Abstract for Paper in Response to the UML CITA Request for Paper Submissions

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Multidisciplinary Research Team Approaches to Promoting Healthy and Safe Employment in Healthcare: Promises and Pitfalls

In late 1999, a diverse team of researchers from three University of Massachusetts Lowell colleges (Health Professions, Engineering, Arts and Sciences) began meeting to decide whether or not and how to respond to a National Institutes of Health request for proposals that address the mechanisms which result in health disparities. The RFP called for proposals to conduct multidisciplinary research that combined both quantitative and qualitative methods and analysis. The team decided to submit a proposal to study occupational injury and general health disparities among healthcare workers. This effort was viewed as a unique opportunity to enhance the UML mission to study and support sustainable regional development by demonstrating the critical importance of health and healthcare as criteria for social and economic sustainability. The proposal built upon the University’s more recent emphasis upon and success with multidisciplinary research. The proposal also built upon sets of relationships that the University had established with area healthcare provider organizations and labor unions that represent healthcare workers. The proposal was accepted, with a grant to support a research project entitled “Health Disparities Among Healthcare Workers.”

This paper discusses a set of challenges faced by this multidisciplinary research team in addressing the aims of the project. These have arisen in our efforts to:

- Share our discipline-specific theoretical backgrounds and perspectives on the research questions and data collection and analytical methods, and then working to find mutual understanding and agreement about research priorities;
- Integrate the use of different research methodologies -- both quantitative and qualitative, as applied to different aspects of the study, and in planning for a contextual/multilevel analysis;
- Establish individual as well as collective intellectual ownership of the project and its research processes; and,
- Develop protocols, communication tools and systems, and research instruments.
In discussing these topics, the paper will reflect on the opportunities and obstacles that have arisen in this process. The variance in experiences and knowledge based upon prior research, clinical practice, and service have become apparent when addressing specific issues of the research (such as the problem of “underreporting” of job related health problems) and academic processes (such as the need to define guidelines of multiple authorship).

We will present lessons that have already been learned about engaging in interdisciplinary public health research in the University’s efforts to promote sustainable regional development.

This paper addresses the following topic areas listed on the CITA Request for Papers:

- Health and Its Many Links to Sustainability
- Universities Supporting Public Health and a Healthy Economy
- The Implications of Diversity for Supporting Public Health and a Healthy Society