



**The Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice’s Academic Health Department Research
Agenda: Comparison with WPHRN Priority Research Questions**

Cassandra Greenwood, MPH, TEP-PH Intern (former),
Tracy Mrochek, MPA, RN, and Susan Zahner, DrPH, MPH, FAAN, RN
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Introduction

In recent years, a number of types of organizational partnerships have evolved to focus on improving public health research through increasing collaboration between local public health departments and universities. One of these types of partnerships that is gaining support is the Academic Health Department (AHD), which is “formed by the formal affiliation of a health department and an academic institution that trains future health professionals” (PHF, n.d.a). Such collaborations between health departments and academic institutions may be comprehensive and focus on education, research, and practice, or focus on only one or two of these areas (PHF, n.d.b). Another type of partnership is the practice-based research network (PBRN), which is a partnership between public health researchers and practitioners that aims to answer questions of relevance and importance to public health practice. This paper briefly describes the development of the AHD research agenda and a specific example of a PBRN, the Wisconsin Public Health Research Network (WPHRN) and their priority research questions. Further, the paper compares and contrasts research priorities related to the structure, function, and impact of public health organizations identified through two recent research priority agenda setting activities, one by the Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice (Council on Linkages) related to AHDs, and one by the WPHRN.

The [Academic Health Department Research Agenda](#) was developed by the [Council on Linkages](#) through its [AHD Learning Community](#) to help build support for collaborative research on the structure, functions, and impacts of AHD partnerships (PHF, 2016). The research agenda originated from a Council on Linkages member’s idea, example AHD research questions generated by Erwin et al. (2016), and a small workgroup of public health experts including members of the AHD Learning Community (K. Amos personal communication, 6/26/17). This workgroup began by examining “Example Research and Evaluation Questions for the Academic Health Department” and adopting the logic model format used in this work (Erwin et al., 2016). They met three times via conference call to discuss potential research questions and updated the research agenda draft after each meeting. The final workgroup draft was shared with the members of the AHD Learning Community and the public for comments. Feedback was used to refine and finalize the research agenda. The agenda was approved by the Council on Linkages in October 2016 and updated in November 2016 (PHF, 2016). Formatting modifications to a small number of research questions occurred in spring 2017 (K. Amos personal communication, 6/26/17).

Established in 2009, the [Wisconsin Public Health Research Network](#) aims to link and support public health practitioners and researchers in order to answer questions and disseminate discoveries applicable to improving practice and population health. One way the WPHRN attempts to advance this purpose is through identifying knowledge gaps and encouraging researchers to investigate topic areas that are of relevance and importance to public health practice. The WPHRN first developed priority research questions (PRQs) in 2011 to advance its purpose and identify potential areas of research to be conducted by its members. A three-step process was used to identify the PRQs. The first step was a literature review on priorities in public health services and systems research (PHSSR)—a field of study that examines the

organization, financing, and delivery of public health services within communities, and the impact of these services on public health (Mays, Halverson, & Scutchfield, 2009). The next step was a survey to assess relevance and importance of questions according to national and state priorities. Finally, there was a brainstorming session with WPHRN partners. An update to the PRQs occurred in 2015, adding questions with relevance towards addressing current public health research needs in Wisconsin and deleting questions of less relevance and priority (Mrochek, n.d., Mrochek & Ryan, 2015, and WPHRN, 2015b). The WPHRN Steering Committee uses the PRQs to help make decisions about which research projects to endorse and/or support (WPHRN, 2015a). The PRQs are available on the [WPHRN website](#) as a guide to researchers and practitioners seeking to conduct relevant PHSSR in Wisconsin (WPHRN, 2015b).

A comparative analysis was conducted to explore similarities and differences between areas identified as priorities for research by the WPHRN and by the AHD Learning Community. The results of the analysis could help direct future collaborations on research by universities and public health agencies.

Methods

Lists of the WPHRN PRQ and the potential AHD research questions were compared at two points in time. At the first comparison, the WPHRN list included 109 PRQs, while the draft AHD research agenda had 35 potential research questions. Common words and themes from the comparison were highlighted and research questions of mutual interest were grouped by category and placed into a table.

The Council on Linkages released an updated, approved research agenda in November 2016, with an additional 27 potential research questions, bringing the total to 62 potential research questions (PHF, 2016). A second comparison was conducted using the same methods described above. New questions were added to the table under existing and new categories, and the language was updated to reflect the final AHD research agenda. In June 2017, additional revisions occurred, following further formatting modifications to the AHD research agenda (K. Amos personal communication, 6/26/17).

Results

Six categories of similar interests were identified. The table below displays questions from each source relevant to each of the six categories (WPHRN, 2017; K. Amos personal communication, 6/26/2017).

Mutual research area interest topic	WPHRN (WPHRN, 2017)	AHD (PHF, 2016; K. Amos personal communication, 6/26/2017)
Shared services	<p>What shared services models have been most effective in improving public health service delivery?</p> <p>What are the characteristics of public health activities that are improved by delivery through shared service, multi-jurisdictional arrangements versus those that are most effectively provided through highly localized (e.g. every county) arrangements?</p>	<p>What types of formal agreements have been used to establish AHDs?</p> <p>What are the critical elements of formal agreements that have been used to establish AHDs?</p> <p>What is the value of shared personnel in AHDs?</p> <p>Which types of personnel contribute most to AHDs?</p>

Mutual research area interest topic	WPHRN (WPHRN, 2017)	AHD (PHF, 2016; K. Amos personal communication, 6/26/2017)
		What arrangements for sharing personnel in AHDs have been successful?
Workforce	<p>What work and worker characteristics are associated with LHD workforce competency?</p> <p>What are the most important competencies for public health leadership?</p>	<p>What models and theories of education and training are most effective in creating the conditions to establish AHDs?</p> <p>What styles of leadership are most effective in establishing and sustaining AHDs?</p> <p>What styles of management are most effective in establishing and sustaining AHDs?</p>
Translation and dissemination	The mission of the WPHRN is to link and support “public health practitioners and researchers in order to answer questions and disseminate discoveries applicable to improving practice and population health.”	<p>How can AHDs inform the field of dissemination and implementation science?</p> <p>Do AHDs enhance the translation of research into practice, and if so, how?</p>
Role with Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs)	How should LHD partner with ACOs to achieve the triple aim of improved population health outcomes, better quality patient experience of care, and lower cost per person?	What roles do AHDs have in ACOs?
Financial variability	What is the difference between counties in Wisconsin regarding how much they each spend on executing the same programs?	What is the variability across AHDs in resources, and how does such variability matter?
Accreditation	<p>How does structure/staffing of LHD influence readiness for accreditation?</p> <p>Does LHD accreditation result in improved LHD outcomes or outputs?</p> <p>Does LHD accreditation result in community health improvement?</p> <p>What LHD providers are most effective in promoting accreditation?</p> <p>Does an accredited LHD function better than a non-accredited LHD?</p>	<p>Are health departments that participate in AHD partnerships more successful in achieving accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) than health departments that do not participate in AHD partnerships?</p> <p>Are academic programs that participate in AHD partnerships more successful in achieving accreditation through the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) than academic programs that do not participate in AHD partnerships?</p>

Discussion

Interest in shared service models and studies of such arrangements have been reported in recent years. These findings indicate that in addition to studies of how LHDs partner with each other, another potentially valuable line of work is how LHDs partner with academic institutions. Statewide networks like the WPHRN are in a good position to study such relationships across multiple institutions within the same state or in partnership with PBRNs from multiple states.

Workforce studies done collaboratively between research networks, LHDs and academic institutions have much to offer to practitioners and educators of public health professionals. Research networks could offer AHDs opportunities to conduct comparison studies between LHDs that do and do not identify as AHDs. Such comparisons could yield insights useful for improving education and practice.

Studies about AHDs' and LHDs' engagement with Accountable Care Organizations could have positive results for population health improvement and quality of care. These studies could use coding to conduct a sub-set analysis or comparisons between partnerships where LHDs are also AHDs and partnerships where LHDs do not include AHD partnerships. Thus, research could explore the differential influence of partnerships with academic programs on health outcomes, quality of care, and cost.

Financial studies are important in public health given increasing resource restrictions in many public health agencies. Understanding variation in expenditures and revenues across types of LHDs (with AHDs as one type), then connecting that variation to differences in health outcomes could lead to more robust understanding of factors and programs that are most important to sustain or develop in order to improve health or reduce costs.

Understanding the impact of LHD accreditation on outcomes, cost, and quality is important given the challenges associated with accreditation programs. It seems likely that LHDs that are AHDs may have different accreditation experiences. Coding AHDs in such a way that allows comparisons between LHDs that are and are not AHDs in future accreditation studies will be important.

Translation and dissemination are primary reasons for public health practice-based research networks to exist. Although not specifically part of the WPHRN priority research questions, the WPHRN's mission is to link and support "public health practitioners and researchers in order to answer questions and disseminate discoveries applicable to improving practice and population health" (WPHRN, 2016). The AHD research agenda includes questions about translation and dissemination and fits well within the mission of the WPHRN, and other similar research networks. AHD questions related to translation and dissemination include, "How can AHDs inform the field of dissemination and implementation science?" and "Do AHDs enhance the translation of research into practice, and if so, how?" (PHF, 2016). Collaboration between practitioners and researchers would be important to conducting a high quality study of how AHDs contribute to translation of research into practice.

Conclusion

The shared research questions show that different public health entities could potentially work together on similar areas of interest in public health research. With limited public health research funding available, collaboration among public health entities and researchers is an efficient way to address public health issues and answer questions. Collaboration among multiple public health groups may also generate more interest among funders for project support.

For more information

WPHRN Priority Research Questions: <https://wphrn.nursing.wisc.edu/research-questions/>

Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice's Academic Health Department Research Agenda: http://www.phf.org/resourcestools/Pages/AHD_Research_Agenda.aspx

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Organizations

Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice: Collaborative of 23 national organizations “focused on improving public health education and training, practice, and research.” “[W]orks to further academic/practice collaboration to ensure a well-trained, competent workforce and the development and use of a strong evidence base for public health practice” (PHF, n.d.d).

Academic Health Department Learning Community: National community created by the Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice in 2011. “[D]esigned to support the development, maintenance, and expansion of AHD partnerships” (PHF, n.d.c).

Academic Health Departments: “[F]ormed by the affiliation of health departments and academic institutions providing education in the health professions.” Collaborations between health departments and academic institutions may be comprehensive and focus on education, research, and service, or focus on only one or two of these areas. (PHF, n.d.b).

Public Health Foundation: Non-profit organization with a mission to “improve the public’s health by strengthening the quality and performance of public health practice” (PHF, n.d.e).

Public Health Practice-Based Research Networks: Partnerships between public health researchers and practitioners that aim to answer questions of relevance and importance to public health practice.

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