Author's response to reviews

Title: The Critical Elements of Effective Academic-Practice Partnerships: A Framework Derived from a Case Study of the Launch Year of the Department of Veterans Affairs Nursing Academy

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Dear BMC Nursing Editor:

We are pleased to receive the favorable comments regarding our manuscript, "The Critical Elements of Effective Academic Practice Partnerships: A Framework Derived from the Launch Year of the Department of Veterans Affairs Nursing Academy," and thank you for the opportunity to make revisions and to resubmit our improved manuscript for your further consideration. Below, we address each of the reviewers' concerns individually and note where changes were made in the manuscript as a result.

"... it appears you are looking at factors influencing success, and the factors identified are also the criteria for success? Example is increase in students as goal, and also as influencing factors? Doesn’t make sense; please clarify use of outputs as influencing factors."

During our evaluation, we witnessed a wide variation of partnership experiences within their start-up year and were able to discern emergent patterns that we ascertained were worth reporting as possible indicators of reasonable progress, or the lack of, being made toward reaching VANA's goals in the ensuing years left in the pilot. Success as we defined it for this study was defined as "successful launch." A successful launch was intended to be a somewhat speculative proxy of having reached early milestones on a partnership's journey through a multiyear, goal-driven funding period. Our hope was that lessons learned from this assessment would be valuable for future overseers of such enterprises to forecast where barriers to reasonable progress may lie and to intervene accordingly.

However, we can easily understand how the reviewer saw our use of the term 'success' as presenting a circular argument; although, the purpose for this study, as we clearly state on page 3, was to evaluate progress made within the first year towards reaching the ultimate goals of the VANA program (e.g., increasing number of students), vis-à-vis 'success.' On the bottom of page 18, we actually highlight the difference in 'launch success' versus 'program success' ("The indicators of relative success of a partnership in a particular domain are based on our actual observations and not necessarily indicators of ultimate success in the latter stage of partnership development.") as the measurement of the latter was clearly outside the scope of this study.

We would also like to stress that this was not a quantitative assessment so the logic of a linear effect (i.e., "factors influencing success") is not being tested here, as much as being proposed, a common approach used in evaluation methodology. To promote clarity, we have added a clarifying footnote on page 3, bottom and emphasis on page 18, last paragraph to highlight the differences discussed here.

"... was the goal to increase faculty by 5FTE for every 20 new students? Seems very high—perhaps clarify?"

This was indeed the case, although ratios were even higher in some funding years. The apparent extravagance of said ratios was intended to be a strong motivation for launching the pilot programs in a time-efficient manner. While undeniably successful in doing so, supporting such ratios in the long term was obviously not possible. VANA, as well as VANAP — VANA's successor, funds were always intended to be a seeding venture that would kick-start longer term relationships involving more sustainable funding models. The ratios are discussed in greater detail in the Bowman article.
Much of what has been reported in the published domain appears to rely on anecdotal evidence (i.e., not derived through rigorous methods) or were presented as scholarly ‘thought’ pieces. Reported evidence that was empirically derived was based on much smaller programs. Therefore, as we discuss in our manuscript, the true value of reporting VANA findings is to affirm what is found in the existing literature on academic-service partnership articles albeit it does add to the existing body of knowledge in the field, especially specific to the VA.”

We heartily agree that these are interesting questions and would have been important to investigate. However, there are several reasons why cost information is not included in this manuscript. First, the evaluation team was not tasked by the VA Office of Academic Affiliations, the funders of the VANA program as well as the Evaluation, to investigate cost issues. Some program costs have been analyzed internally by others but those analyses were not conducted with a view to extrapolating outside VA, as they would not be meaningful. Second, large multi-year studies such as ours often spawn a number of manuscripts that cover multiple dimensions of the programs that are evaluated. The scope of this particular paper, as stated on the bottom of page 3, was strictly limited to describing patterns of progress observed in the formative phases of these partnerships towards illuminating possible effects on a partnership’s trajectory in the following years; thus, it was not intended to be a full report on the VANA program. Lastly, VANA pilot partnerships were given quite a bit of latitude in creating and implementing their own specific programs so conducting a publishable cost analysis of the overall VANA program would have been prohibitive given the unique circumstances of each partnership. These variations were further complicated by the dramatic events that occurred in the national economy during the pilot and the resulting impacts that varied widely by locality.

As a footnote, VA obviously has been convinced of the return on its investment in the VANA partnerships as it has invested in a follow-on program called VA Nursing Academic Partnerships, or VANAP, which provides support for another 18 partnerships. Information regarding VANAP can...
How many graduates were retained in the VA system as a result of this initiative? Of the graduates retained, did they fare better than other new graduates who were not part of the VANA project?”

As discussed previously, we would like to emphasize that this study was a formative, not summative, evaluation and therefore did not include the analysis of program outcomes, as noted above in discussion of outputs versus outcomes. The programmatic outcomes discussed on page 2, last paragraph were included to be informative about what the full scope of the VANA pilot entailed.

As a point of interest, we would like to note the difficulties we encountered in later analyses of the particular outcome mentioned by the reviewer. Consequences of the economic downturn that occurred during the VANA pilot were inconveniently realized in changes made to hiring policies across the VA system at that time. As a result, the numbers of VANA graduates hired into VA became a rather confusing metric and was thus abandoned for the pilot evaluation. We have updated some of the language on page 15, paragraph 2 to emphasize the problem. It is rather timely to note the possible changes to those hiring policies that are just now being considered at the national level. We have included a brief discussion of these very recent events on pages 17-18.

“It would be nice to have a section that speaks to the other unanswered questions, such as...

- “… how the partners came together to achieve mutual goals through complementary elements…”

We did indeed observe that certain features of partnership formation were essential to achieve a successful launch, per the logic model inputs described on pages 13-15 under ‘Initial Program Inputs and Environmental Context’. Beyond the information already included in this manuscript, we note that a more in-depth discussion of the complementary elements of the partnering institutions is explored in an earlier paper, Bowman et al. (2011).

- “… replicability of the model in non-VA settings and the sustainability of the model without grant funding…”; “… governance structure that kept the partnership going and how the partnership would be managed on an ongoing basis…”

We agree with the reviewer that these are important questions, but believe that these questions were not within the scope of this formative evaluation (see page 3, bottom). This formative evaluation is not intended to be a full and final report on the VANA program. We would like to note that these questions, as well as others, are addressed in a qualitative analysis of stakeholder reflections on pilot participation; a report from this analysis is pending.
We hope that these explanations and amendments sufficiently satisfy the reviewers’ concerns. I look forward to hearing from you. Please contact me if you have further questions.

Sincerely,

Aram Dobalian