

Evaluation of the Physical Activity Alliance of Northern British Columbia Community-University Partnership Report

Baseline Evaluation Report



Report prepared by:

Davina Banner, Katie Cornish, & Jihanne Dumo

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Executive Summary

Overview

The aim of this evaluation is to determine the effectiveness of the partnership within the *Physical Activity Alliance of Northern BC (PAANBC)*, a network of academic institutions, policymakers, multi-sector partner organizations, and communities. To achieve this, we are conducting an evaluation of the Alliance partnership approach at three time points over the course of the study in order to determine the impact and outcomes for researchers and partner organizations. In this report, the outcomes of the baseline evaluation are presented.

Methods

To conduct our evaluation, we will undertake documentary analysis, descriptive surveys, and qualitative interviews/focus groups to examine partnership expectations, team goals, and partnership cohesion and impact. At baseline, we have distributed a survey with items adapted from the collaborative partnership indicators (Kothari & Armstrong, 2011) and the Member Involvement in Physical Activity Coalitions survey (Bornstein et al., 2015). All participants were required to provide informed consent. Data were aggregated and analyzed descriptively.

Findings

A total of 19 survey responses were received at baseline. Of the participants, the majority were aged between 35-54 years (n=9) and identified as women (n = 12). Most respondents were representatives of a community organization (n=13), while others identified as researchers (n=4), trainee (n=1) or community member (n=1).

When asked about the types of initiatives the Alliance should be engaged in, participants reported identifying community needs (87.50%; n=14), expanding partnerships (81.25%; n=13), advocacy to promote active living (75%; n=12), and changes to/formation of policy (75%; n=12). When asked about their engagement in the Alliance, the majority felt that their engagement aligned strongly with their personal interests and that the Alliance would help them strengthen their existing connections and partnerships. Potential barriers to collaboration and partnerships included a lack of time, competing demands, and inflexible schedules.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Five recommendations for the PAANBC emerged from the baseline evaluation that will help inform partnership planning over the coming years. These include: 1) Work to identify and respond to community needs; 2) Build and expand partnership with organizations across BC; 3) Support robust collaborations with physical activity organizations across northern BC; 4) Establish clear lines of communication and support participation in diverse ways; and 5) Mitigate and remove barriers to participants.

Evaluation of the Physical Activity Alliance of Northern British Columbia

Community-University Partnership Report - Baseline

BACKGROUND

Research partnerships, broadly including community-based participatory research and integrated knowledge translation, are becoming increasingly common as a strategy to support knowledge mobilization. Research partnership approaches can emerge as formalized research networks or for shorter-term individual projects and/or involve co-creation of knowledge products. Proposed benefits of research partnerships for both researchers and stakeholders include higher quality research, increased knowledge user (stakeholder) capacity and knowledge, and system change or action (Hoekstra et al., 2020).

Despite increasing popularity among researchers and funding organizations, the formation of partnerships and the process of working collaboratively across sectors is not well understood (Zych et al., 2020). Research partnership formation and processes are complex and take a considerable amount of time to establish required trust, respect, and role clarity (Zych et al., 2020). Much of the prior research partnership literature include a retrospective evaluation of partnerships or collaborative research processes; there is an identified need for prospective planned evaluation of the development, implementation, and outcomes of a particular research partnership or network. Because of the heterogeneity of research partnerships, studying different partnerships with various goals, in different geographical settings, and different knowledge user team members will help advance the science of research partnerships.

The Physical Activity Alliance of Northern BC (PAANBC)

Rural communities face substantial inequities in access to physical activity opportunities and effective physical activity promotion. Urban-focused physical activity promotion or policies (e.g., being active in a gym, competitions to encourage active transport) are ineffective for rural communities because they do not resonate with the values of or opportunities available to rural residents. There is a large gap in context-specific knowledge and strategies to support active living in rural areas. The lack of context-specific knowledge products, infrastructure, and human resources can challenge the efforts of community-based organizations to mobilize support and strategies to promote active living (Nykiforuk et al., 2018). These resource-based limitations amplify inequities that arise from geographic distance and disable the communication pathways needed for knowledge mobilization and collaboration. Policy to action gaps for rural communities have accelerated the need for initiatives to build capacity, strengthen partnerships, and support wellbeing.

Northern British Columbia (BC) is a region covering more than two-thirds the geographic land mass of the province with roughly 7% of the provincial population. Due to the vast area, there are challenges associated with specific barriers to physical activity, a lack of tailored strategies to promote active living, and limited knowledge mobilization due to geographical remoteness and distance from urban centres. Based on our prior community engagement events (Pelletier et al., 2019), community members and knowledge users in northern BC identified the need for a formalized partnership to share resources, information, and disseminate contextually relevant physical activity information. To incorporate the unique characteristics of rural communities into physical activity policy, promotion, and research, we must partner with community members and organizations who are the experts on their context and needs. A partnered approach to the development and mobilization of strategies will increase the likelihood of adoption by allowing two-way sharing of knowledge, consideration of social context, and centering the voice of communities (Abma et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2020).

The aim of this evaluation is to determine the effectiveness of our partnership, the *Physical Activity Alliance of Northern BC (PAANBC)*, as a network of academic institutions, policymakers, multi-sector partner organizations, and communities. We will conduct an evaluation of our research network as a partnership approach to determine the impact and outcomes for researchers and partner organizations across the lifespan of the project. In this report, the outcomes of the baseline evaluation are presented.

METHODS

The Physical Activity Alliance of Northern BC is funded by a 3-year partnership development grant by SSHRC. The overall aim of this partnership is the development and mobilization of physical activity strategies across rural and northern British Columbia, Canada. The advisory group is the group that steers the partnership activities. It is composed of community partner and health service organizations, researchers, and trainees. The evaluation of the partnership will span from conception to end and will include multiple data points to capture the formation, work of, and sustainability of the partnership. The goal of the evaluation is to determine partnership goals, expectations, and potential barriers and facilitators for partnership engagement. Data will be collected across the project through anonymous online surveys, individual interviews and/or focus groups, and documentary analysis.

Evaluation Goals

The goals of our evaluation are to:

1. Conduct baseline, midpoint, and end of grant surveys with advisory group members to determine partnership expectations and goals, and to examine the basic demographic characteristics of partners;
2. Undertake Interviews and/or focus groups at mid and end point to evaluate partnership development, cohesion, and impact;

3. Track basic engagement indicators (e.g., meeting minutes, logs) over the course of the partnership to determine effective engagement strategies.

Evaluation Plan

The evaluation will be undertaken at three points over the course of the study (baseline, mid-point, and end of grant) and will include an amalgamation of quantitative and qualitative components. An overview of the evaluation approaches by stage is presented below:

Baseline Evaluation (Winter/Spring 2022)

The baseline online survey will include items adapted from the collaborative partnership indicators (Kothari & Armstrong, 2011) and the Member Involvement in Physical Activity Coalitions survey (Bornstein et al., 2015). Open ended questions will be included so participants can identify their specific needs related to the work of the partnership. Findings will be organized by identified role of participant (e.g., researcher, community organization), aggregated, and shared with the project director and advisory group as iterative feedback to support partnership activities in the early stages of the project. Data will be analyzed descriptively.

Midterm Evaluation (Winter/Spring 2023)

The goal of the midterm evaluation is to understand the evolution of partnership, progress toward goals, barriers and facilitators to partnership engagement, and identify aspects that are working or need revision through iterative partnership development. We also aim to identify partnership cohesion over time, and to examine alliance progress to date (e.g., track key deliverables). The mid-project data collection will include: (1) online survey, (2) focus groups and/or individual interviews, and (3) documentary analysis. Mid-project data collection will occur approximately 12 months after the baseline survey (estimated April 2023). Survey data will be analyzed descriptively, while interview, focus group, and documentary data will be analyzed thematically.

End of Grant (Spring 2024)

The end of project evaluation of the research partnership will be similar to the mid-point evaluation and will include: (1) The online survey will be similar to the mid-project survey and adapted to reflect the experiences of the partnership. The goal of this survey will be to understand the evolution of the partnership, progress toward goals, quality of partnership, communication between members to support iterative partnership development. Data will be analyzed descriptively and aggregated. (2) Advisory group members will also be invited to join a focus group and/or individual interview. Focus groups will be mixed groups of different members of the research partnership and will last approximately 90min. Individual interviews will be offered for those unable to attend the focus group or who would prefer a one-on-one setting. Survey data will be analyzed descriptively, while interview, focus group, and documentary data will be analyzed thematically.

FINDINGS OF BASELINE EVALUATION

The baseline survey was administered by email in February and April 2022. Prospective participants received two email reminders. A total of 19 responses were received and were included in the analysis. Of the participants, the majority were aged between 35-54 years (n=9) and identified as a woman (n = 12), and Caucasian (n=12). Most respondents were representatives of a community organization (n=13) and were working within a non-profit organization (n=9), while others were researchers (n=4), trainees (n=1), or were a community member (n=1). When asked about their role, of the 16 who responded, the majority identified as employees of their organization (n=10), while others identified as managers (n=5) or volunteers (n=1) with an average of 7.2 years of service within their organization.

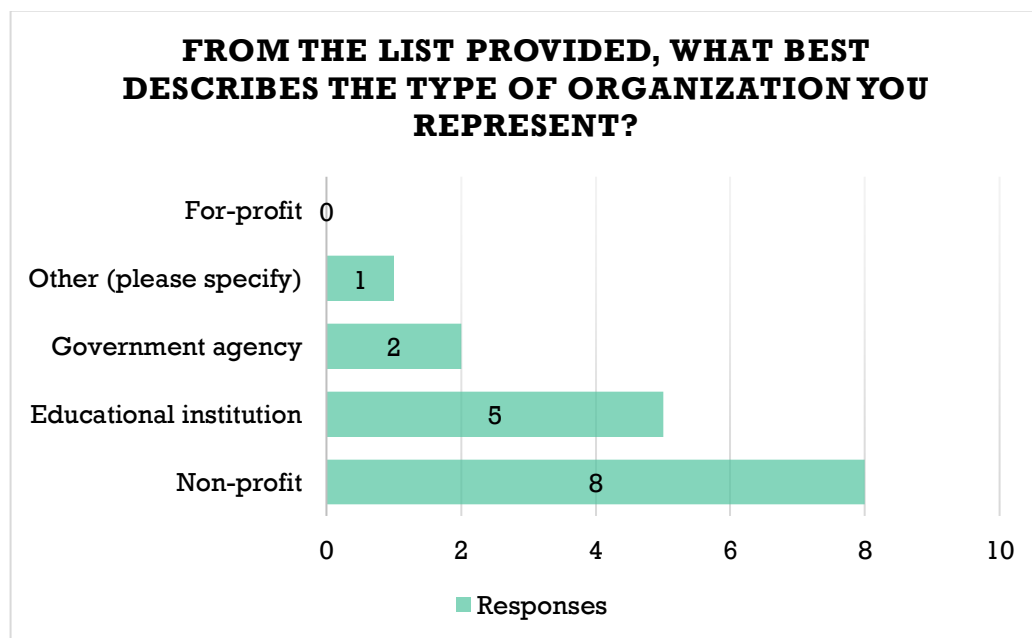


Figure 1: Respondent's organization type

Establishing and Expanding Partnerships

Respondents were asked to explore opportunities for establishing and expanding partnerships as part of the Alliance. A wide range of potential organizational partners and settings were identified, with parks and recreation (100%; n=16), public health (87.5%; n=14), and schools (87.5%; n=14) being the most often identified.

What types of organizations and settings do you think this Alliance should work with? (Mark all that apply)

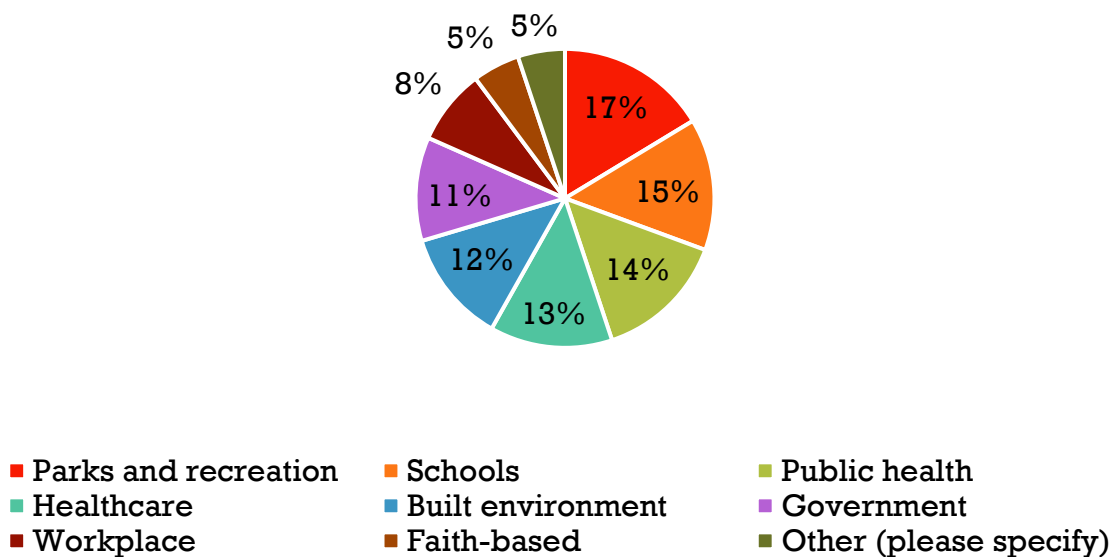


Figure 2: Respondent’s preferences for organizational partnership

When asked about the types of initiatives the Alliance should be engaged in, participants reported that identifying community needs (87.50%; n=14), expanding network partnerships (81.25%; n=13), advocacy to promote active living (75%; n=12), and changes to/formation of policy (75%; n=12).

When asked about their engagement in the Alliance, the majority felt that their engagement aligned strongly with their personal interests and that the Alliance would help them strengthen their existing connections and partnerships. One participant commented: *“This is a great example of an integrated knowledge translation approach to conducting research in partnership.”*

Barriers and facilitators of collaboration and partnership

The respondents were asked to identify potential barriers to collaboration and partnerships. of the 13 open ended responses, eight identified that time was a key barrier to engagement, with participants noting that competing demands and inflexible schedules may make regular participation challenging. For example, one respondent commented: *“The pragmatic issues/barriers of time and resources, which are not specific to this project, but are always a risk to participating in projects/initiatives such as this.”*

When asked about strategies that could help support their engagement within the Alliance, many respondents commented that ensuring partners value each other's contributions, having clear and ongoing communication, and that all partners are contributing to the development of project objectives were most important. In addition, having clearly articulated roles and responsibilities, along with strategies to support ongoing communication (e.g., access to meeting minutes and the ability to provide input via email) was seen as important in fostering effective partnerships. For one respondent, the opportunity to meet in person was seen as an important partnership facilitator: *“In-person events when and if possible, would help build more rapport with the alliance.”*

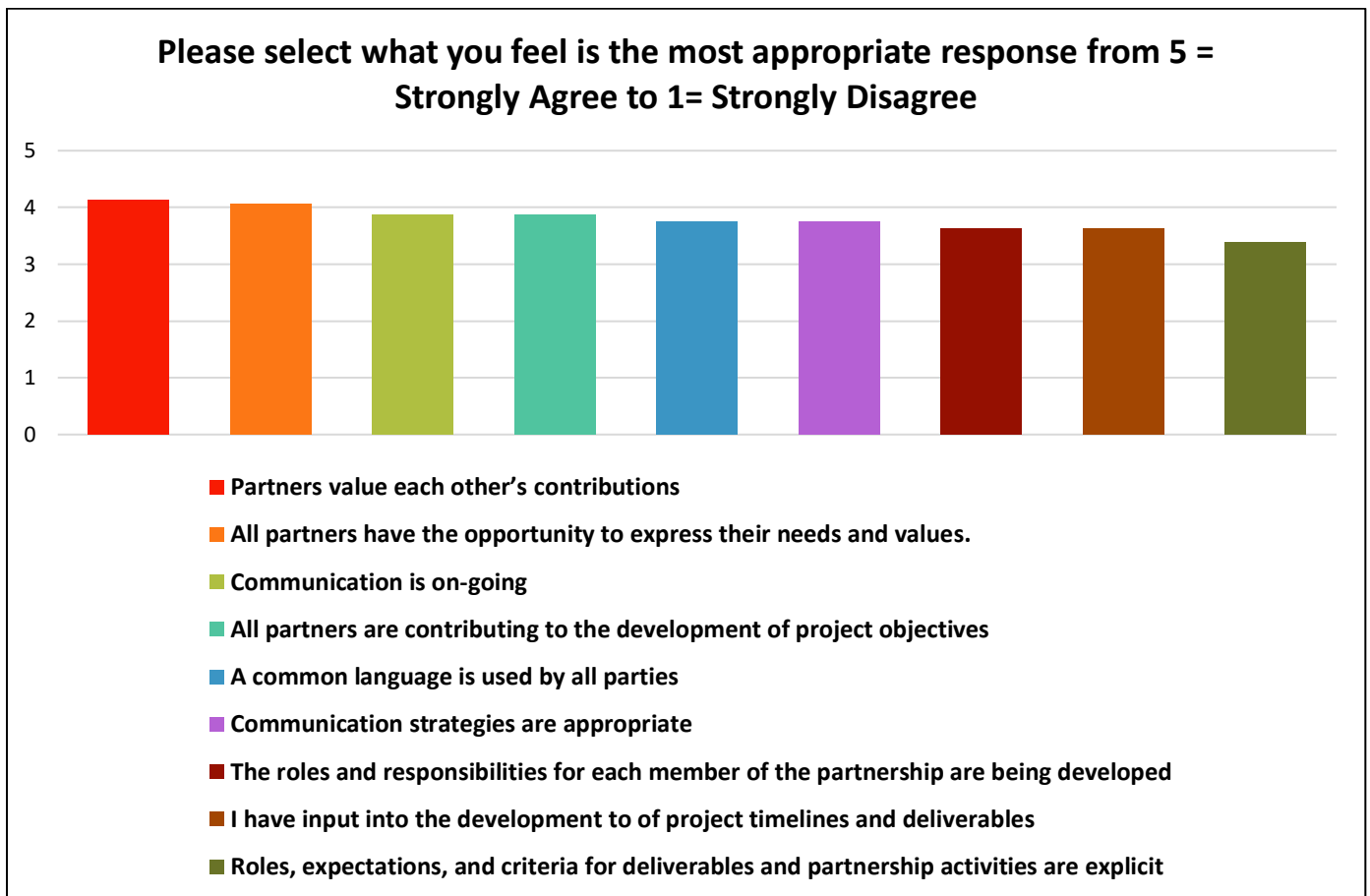


Figure 3: High degree of agreement across the aforementioned statements

Future Hopes

Throughout the survey, respondents were provided the opportunity to add comments related to the development of the Alliance partnerships. Overwhelming, respondents commented about their hopes for the future and the opportunities that they saw as resulting from these collaborations and partnerships. For some respondents, a key desire was the potential to develop and enhance the availability of physical activity programs across the northern BC regions. Respondents commented that *“there should be a physical fitness promotion campaign*

ongoing to encourage everyone to stay active,” and that there was a need for the *“removal of more barriers in the north to access opportunities.”* Finally, one respondent reflected on the potential to help develop assets, commenting:

“We hope to see the development of a process that works to engage Northern rural and remote communities and that results in increased community-relevant PA opportunities and programs. We hope to learn about the issues and assets that shape health promotion in Northern BC and we hope to make stronger connections with the other organizations in the Alliance and in Northern BC”

For other respondents, the Alliance was seen as supplying valuable opportunities that could support the development and growth of networks across northern BC. For example, one respondent commented on the potential to *“strengthen relationships and partnerships across the north”*, while another reported:

“I hope my organization will build a broader network of connections and partners, which will increase information and resource sharing, create more opportunities for participation in regional activities by our members, and will develop new partnerships focussed on increasing access to and inclusion and participation in physical activity by our members (and everyone) in the north”

EVALUATION OF THE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ALLIANCE OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

Recommendations from the baseline evaluation



Work to identify and respond to community needs within northern BC and establish the inclusion of partners and organizations with diverse perspectives and experiences.



Continue to build and expand partnerships with organizations across northern BC that can strengthen the mission and reach of the Alliance.



Support the growth of robust collaborations and connections with physical activity organizations and stakeholders across northern BC.



Continue to establish clear lines of communication, including access to shared information, providing sufficient time for partners to review and provide input on materials, and fostering opportunities for partners to contribute in multiple ways.



Work to mitigate or remove barriers to participation where possible.



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