits research networks, and thus, citations and broader reputation. If all PIs develop skills in how to create collaborations where everyone is treated with respect and all voices are heard, all collaborators will benefit, although faculty from underrepresented minority groups may particularly benefit.

Case studies can often be helpful for engaging in the difficult conversations that should be held before problems arise, when a team is creating the collaboration. Discussion questions and Case Study 2 are intended for collaborators to engage with collectively, to brainstorm how to best set up an equitable collaboration and outline conflict management procedures before beginning a project.

Case Study 2: The invitation

Arbor was recently hired into their department as an assistant professor and the only specialist in a subfield that connects to research themes studied in other departments and colleges. A prominent PI in another college, Distinguished Professor (DP) has never worked with anyone in Arbor's discipline but notices a promising call for federal funding that requires including CoPIs from fields like Arbor's, and invites Arbor to collaborate on a new project. DP likes the idea of learning about a new area of scholarship through leading a large, interdisciplinary project and expanding his network to Arbor's college, but he doesn't know much about budgeting for research needs in Arbor's subfield. Arbor asks their departmental mentor for advice about working with DP. The mentor is not able to find others who have worked with DP, and thus cannot provide good advice about what it might be like to collaborate with DP. The mentor talks to Arbor about the potential opportunities of a large interdisciplinary grant as well as the challenges of the collaboration, mentioning that she doesn't know whether or not this is likely to be a good collaboration for Arbor.

What other information does Arbor need to decide about collaborating with DP? What factors would need to be present for Arbor to agree to pursue the collaboration? How can DP approach the collaboration equitably?

STEPS TO SUPPORT EQUITABLE COLLABORATION FROM THE START

- Have all research team members read the UMass ADVANCE tools on [Resources for Equitable Research Collaborations](#), and [Equitable Research Collaboration Between Faculty and Grad Students](#). Then discuss with collaborators how to center equity throughout the research process, including pre-proposal, proposal, start-up, during the project, and project closure.
- Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and other written documents to safeguard the foundation for research relationships, including articulating roles, responsibilities, and authorship agreements.
- Discuss where the project falls in line with priorities for each collaborator before collaborating. Be transparent about workloads.

This tool is based on presentations and suggestions made by Ember Skye Kanelee, Dessie Clark, and the ADVANCE team at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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