

“Building a Research Team”

Rebecca P. Winsett, PhD, Associate Professor, University of Tennessee-Memphis, Memphis, TN; Professor, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN, NATCO Research Committee Co-Chair

What is a research team?

Although many times as a researcher you feel alone, research is not performed in a vacuum. You will need a team to assist you in designing and implementing the process. The team is made of professionals and lay persons who have a shared interest in the topic and can bring to the table an area of expertise. Your team consists of the co-investigators (professionals who have participated in developing the design) as well as people who will be instrumental in ensuring that your project can be completed.

Who belongs on your team?

Although there is no specific rule of the number of team members, you need to consider the research question. Is it strictly a transplant nursing question? Will it involve medications? Are you planning an intervention? The larger the team, the more complicated the communication network becomes (Stoner 1998). Of course, the design (will data be collected just once or over time?), the type of analyses performed, and the environment in which you will be doing the research are also as important as considering who should be a part of your team. Is the project contained in the unit where you work and will you need to rely on the good faith of busy nurses or coordinators?

As an example, suppose you have noticed that patients where English is a second language seem to have more medication problems. You think that adherence is more difficult with this population, and you want to evaluate this. You have never lead any research before, but have been a part of the transplant research team in collecting data for drug studies and have taken the IRB human subject test. Where do you go from there?

Research Design. You may want to investigate collaborating with someone who has more experience in research design. Check your nursing faculty or the research department of your hospital. You may find a researcher who may have a similar research interest and can help you fine tune your question, help design the data collection, and assist with analysis. If you find someone with this type of expertise, this person will most likely want to be a co-investigator. Easy accessibility and trust are things you may want to examine before asking this person to be a co-investigator.

Entrée into the clinic. You will want to make sure that the clinic manager and staff are supportive of your project, and it may help to include the clinic manager on your team. While these persons may or may not have any research experience, including them may prevent passive obstruction of your project. Unless it is strategically important these persons may not need to be a part of the co-investigator team, but important to include in the day-to-day operations team.

Physician support. Adding your transplant surgeon or physician to your team depends on the type of support you are requesting. If this is a large project that you specifically need your transplant physician to endorse so obtaining information or documents from other departments is not obstructed, then by all means include your physician. If this is a small pilot project, you may just want to discuss the research plan with your physician, and he/she may choose to be included. Enlisting those who are in higher positions never hurts when you are trying to ask other people to record or obtain questionnaires that are not part of their normal job description.

Data analyses. Depending on the research design and the complexity of the analyses, you may want to have a biostatistician on your team. At least once you have the design, consult with a statistician before embarking on your data collection. Depending on the resources of your study and the time that your statistician will be needed for the study, this may be a one-time consultation. Clarify with the statistician his/her expectations regarding inclusion as a co-investigator.

Data collection. You may need to put some thought into this. What are the needs of the data collector? Are you going to collect data yourself or will you need others in the clinic to help you. Do you need administrative help? Will there be funds to help offset costs or are you asking someone to perform duties that are not a part of their daily routine?

Roles and Responsibilities

Leading this team, whether you have two or six members, requires activities that will help you in the long run. You must form the team atmosphere, and this includes determining individual roles, the long- and short-term goals of the team, clarifying performance rules that also include authorship and ownership of data and data results (Laing 2003). Clarifying expectations is very important on the front end.

Team Meetings

Most of the work of the study will be done in team meetings. You may sigh and think, "how can I ask one more person to attend one more meeting?". Remember that the time invested in the meeting is a way to help you complete your study on time and thus is important for the overall project. Consider these ground rules when calling meetings.

1. Announce the team meetings well in advance and send reminders. Make them often enough to prevent problems, but not so often that members skip them because of other job priorities.
2. Create an agenda, and if at all possible, send the agenda out prior to the meeting.
3. Announce which individuals are expected to report on an agenda item so that they can come prepared to the meeting.
4. Start on time, and finish on time. Don't punish those who arrive on time.
5. Keep minutes of the meeting.

References:

Laing, K. (2003). "Teambuilding." Gastroenterology Nursing **26**(4): 15-158.

Stoner, M. H. (1998). "Putting a research team together." Journal of Emergency Nursing **24**(4): 362-364.