

Advancing Health Equity: Building Strong Community-Academic Partnerships in Hispanic and Latino Communities of Puerto Rico

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ABSTRACT

The Community Outreach and Engagement Core aims to improve population health, trust, and research participation among Hispanic communities in Puerto Rico (PR) by fostering Community-Academic Partnerships, establishing a Community Health Research Council (CHRC), and organizing capacity-building activities.

In 2021-2022, we focused on community forums and reviving a Practice-Based Research Network (GROW) to boost research participation and collaboration between healthcare providers and researchers.

Using a mixed-methods approach, we analyzed data from community epidemiological reports, readiness assessments, and resource capacity analyses. Guided by frameworks like the Tri-ethnic Center Model and the Delphi Technique, our forums engaged 223 participants from 51 municipalities, mostly females (79%) aged 25-67. Collaboration with the CHRC resulted in a stable group of 12-21 members who aligned research with community health needs, enhancing data, addressing care disparities, and fostering over 10 Community-Academic Partnerships. The GROW network, with over 90 collaborators, facilitated capacity-building and recruitment for studies.

These efforts highlight the importance of community engagement and collaboration in addressing health needs in Hispanic/Latino communities, emphasizing strategic partnerships and inclusive practices to align research with health priorities, enhance data, and address care disparities. Continued resource mobilization for community engagement and capacity building, with a focus on mentorship, education, and effective dissemination, is essential for promoting health equity and well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Developed within an existing infrastructure of a 10-year partnership known as the Puerto Rico Clinical and Translational Research Consortium (PRCTRC). Brings together the intellectual and physical resources of 3 academic centers of medicine and health sciences in Puerto Rico:

- UPR Medical Sciences Campus
- Universidad Central del Caribe
- Ponce Medical School Foundation / Ponce Research Institute
- Other stakeholders (e.g., hospitals, community-based, and government organizations)

The Hispanic Alliance for Clinical & Translational Research (Alliance) is a collaborative initiative between the three main health academic universities of Puerto Rico for the support of island-wide research. The Alliance's Community Core:

ESTABLISHED a Community Health and Research Council to enhance and maintain community involvement in the decision-making processes for developing research initiatives targeting community health disparities.

ORGANIZED 8 community forums to enhance and maintain community participation in research and aligning research action plans to comply with the identified priorities.

PROMOTED multi-sectorial collaborations needed to improve population health among Hispanic communities in Puerto Rico (PR) by accelerating and supporting the development of meaningful Community-Academic Partnerships (CAPs).

Members of the Alliance's leadership:

LAUNCHED the island's inaugural PBRN to forge a collaborative nexus among healthcare providers, researchers, and community stakeholders.

STRATEGIES & RESULTS

- Examine the **evolution of the collaboration and participation** of the Council members
- Formative evaluation surveys (REDCap)
- **Spanish version of the Community Engagement Survey** developed by Engage for Equity (E2): collaboration capacity, community engagement, and members' experiences.
- 18 to 23 members were invited
- **Response rate was over 39%** for each year (2020-2022)



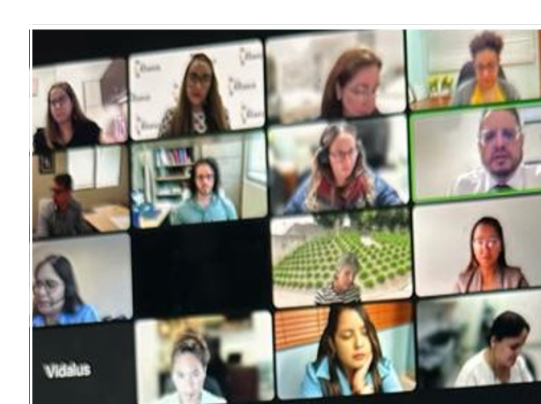
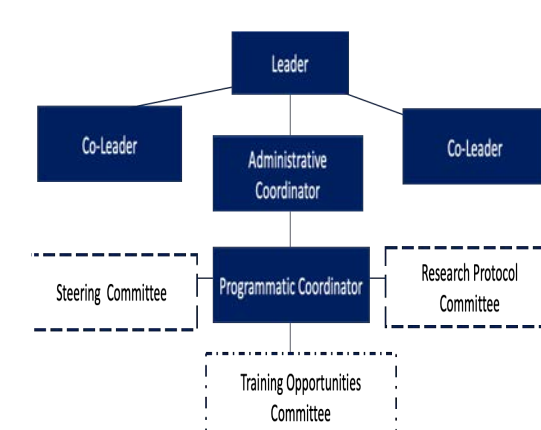
Findings emphasize the **Council's pivotal role as a platform for fostering collaboration**, driving positive change and addressing critical health disparities within the community

"Integrate wills in CREATING COMMUNITY FORUMS that allow the voices of the grassroots to be heard."

"That the findings [from the community forums] can be taken to government agencies and be considered to form part of the COUNTRY'S PUBLIC POLICY. Also, that universities take into consideration the data collected to adjust their educational programs with the intention of becoming more present in the communities."



Established in 2022, the Hispanic Practice-Based Research Network, Generating Research Opportunities Working together for Puerto Rico (**GROW PR Network**), aims to cultivate a collaborative network of healthcare providers, academic researchers, and community stakeholders to advance scientific knowledge and enhance healthcare services and outcomes. The use of **Team-based learning** helped foster stakeholder engagement in the development of collaborative research ideas from the different perspectives through a rapid idea development process.



Organizational Development: Following two years of meticulous planning, the Practice-Based Research Network (PBRN) evolved into the "Generating Research Opportunities Working together (GROW PR Network)" with a robust organizational framework.

Collaborative Growth: The network expanded significantly, boasting over 90 collaborators, including Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), hospitals, academic institutions, and nonprofit organizations

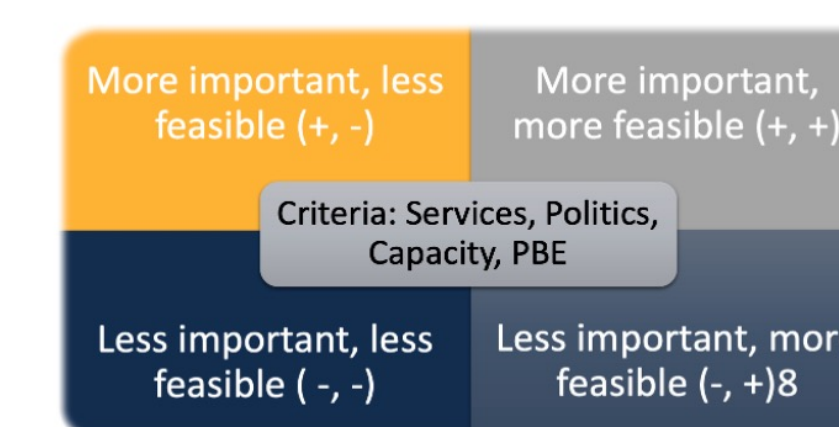
Innovative Club Creation: The establishment of an AIRE Club (Achieving Innovative Research Club) served as a central platform for fostering idea exchange and collaborative project development.

Promotion of Collaboration: The facilitation of membership meetings, site visits, and active dissemination resulted in fifteen MOU's, five research projects in development, and sharing of multiple training and research opportunities among academics, clinicians, and community stakeholder

We conducted 8 forums with 223 individuals from 51 municipalities:

- Most of the participants were females (79%; 25-67 years)
- Citizens/patients, researchers, advocates, providers, and community leaders
- Related to homelessness, trauma, gender, and/or sexual identity discrimination, isolated communities, migrants, and people with diverse functionality.

Figure 3: Prioritization Model



Alliance Leaders (80%) and Advisory Board (65%) completed the prioritization.

There is a need to **leverage resources** for community engagement & bridging capacity to stimulate research to address health needs.

Priorities:

- improve continuous data collection & sharing,
- mental health & substance use treatment & services,
- access to care & multidisciplinary health approaches, and
- reduce discrimination based on migration status, gender, or sexual orientation.



Examples of the Community Forums Calls

DISCUSSION

These efforts underscore the significance of **proactive community engagement** and collaboration in addressing the primary health needs of Hispanic/Latino communities. The strategic partnerships and inclusive practices adopted ensured that research initiatives were closely aligned with pressing health priorities, such as data enhancement and addressing care disparities.

Moving forward, the Alliance, through the CoE & GROW programs, will continue to mobilize resources for community engagement and capacity building.

Key areas of focus should include:

- **Mentorship and Education:** Providing guidance and education to community members and stakeholders to empower them to take active roles in health initiatives.
- **Effective Dissemination:** Ensuring that the findings and outcomes of research are effectively communicated to the community and other stakeholders to promote informed decision-making and policy development.

By maintaining a focus on these areas, the **Alliance can continue to promote health equity and well-being in Puerto Rican Hispanic communities**, ultimately leading to improved health outcomes and enhanced trust in research and healthcare systems.

"Seize the opportunity to engage with your community actively. By doing so, you can play a pivotal role in promoting the use of scientific insights in making crucial life decisions and inspiring our community towards innovation."

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