

# REPORT: INTERVIEWS WITH SMALL GRANT PROGRAM RECIPIENTS



February 2024

Elizabeth Feder, PhD

Jane Mahoney, MD



Prevention Research Center  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



## About

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Prevention Research Center (UWPRC) offers funding to support investigator-initiated prevention research promoting maternal and child health through the Small Grant Program. To assess the achievements and identify areas of improvement of the funding mechanism, UWPRC Associate Directors of Evaluation (Liz Feder) and Translation (Jane Mahoney) interviewed Small Grant Program recipients from the 2020/21, 2021-22, and 2022/23 funding cycles. Grant recipients from each of the nine grants awarded were invited to participate. Interviews were conducted between October and December 2023 with the recipients of five grants.

---

## Key Findings

- All recipients strongly expressed the significant value of the grant in advancing their academic careers.
- Recipients look to the UWPRC primarily for matchmaking services and wanted the UWPRC to connect them to community partners, other researchers, funding opportunities, and each other.
- The degree of community engagement in the projects varied, and investigators had different interpretations of “community”. Only one project involved extensive direct engagement with those belonging to the communities that would be most impacted by the research.
- Investigators need support with community-engaged research, particularly in the following areas:
  - Conceptualizing the role of community engagement in their own work
  - Finding community partners
  - Trainings on how to work with community partners
  - Developing relationships with partners in the limited time of the application process
- Recipients would like more regular interactions with each other and with other researchers in both peer and mentor relationships.



---

## Recommendations

- Strategize how to institutionalize more direct support for community-engaged research. The RFA should clearly state the support services the UWPRC offers around community engagement.
- Regularly plan consultations throughout the life of the grant cycle, not just at the beginning of the award. This would greatly benefit researchers' ability to develop both community engagement and dissemination strategies.
- Community-engaged research trainings should be co-led by the UWPRC and community partners.
- Develop trainings for working with advocacy organizations and the appropriate role/boundaries of researchers in policy making.
- The UWPRC should consider ways to create community among recipients. This could include hosting coffees or lunches or holding seminars each semester.
- Develop a "matchmaker" infrastructure to connect recipients to needed research support.
- Create a mechanism for targeted check-ins with recipients that, at minimum, serve as regular reminders of available UWPRC services.
- Increase the amount of the award to meet increased UW costs.
- Consider extending the timeline for applications to accommodate those who need to develop a community partner. Or consider an announcement for the RFA release to alert those without community partners that there is support in developing partners.

---

## Details from the Interviews

### Value of the grant

All of the respondents expressed the importance of the Small Grant Program to their careers and had multiple examples of how it advanced their research path. The contributions included:

- All but one investigator said they had **multiple publications** coming out of their Small Grant Program-funded research.
- Three investigators said the grant had been a **launch pad to further funding** and that they were now eligible for larger grants as a direct result of the Small Grant Program.



- For the earlier career, post-doc recipients, the grant **supported a critical career transition** from conducting secondary data analysis to collecting primary data. Having a dataset was essential when going on the job market.
- Presentation of the work has led to important **networking opportunities** and new connections with researchers in different fields.
- The money enabled the investigator to connect to community by **paying participants** and printing fliers to advertise the research.
- One investigator used funding to hire a **student who then became a collaborator** and part of the research team.
- Three investigators said the Small Grant Program directly resulted in **expanded research agendas**. One was able to generate data to formulate hypotheses that are now testable. Another spoke more generally about being able to ask new questions and work at a larger scope. The third discussed how results from a previous grant had pointed to the need to engage with a new portion of the community, which the Small Grant Program allowed her to do.
- Rewards could be both tangible and intangible. One investigator said that the project had been met with some skepticism and the grant had provided important **external validation** of its importance. The grant provided both momentum for further funding and respect.

*“the small grant program kind of just put my research on a trajectory that I did not expect. . . It gave me that space to innovate. It gave me that space to experiment. And it was an experiment that worked really well. It really led me to develop my intervention to what I really have today.” (Respondent #1)*

*“it has been huge for introducing my research and the importance of it and the relevance to different community organizations and getting in touch with other people who do similar work.” (Respondent #2)*

*“This is a small amount of money and literally this one even has like small in the name. But for me, it was a lot and I have been able to do a lot with it and it's just really given me a lot more kind of autonomy over the research trajectory I'm trying to build and helped me to get a data set that I'm working now to start publishing with and I have a lot.” (Respondent #3)*



## Degree of Community Engagement

The amount of community engagement varied considerably among projects, as did investigator's definitions of "community". At least in the five projects sampled here, there was only one project in which the definition of community engagement aligned with the UWPRC's objective promoting direct investigator engagement with those who represent the end user, recipient, or beneficiary of an intervention.

- Only one project involved extensive community engagement. This project utilized outreach to anticipated users of the intervention and incorporated their insights into design improvements, as outlined in the original research plan. Additionally, after meeting with Dr. Mahoney, this investigator included stakeholder perspectives from host sites that would be implementing the intervention. She also developed a dashboard to track how the intervention is being used at each site.
- In one project, the investigator asked a research collaborator with lived experience to review the project materials.
- In another project, the researcher asked a community organization to recruit people for an observational study.
- Community engagement may also occur at different stages of research. One of the grants funded a basic science project, which had no real place for community engagement. In the longer term, however, as an intervention or educational program is designed around the research findings, the investigator sees ample opportunity for community engagement.
- In one project, community engagement was indirect and looked more like dissemination. Researchers engaged extensively with advocacy organizations that would use the research findings to promote policy changes that would benefit the target population.

## Challenges to Community Engagement

Investigators mentioned the following as barriers to community engagement:

- Small budget and quick timeline (Respondent #3)
- Community engagement is seen as more important for qualitative work, not quantitative work such as their own (Respondent #3)
- Not sure who the community is (state or national? Which population); does a group of experts count? (Respondent #3)
- Without an introduction it is hard to connect to community organizations. Emails are not returned, for instance. (Respondent #2)
- If the project isn't local and/or the investigator is working remotely it is hard to find a relevant community organization. (Respondent #2)



## What assistance could the UWPRC offer grant recipients?

**All interviewed recipients said that help facilitating community connections was the most important thing they needed from the UWPRC.**

- Recipients felt they needed training/coaching on approaching community partners, particularly regarding:
  - Who to target
  - How to reach them
  - How much to pay them
- All recipients thought there would be benefit to meeting with the CAB (Community Advisory Board) at some point during the project. All recipients appreciated being offered the opportunity to meet with the TPP (Translational Partners Panel). They felt that these meetings would be most productive as their projects approached the end, rather than afterwards or early in the project.
- Most recipients did not know that the UWPRC had a structure in place to assist with community engagement.
- One recipient thought the UWPRC could help investigators think about their next steps after the grant, particularly how to move toward larger grants at the intermediate level. (Recipient #3)
- There was interest in having support translating academic findings for public audiences. Investigators would like the UWPRC to help them with report design/visualization for policy briefs or other public facing materials.

## Value of the Dissemination Tool

The value of the dissemination tool and consultation was apparent throughout the interviews. Most of the interviews involved substantial and constructive dissemination consultations. Investigators generally wanted more assistance with dissemination strategies.



*"I appreciate this tool, because I think it is relevant for people who are engaging in basic science, but also for people who are doing things like, you know, educational programs. . . we're going to do this towards the end of the study, because it's not relevant until we have the results."  
(Recipient #4)*

*Recipient #1 said that the required consultation early in the process was extremely fortunate because it, "opened (my) eyes to all the different stakeholders and thinking through how I might go about understanding from (their perspectives). " That one-time meeting led to a strategic plan for piloting a project with stakeholders.*

## Recipient involvement with the UWPRC

- Only one recipient admitted to having no interaction with the UWPRC; she received the emails but ignored them (Recipient #3).
- Four of the five at least skim the newsletter.
- Three have attended at least part of one UWPRC Annual Meeting and one has presented at an Annual Meeting. Most try to attend but find it competes with many other obligations and invitations.
- All expressed some confusion about ways in which they could engage with the UWPRC or what is expected of them regarding involvement. One said he assumed there was a dissemination requirement, but he has never been asked to do so, or seen himself on a meeting schedule. (Recipient #4).

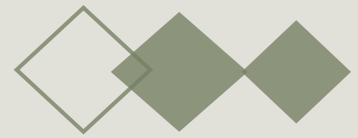
*"(The PRC) could have been a good community for me . . . I haven't taken advantage of it." (Recipient #1)*

## Suggestions for involvement

**Four of the five recipients wanted a structured way to interact with the UWPRC more regularly.** Variations on this theme included a peer network of grant recipients. This is envisioned as an informal place to talk about how the work is going and to discuss shared themes of health equity and improving maternal health, and generally seeing how others are thinking about these ideas.

This could take several forms:

- Meeting for coffee a couple of times a year



- A seminar series that involved small gatherings; a place to learn about each other's work and to hear speakers about specific topics such as CBPR or qualitative methods
- A Community of Practice with practitioners invited to consult on shared issues. For instance, a MD who could speak about using birth records.

Additionally, **recipients wanted more regular connections with the UWPRC** infrastructure, especially around community engagement and dissemination. Ideas included:

- More frequent check-ins, either with the CAB or progress reports to the UWPRC, perhaps quarterly
- Required UWPRC mentors – This relationship would involve check-in meetings, perhaps twice per year. The UWPRC could suggest a mentor from their affiliate list. The relationship could be a senior mentor but could also be a career peer. The recipient suggesting UWPRC mentors agreed to serve as a mentor to an incoming grantee. (Recipient #1)

## Finding Applicants

Most recipients had been told about the grant opportunity from a colleague. Many described this as “by accident,” suggesting that the UWPRC may need targeted efforts to reach potential applicants. This may mean making personal phone calls to those who can reach eligible investigators.

Interviewee ideas for reaching applicants included:

- Use previous grantees as grant ambassadors and ask them to present the opportunity to researchers they think would benefit. It seems that knowing someone who was funded increases a researcher's belief in the possibility.
- Reach out to department and program chairs of past grantees and ask them to identify potential applicants.
  - Proof of this concept is that the grant is well known within the Health Disparity Research Scholars program because its program administrator makes sure they are aware of the opportunity.
- Advertise as broadly as possible, including to the Department of Medicine Office of Research Services and College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.
- Is there a centralized place to advertise all campus grant opportunities? If not, push for one.





## Completing the Application

For those who had community partners (or for those who had no intention of including a community engagement component), the grant timeline and requirements were not at all burdensome. These investigators had project plans well underway and had their application content already written for other purposes. For them, it was largely a matter of formatting their ideas for the Small Grant Program application.

For those who wanted to conduct community engaged research but didn't yet have a community partner, the application timeline was very challenging. Supporting these applicants may require extending the RFA timeline considerably.

---

## Conclusion

The UWPRC Small Grant Program is of high value to its recipients and is an important part of fulfilling the UWPRC's mission. With greater infrastructure to support recipients, the Program could have an even larger impact and the UWPRC could become a premier research center for community-engaged research on the UW-Madison campus.

For information about this report contact:

Liz Feder: [efeder@wisc.edu](mailto:efeder@wisc.edu)

Jane Mahoney: [jm2@medicine.wisc.edu](mailto:jm2@medicine.wisc.edu)

