

# CREATING JUDICIAL – ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS



**AN EFFICIENT WAY TO LEVERAGE RESOURCES FOR  
EVALUATION**

PERMANENCY PLANNING FOR CHILDREN DEPARTMENT

SEPTEMBER 2010



**CREATING JUDICIAL — ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS**  
**AN EFFICIENT WAY TO LEVERAGE RESOURCES FOR EVALUATION**

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This Technical Assistance Brief is a publication of the Permanency Planning for Children Department of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ). The NCJFCJ wishes to acknowledge that this material is made possible by Grant No. 2008-CT-BX-K012 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice or the NCJFCJ.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Judge Smith attends a conference on the child abuse and neglect court system. At the conference, Judge Smith is inundated with information about programs that have been implemented around the country with varying degrees of success. Judge Smith is particularly interested in a charismatic speaker who relays a touching story about a girl who finds comfort through an equine program. Judge Smith returns to encourage his local treatment providers to begin an equine program. Five years and thousands of dollars later, the program appears to be successful. Anecdotal reports are that the children love it. Yet, there is no evidence that the program has any effect on the safety, well-being or permanency of the children involved in the child welfare system. The funders want more. They want to know if their money is being spent wisely. System stakeholders want more. They want to know if the program is effective. Everyone wants to know how the program meets the court's goal of helping children and families involved in the court system.*

Scenarios like the one presented above are common amongst system-focused, forward-thinking dependency court judges. Conferences and other judicial meetings provide great opportunities for judges to learn about the successes of other courts. In the flood of information, many courts find programs that inspire them, that they feel would be helpful to their jurisdiction, particularly when presenters are excited with the promising results they have experienced. Many are eager to improve their courts and outcomes for children and families in any way that they can. They want to make a positive change. Yet, as illustrated in the example above, they often miss a vital step. They find the means to implement programs without developing a way to know if the program works. With today's push for evidence-based practice, the step of evaluation is crucial to determine if these programs are effective at meeting their stated goals.<sup>1</sup>

Further, times of economic crisis, budget constraints, and the ongoing basic need to well-manage state and local funds make it vital to assess the cost efficiency of all programs. To be appropriately accountable, courts must take action to ensure that programs are efficient and effective at meeting goals. Evaluation is how the courts can figure out what works well and what the costs are.

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. (January 2009). *Identifying and Selecting Evidence-based Interventions: Revised Guidance for the Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant Program*. Available online at [prevention.samhsa.gov/evidencebased/evidencebased.pdf](http://prevention.samhsa.gov/evidencebased/evidencebased.pdf)



Understanding the need for evaluation does not make conducting evaluations easier. Courts may not have the time or expertise necessary to carry out evaluations, formulate research questions, assess data, or interpret results. Turning to external partners can help courts meet evaluation needs. Judicial-academic partnerships are an especially effective way to leverage resources to enhance the evaluation capacity of the court. *Collaborating with an academic researcher can provide courts with mutually beneficial evaluation opportunities.* This Technical Assistance Brief provides systematic guidelines for developing judicial-academic partnerships.

### WHY EVALUATE?

For courts, evaluating promising programs and practices provides a way to identify which programs and practices should be retained as effective and which should be discarded or modified. It can also be a way to assess how it is affecting families and children involved in the courts. Many funding sources require evaluation as a condition of a funding award. Further, many funders want proof of effectiveness before allocating future funds. Understanding how a program works and what effect it has crucial information to decision-makers as to how to enhance or change the program for the better, improving efficiency and outcomes.

- **FUNDING**

- Current funders may require it
- Future funders encourage and may require it

- **ACCOUNTABILITY**

- External agencies/governing bodies require accountability

- **DETERMINE PROGRAM MECHANICS**

- Can help to improve efficiency
- To see if program is doing what it is supposed to be doing
- To help with replication

- **DETERMINING EFFECTIVENESS**

- To see if program is meeting goals/consistent with mission/vision
- To determine which programs to keep or cut in budget crisis

### SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC-JUDICIAL RESEARCH COLLABORATION

Collaboration is “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.”<sup>2</sup> Successful collaborations:

1. Benefit all parties;
2. Have clearly defined relationship expectations; and
3. Have a mission to achieve a common goal.

There is great potential in working toward common goals in a way that is beneficial to all. However, it is often difficult for parties to create meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships in a real-world context. The following guidelines provide concrete steps in forming a judicial-academic partnership.

#### PREPARING FOR A JUDICIAL-ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP

- **Engage in Preliminary Outreach.**
- **Learn and Understand.**
- **Set a Common Research Agenda.**
- **Develop and Sustain Ongoing Working Relationships.**
- **Assess Available Resources.**
- **Consider Ethical Obligations.**
- **Create a Strategic Plan.**

<sup>2</sup>Mattessich, P., & Monsey, B. (1993). *Collaboration: What makes it work*. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.



## CONDUCT PRELIMINARY OUTREACH

The first step in any successful relationship is to identify and reach out to potential collaborative partners. Judges can begin this process by:

### 1. Identifying local institutions.

Consider universities and community colleges, as both will have students and faculty who may be interested in evaluation research with the courts. Internet searches provide the best and most efficient way to identify potential academic partners. Telephone directories may have contact information as well.

### 2. Examine institution websites for departments of interest.

University websites have detailed information on available degree programs and departments that may be relevant to court program research and evaluation. These include social work, law, social psychology, and policy programs. Remember to consider that departments may have varying names but similar purposes. For example, policy programs may be listed as public policy, policy analysis, social policy, or health services and policy. Most of these programs will have similar programs of study and faculty with similar interests.

#### Potential Collaborative Academic Departments

- Social work
- Social welfare
- Social psychology
- Sociology
- Program evaluation
- Policy
- Political science
- Criminal justice
- Law
- Legal studies
- Education
- Health
- Human development and family studies
- Public affairs

3. **Look for interested faculty.** Any of the departments listed here could have faculty that may be interested in conducting research with the courts. University websites include faculty pages that list research interests and experiences (e.g., publications). Select a potential collaborative partner from these lists. If none of the faculty appear to be good matches, consider reaching out to the department chair or department head; they may be able to point out faculty or students who are interested in court-based research.



4. **Contact potential collaborative partners.** Most university websites include email addresses and phone numbers for their faculty. While phone conversations make it easier to communicate, many faculty members may have limited office hours and email may be the easiest way to get a timely response. Further communications can be established from there. It is perfectly acceptable to contact multiple faculty members simultaneously. They may all have different interests and will bring different expertise to the collaborative relationship. In these initial discussions, consider inviting the faculty to attend a Model Court collaborative meeting. Fellow judges and stakeholders may know of prospective student and faculty partners and may be able to facilitate introductions as well.

**Example: Dallas, GA**

*The Dallas Model Court was interested in implementing a mental health screening tool and wanted to include evaluation in the formulation plan for the program. Discussions with the Lead Judge indicated that they had a Systems of Care program in place that was an integral part of this plan.*

**Step 1:** A search of local institutions found [Georgia State University](#)

**Step 2:** The first department identified was the [School of Social Work](#).

**Step 3:** Searching faculty bios led to a professor whose research interests included [Systems of Care](#).

**Step 4:** A research associate from the National Council made initial outreach to ascertain interests. The example email is below:

Good Morning,

I am a Research Associate with the Permanency Planning for Children Department of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. We are a non-profit organization that works closely with the juvenile dependency court system. One of our initiatives is the Model Courts project, through which courts sign on with us to work toward positive systems change by building collaborative relationships with all system stakeholders, implementing best practices, and designing and implementing new practices and programs aimed at enhancing the juvenile dependency court system.

We have a Model Court in Dallas, GA. We have been working closely with the lead judge to determine what the court needs and what goals they would like to set. As part of this discussion, we learned that they have developed a Systems of Care initiative and are working toward having meetings that are more frequent and establishing set meeting protocols. One of the items that the Model Court would like to work on is early screening of youth for mental health concerns by implementing a screening process as a frontloading tool, assessing mental health early and frequently throughout the case. The Model Court would also like to use the tool at specific times during the case (such as initial hearings, following placement moves, or at reviews). We would like to assess the effectiveness of the tool in enhancing well-being outcomes for children involved in the system. In addition, as Dallas is a small jurisdiction the Model Court Lead Judge has indicated she would like to outreach to neighboring jurisdictions to see if we can get a multi-site implementation and assessment.

This project is just beginning, which makes it ideal for evaluation. Our concern is that we do not have the resources necessary to do all the research (which may involve case file review, court observation and other evaluation strategies) needed for a high quality research project. I saw your research interest areas online and thought that you, or perhaps some of your students, would be interested in collaborating with us. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges supports collaborating with universities as ideal in that it allows us to expand our research potential, helps students to learn more about conducting research in their interest areas, and helps bridge the gap between applied and academic research.

Please let me know if you have any interest in collaborating with us to work on this project. If so, I would love an opportunity to setup a conference call to discuss this further with you. If not, do you have colleagues that you know of that may be interested in this work?

Thank you.

**LEARN AND UNDERSTAND**

A second step in forming successful research collaborations is learning and understanding each partner’s culture and framework – each partner’s roles and responsibilities as a court, university researcher, etc.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the needs of each partner requires open communication whereby each party can freely express the culture of their organization, their goals, obligations, and their individual needs and approaches. Sharing information can facilitate these conversations, as each party will have documents that can be helpful learning tools for the other. *Each partner has something to contribute to the collaboration.* A better understanding of the culture and context of each partner can help to avoid misunderstandings, which will in turn help move evaluations forward. The table below lists some things to consider and ways that judges and academic researchers may differ. It can serve as a guide for ongoing dialogue between collaborators. This will also help when determining who is to do what in the research process, e.g., from responsibility for obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (if necessary), to responsibility for randomly pulling case files at the Clerk’s Office.

	Judges	Academic Researchers
<b>Goals</b>	To understand program effectiveness To seek funding for projects To make program decisions (keep, change, add)	To conduct research for publication To teach students how to conduct research To gain access to courts and court data
<b>Methods</b>	Examining current reports Examining monthly data	Advanced statistical analysis and research design Qualitative methods
<b>Responsibilities</b>	To children and families To stakeholders	To university (to present or publish work) To students To research participants
<b>Priorities</b>	Reporting to stakeholders and external agencies	Publishing in academic journals Meeting course requirements
<b>Timelines</b>	May want immediate results May need lengthy evaluations that require years to conduct	More labor intensive and longer timeframes for reflection Student helpers may only be available for one semester
<b>Desired Output</b>	Report with specific project results and recommendations <b>Audience:</b> Judges, Stakeholders, Funders	Academic paper <b>Audience:</b> Academic researcher/student
<b>Information Sharing</b>	Court mission/vision statement Project reports Project history	Research interests and bio Syllabi from courses Past publications

<sup>3</sup>Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (December 2008). *Strengthening university/agency research partnerships to enhance child welfare outcomes. A Toolkit for building research partnerships.*



### SET A COMMON RESEARCH AGENDA

Setting a common research agenda is a vital step in forming the judicial academic relationship. *Identifying a mutually beneficial research agenda will depend largely on the goals of the court and the researcher.* Because academic researchers and judges will have differing needs (as noted in the previous step), any evaluation partnership should begin with setting a common research agenda. The research agenda should include **clear expectations** regarding what questions the court would like to answer. Identification of the court's questions will help facilitate a discussion of what the courts wish to answer and what the researchers can effectively examine given any project constraints.

#### **Questions to consider when setting a shared research agenda:**

1. What is the goal of the program/project to be evaluated?
2. What questions need answered? *(Use this to inform question #3)*
3. What type of evaluation needs to be conducted? *(See next page for descriptions)*
  - a. Process Evaluation – *How is the program working?*
  - b. Outcome Evaluation – *What has happened because of the program?*
4. What is the expected timeline for evaluation completion?
5. What are the expected outputs (e.g., reports, paper, presentations)?
  - a. Judge Expected Outputs
  - b. Researcher Expected Outputs
6. What expectations does each party have of the other party's potential contributions?
7. What types of constraints does each party have (e.g., time, funding)?
8. What are the expected roles of each party?

After judges convey the questions that they would like to ask it will be important to work directly with the researchers to translate these into a format amenable to evaluation procedures. The researcher will help the courts identify the appropriate methods to answer the questions. This step will also help when examining existing and needed data.

## DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN ONGOING WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

“Collaboration is more than just bringing stakeholders to the table – collaboration is more than ‘cooperation.’ Collaboration involves giving collaborators a meaningful role, a strong voice, and a real opportunity to make a contribution. Meaningful collaboration emerges over time and multiple interactions through which trust and mutual respect develop among members.”<sup>4</sup>

Creating and sustaining meaningful collaborative relationships with all system stakeholders is essential to the evaluation process. As the judicial academic partnership begins, the collaborative process should include all stakeholders who may be affected by the project or can contribute ideas and feedback, such as through discussion at regular Model Court collaborative team meetings. This will help to facilitate cooperation with researchers and understanding of the purpose of the research. It will also generate interest in the results.

*The more people who are involved the greater the potential for sharing of expertise and knowledge, recognizing the importance of the work and sustaining momentum to move projects forward.* In order to develop and sustain working relationships with all stakeholders:

- Work with the Model Court team to identify a list of key stakeholders
- Consider bringing together stakeholders from different levels within departments
- Develop a plan for regular meetings
- Hold frequent meetings/conference calls to ensure the collaboration stays focused with increased involvement
- Think about how the work fits in or supports the achievement of existing and larger system reform efforts
- Consider/verbalize the role of each participant
- Establish how information will be shared among group members

### Potential Stakeholders

- Legal Representatives
  - Parent’s Attorney
  - Children’s Attorney
  - Agency attorney
  - State or county attorney
- Guardian *ad litem*
- CASA
- Social Workers
- Court Administrators
- Non-profit organizations
- Treatment Providers
- Educational Advocates
- Domestic Violence Advocates
- Community Representatives
- Probation Officers

<sup>4</sup>Shirley A. Dobbin, Sophia I. Gatowski, & Dionne M. Maxwell. (2004). Building a Better Collaboration: Facilitating Change in the Court and Child Welfare System. *Technical Assistance Bulletin*, Vol. VIII, No. 2. National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.



### Types of Evaluations

Collaborative discussions between researchers and judges can help to identify the type of evaluation needed, setting clear expectations for potential findings and how they can be used to best aid the court and researchers in moving forward. There are two basic types of evaluations – process evaluations and outcome evaluations. Both types can be beneficial to the court.

	Process Evaluations	Outcome Evaluations
<b>Answers the question:</b>	<i>How does it work?</i>	<i>Does it work?</i>
<b>Useful for:</b>	<p>Monitoring implementation progress (is it being implemented as planned)</p> <p>Identifying successes &amp; challenges related to implementation</p> <p>Identifying how the program changes current practice, workload or ideas</p> <p>Illustrating how a program works to outside parties (necessary for replication)</p>	<p>Determining if program has desired effect</p> <p>Determining if program has other unintended consequences</p> <p>Identifying the benefits of the program</p> <p>Assessing whether goals have been achieved</p> <p>Identifying short and long-term effects of the program</p>
<b>Why use it?</b>	<p>Process evaluations can help verify that the program is working as expected</p> <p>Understanding the process can help to identify reasons why the program may not achieve desired results</p> <p>Understanding the process is necessary for replicating the project</p> <p>Process evaluations are useful communication tools to facilitate discussions about programs and identify ways to <i>improve</i> the program</p> <p>Process evaluations can identify ways to make the program more efficient (both for cost and resources)</p>	<p>Outcome evaluations will determine if the program is achieving its desired effect. This information is useful when determining which projects to retain or eliminate, particularly when budget issues arise.</p> <p>Outcome evaluations can help ascertain if funding is being used efficiently and are often required by funding agencies.</p> <p>Outcome evaluations can help determine if the program is meeting its goals, which can help for future strategic planning.</p>

**ASSESS AVAILABLE RESOURCES**

After identifying stakeholders and forming a collaborative group, it is essential to assess available resources, stakeholder specific goals, concurrent related stakeholder projects, programs, initiatives, and other such information from all parties. This will help to determine the questions to be answered and identify any additional resources that could be used to enhance the evaluation.

Access to data is one of the most valuable resources. It is important to consider *all* types of data that may provide information for the evaluation, and from whom the data can be obtained.

Resources That Each Party May Have		
Judges	Researchers	Other Stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data</li> <li>• Access to records</li> <li>• Access to gatekeepers</li> <li>• Knowledge of other, related court projects</li> <li>• Ability to garner stakeholder support and buy-in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Methodological expertise</li> <li>• Access to software, computers, and technology support</li> <li>• Students who can provide time and expertise</li> <li>• Ability to apply for funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data</li> <li>• Access to records</li> <li>• Different perspectives, expertise</li> <li>• Knowledge of other related system reform projects</li> </ul>

**Consider these questions:**

- What sources of data currently exist?
  - Court level:  Computerized case management system       Case Files (Electronic? Hard Copy?)
  - Agency Level:  Court reports       Case Plans
  - Other stakeholder data? (e.g., CASA reports, grades, probation reports)
- Who collects data on child abuse and neglect? Who has access to this data?
  - Clerk      • Court administrator      • Court information technology staff
  - Social service agency      • Attorneys      • Treatment providers      • Other local agencies
- What specific information is needed for the evaluation?
- What data can be feasibly collected?
  - Internet or in-person surveys      • Interviews      • Observations
  - Focus Groups      • Case file reviews      • Review of other files



### CONSIDER ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS

Academic researchers as well as courts and stakeholders have ethical obligations to the populations they serve. These obligations must be considered to ensure that research will not do harm to those that the collaborative partners are obligated to protect. Researchers must obey federal research ethics guidelines<sup>5</sup> that require researchers to balance potential risks and benefits so that benefits outweigh any potential negative consequences. Federal guidelines require special consideration to protect vulnerable populations. In some cases, official approval might be needed from an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Researchers have access and knowledge to submit protocols to university IRBs for approval.

Stakeholders, such as child welfare agencies, might also require official approval or access to records, personnel, or clients. It is important to determine whether approval is required and the appropriate channels to gain the approval. Judges will have needed access to files and have their own obligations. There may also be state law or local rules of court governing confidentiality and access to records. *Researchers and courts need to be patient with and understanding of each other's professional obligations.* Communicating these obligations, and methods to achieve the evaluation goals while still honoring the obligations, is vital to the collaboration's success.

<sup>5</sup>National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research, available at: [Bhttp://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html](http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html) (accessed 16 March 2009).

***What is an Institutional Review Board (IRB)?***

- An IRB is a committee established to review research involving human subjects.
- They protect the rights and welfare of human subjects.

***When do you need to go through an IRB?***

- Any research using human subjects may need to be reviewed through an IRB.
- However, anonymous research or secondary data collection of already existing information may be *exempt* from IRB review.

***When do you NOT need it?***

- Research that will not be published or shared may not require IRB review.
- Data collection that does not collect identifying information may not require IRB review.

***Where do you find an IRB?***

- Higher education institutions nearly always have their own IRB.
- Private IRBs are also available to review research protocols.

***What is the IRB process?***

- If research needs to be submitted to an IRB, a research protocol and informed consent documentation are submitted to the IRB for review.
- The IRB reviews the protocol and approves/denies the research. They may also require changes to methods, consent forms, or instruments before approval.
- The process can be lengthy, but can usually be completed within 1-3 months.



## CREATE A STRATEGIC PLAN

The steps outlined above lay the foundation for establishing a collaborative evaluation relationship. *Given that court-based research takes place in a context that affects the lives of real people, so the need for flexibility and change is likely.* Success of the evaluation requires a strong commitment to working together, good communication, and flexibility when change is necessary.

### Strategic Planning for the Evaluation Process

- Establish an evaluation plan
  - Decide on evaluation goals
  - Lay out steps of evaluation process
  - Create logic model
- Assign roles and responsibilities for evaluation tasks
  - Determine who will be responsible for doing what
  - Decide who will be the contact person for questions or concerns
- Set clear and realistic expectations for fulfilling the project goals *and* expected outputs (i.e., reports, papers, data, etc.)
  - Stakeholders will not over- or underestimate what can be done
  - Clear expectations hold parties accountable
  - Parties will receive an end product that meets their needs
- Set a clear timeline
  - Establish concrete milestones
- Establish a structure for meeting or reporting on a regularly agreed upon basis to:
  - Provide updates on the progress of the project
  - Alert stakeholders what is needed from them and when
- Set up a process for changes or amendments:
  - Consider ideas for changes to stakeholder staffing and budgets
  - Plan for contingencies in research findings
- Develop procedures for review of resulting publications/presentations

**CHALLENGES**

Every collaboration will have challenges. The most important tools to successfully meet any challenge are flexibility and open communication. Discussing barriers as they arise and brainstorming potential solutions is vital. The following table outlines common relationship barriers between academic researchers and the judiciary that may arise and offers some practical solutions.

Common Relationship Barriers in the Research/Evaluation-Practitioner Relationship (and what you can do about them!) <sup>6</sup>		
Common Relationship Barriers	As Indicated By.....	And Overcome through.....
“Us vs. Them” Mentality	<p>Program stakeholders disinterested in engaging in research/evaluation process</p> <p>Research staff disinterested in the programmatic or on-the-ground points of view</p>	<p>Program leaders modeling their commitment to the research process</p> <p>Research staff including program stakeholders in meaningful roles through all phases of study</p>
Conflicts and Confusion over Values, Roles, and Responsibilities	<p>Program stakeholders feeling insulted by having to “prove” what they’re doing is effective; also concerned that “the science” may not be sensitive enough to uncover what they experience as success in their day to day practices</p> <p>Research staff minimizing the value of the practitioner’s service delivery experience or failing to include qualitative process data in their study design</p> <p>Program stakeholders feeling overwhelmed by study demands (esp. data collection)</p> <p>Research staff worrying that program stakeholder study efforts are inconsistent and might jeopardize study outcomes</p>	<p>Strong programmatic leadership to discuss the study in advance with front-line staff and address this value question up front</p> <p>Research staff discussing the purpose and values of conducting the study up front with program staff before the study begins</p> <p>Program leadership assessing impact of study on existing workload demands before study starts</p> <p>Research staff working with program leadership before the study begins to map out study demands and roles, especially with regard to data collection, which is often the most time-consuming and critical piece of any study</p>
The Whistleblower Effect	<p>Program stakeholders worried the study findings will be used to evaluate their own performance as employees</p> <p>Research staff concerned there might be backlash if the study produces unpopular or negative findings</p>	<p>Program leadership taking the initiative to discuss the purpose of the study with staff before the study starts to allay staff fears and answer any questions</p> <p>Research staff working with program leadership to develop agreements in advance regarding reporting of findings editing processes , and designation of final authority on the study’s findings</p>

<sup>6</sup> This table was created and presented at the National Conference on Juvenile and Family Law in March, 2010 by Patricia E. Campie, Ph.D., Director of the National Center for Juvenile Justice.



## AN EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP: THE BALTIMORE CITY MODEL COURT AND THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

In 1995, the Permanency Planning for Children Department (PPCD) of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) laid the foundation for best practices in child abuse and neglect court processing with the publication of the *RESOURCE GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse & Neglect Cases*.<sup>7</sup> With funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the NCJFCJ began disseminating the best practices outlined in the *RESOURCE GUIDELINES* and working toward system reform through the Victims Act Model Courts project.

Baltimore City's Juvenile Court became a Model Court in 2005. The Model Court was charged to collaborate with stakeholders to implement best practices to achieve timely and safe permanency for children in dependency cases. A number of key stakeholders were invited to serve on the Model Court Executive Team that would lead the process for system change. An alumnus of the University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work, who worked closely with the Baltimore Juvenile Court, made the initial connection between the school and the judiciary, introducing Assistant Professor Corey Shdaimah, who joined the Model Court Executive Team.

When Professor Shdaimah joined the team, the Baltimore City Model Court had already formulated year one goals to develop a mission statement, develop and implement a one family, one master docketing system and to identify and eliminate the termination of parental rights backlog. Professor Shdaimah participated in the Executive Team for nearly a year, gaining a better understanding of the Model Court practices and evaluation priorities through ongoing communication and sharing of the court's mission and goals.

The court implemented new programs, protocols, initiatives, directives, forms, and guidelines, but there was no plan for evaluation. The Model Court team identified a need for evaluation of their year one goals and Professor Shdaimah offered her expertise and resources to meet this

<sup>7</sup>National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (1995). *RESOURCE GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases*. Reno, NV: NCJFCJ.



need. Although there was no funding for evaluation, Professor Shdaimah was able to create a class called Court-Based Evaluation Research. *This course provided students with skills and opportunities, while simultaneously providing the Model Court team with modest but meaningful evaluation research products.* The Model Court team had already set the proper foundation by collecting data that the students used to learn how to conduct evaluation in a real world setting working closely with the Model Court team.

After designing a set of tools to evaluate the Court's initiatives, Professor Shdaimah submitted an IRB application to the University of Maryland, Baltimore, which was approved. She learned that the child welfare agency also required approval before beginning research and she was able to gain approval from them as well. So far, research activities have included quantitative data analysis, survey development and implementation, and qualitative interviews, focus groups, and evaluation. As a final product for the course, the students generated a report of findings with a two-page executive summary. Professor Shdaimah shared these reports with both the court and the NCJFCJ.

After the first year of Professor Shdaimah's course, the PPCD became involved with the project. Researchers from the PPCD learned of the collaborative partnership and set up a conference call between the Model Court Lead Judge and Professor Shdaimah to discuss ongoing Model Court evaluation efforts. The resulting collaboration allowed the PPCD research team to share expertise and expand the purview of the evaluation efforts to include new methodologies, allowing for a more in-depth quantitative look at court programs. The collaboration continues to grow and develop with all parties maintaining contact and working toward achieving common goals to improve outcomes for families and children.



This partnership has all the features of an effective judicial/academic partnership. It:

- Benefits all parties
  - The Model Court gets a report of findings to use in system change efforts.
  - Professor Shdaimah trains students and writes up findings for submission to academic journals.
  - The PPCD can use the knowledge to inform the Model Courts project as a whole.
- Has clearly defined relationship expectations
  - Communication among all parties.
  - Each party has clearly articulated roles.
- Is focused on achieving a common goal
  - All partners have the same goal of working together to improve the juvenile dependency court system.

## CONCLUSION

Evaluation is a central component of system reform efforts. Implementing new programs and practices is impractical unless there is a means to assess the implementation progress and effectiveness. Without evaluation, there is no way to determine if change efforts are successful. Despite this, judges often lack the necessary resources and expertise to implement evaluations. Partnering with an academic researcher is an excellent way to leverage resources for evaluation. This partnership provides a synergistic relationship resulting in collaborative efforts that are greater than the sum of the unique knowledge and experience that each partner brings. This relationship is mutually beneficial, providing the judiciary with research expertise and resources and the researcher with unique access to previously unattainable data. The end results of such collaborations can be modest or substantial, depending on the available resources and expertise of the parties involved. No matter how sizable the resulting evaluation may be, it has the potential to provide meaningful data to the court which can inform ongoing system change efforts, making this partnership an invaluable asset.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Publications

- ❖ For building a collaborative - *Building a Better Collaboration: Facilitating Change in the Court and Child Welfare System*

This publication provides an excellent overview of components critical to effective change and discusses in depth, practical concrete strategies to enhance the effectiveness of collaborative groups.

**Reference:** Dobbin, S.A., Gatowski, S.I., & Maxwell, D.M. (2004). Building a Better Collaboration: Facilitating Change in the Court and Child Welfare System. *Technical Assistance Bulletin*, Vol. VIII, No. 2. National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

- ❖ For Program Evaluation - *Thinking about Program Evaluation: What is it and Why Should You Do It?*

This publication provides basic tools necessary to plan and conduct an effective program evaluation.

**Reference:** Gatowski, S.I., & Dobbin, S.A. (1998). Thinking about Program Evaluation: What is it and Why Should You Do It? *Technical Assistance Bulletin*, Vol. II, No. 4. National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

### Technical Assistance

For further information or assistance with forming judicial-academic partnerships, please contact the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' Permanency Planning for Children Department's research team. Contact information for research team members is available on the National Council's website at <http://www.ncjfcj.org/content/blogcategory/278/537/>.

