



UNIVERSITY of
DENVER

COLORADO EVALUATION
AND ACTION LAB

What to Expect when Working with the Colorado Lab

Motivation and Strategy

The Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) is committed to improving the lives of Colorado residents by partnering with state and local governments to strengthen coordinated and efficient person-centered services. The Colorado Lab is dedicated to building the capacity of government to be person- and family-centered by prioritizing work that addresses cross-system challenges, either among state agencies or between state and local agencies.

A key Colorado Lab strategy is to expand opportunities for government staff and academics to partner in producing actionable research. Such partnerships are difficult to establish and maintain because of the well-documented culture gap between government and academia. Government needs tend to be immediate and pragmatic while academic interests tend to be longer-term and lean toward the theoretical. Development of trust and mutual understanding require a degree of responsiveness and sustained interaction that can be difficult for both sides. Furthermore, the amount of jargon specific to each sector can make communication slow and frustrating.

The Colorado Lab seeks to generate responsive, high quality research and evaluation by breaking down the historical barriers between government staff and academics by serving as a connector, cultural decoder, and facilitator throughout a project's lifespan. Thus, Colorado Lab support increases the probability of actionable research resulting from a partnership.

Available Services

The Colorado Lab provides partnership support in the following areas, as needed and appropriate to the situation:

1. Supporting initial scoping of projects and methods
2. Ensuring the relevance, potential target audience(s), and actionability of results before a project gets underway
3. Facilitating outreach to and convening of potential stakeholders to inform research and obtain buy-in
4. Connecting government staff with academic researchers committed to the scoped project ideas
5. Facilitating development of and accountability to a partnership communications plan
6. Supporting development and registration of a rigorous analysis plan
7. Supporting the identification, integration, security, and accessibility of data appropriate for project
8. Supporting development of an external communications plan and implementing plan on schedule
9. Coauthoring research products

These services will benefit government partners who have intensive knowledge of their constituents and programs but often lack the capacity to rigorously analyze processes and programs, particularly those that involve multiple systems. They will also benefit academic researchers who are motivated to engage with government partners in applied research but are disincentivized to do so by the emphasis in academia on peer reviewed publications over partnership development and actionable findings.

The Colorado Lab's approach is designed to supplement, not supplant, existing well-functioning partnership activities between government staff and academics and to promote work that would not happen *but for* the Colorado Lab. The hope is that the Colorado Lab can model partnership behaviors that will increase the capacity of government staff and academic partners to engage in actionable research with less -- or no -- Colorado Lab support in the future.

Foundation Building

The foundation for a systematic expansion of partnership opportunities depends on understanding government research and evaluation needs. The Colorado Lab started facilitating conversations with state agency leadership about their research needs in January 2018 shortly after the Colorado Lab's founding. These conversations continue informally through the open Call for Ideas from government partners as well as formally through the research agenda-setting process within each of the Governor's Colorado Lab priority areas.

Another foundational element of successful cross system research partnerships is data access and integration. The Linked Information Network of Colorado (LINC) is a state collaborative that supports timely and cost-efficient research, evaluation, and analytics using integrated data across state agencies. LINC is designed to securely share data to a centralized linking hub in state government to produce anonymized datasets for approved end users. LINC development is partially supported by seed funds and staff commitment from the Colorado Lab.

The Colorado Lab is also expanding professional development opportunities for academic researchers interested in strengthening their partnership skills. The Colorado Lab supports researchers on Colorado Lab-funded projects with communications training from an experienced external consultant. The Colorado Lab is also offering a summer institute for early career faculty across Colorado that will be focused on designing research for action, balancing tenure expectations and applied work, planning strategic communication, and positioning research to be competitive for external funding opportunities.