Using social network analysis to evaluate changes in transdisciplinary collaboration during a Clinical and Translational Science Award

Bobbi J. Carothers  
*Washington University in St Louis*

Douglas A. Luke  
*Washington University in St Louis*

Sarah Moreland-Russell  
*Washington University in St Louis*

Cathy C. Sarli  
*Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis*

Bradley A. Evanoff  
*Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis*

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Bobbi J. Carothers1
Douglas A. Luke1
Sarah Moreland-Russell1
Cathy C. Sarli2
Bradley A. Evanoff3

1Center for Tobacco Policy Research, Washington University in St. Louis George Warren Brown School of Social Work
2Becker Medical Library, Washington University in St. Louis School of Medicine
3Division of General Medical Sciences, Washington University in St. Louis School of Medicine

BACKGROUND

Washington University in St. Louis was awarded a Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) in 2007 and consequently formed the Institute of Clinical and Translational Sciences (ICTS). One of the aims of the institute was to provide the infrastructure needed for interdisciplinary research. To evaluate success toward meeting this objective, the evaluation team utilized social network analysis to assess collaboration patterns in research productivity including grant development and publications.

RESULTS

• The average number of collaborators per member for both grants and publications increased over three years of the grant period.
• Collaboration for both grants and publications became more interdisciplinary (color indicates discipline).
• Greater collaboration is demonstrated by the increased number of links between members and fewer members working in isolation from 2007 and 2010 for both grants and publications.

Grant Networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># Members</th>
<th>Average # Collaborators</th>
<th>Inter- to Intra-disciplinary Collaboration Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>.436</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Publication Networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># Members</th>
<th>Average # Collaborators</th>
<th>Inter- to Intra-disciplinary Collaboration Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>.191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>.230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Social network analysis can provide objective indicators of collaboration necessary for demonstrating the value of a CTSA at an academic institution. In this case, an increase in total collaboration and interdisciplinary collaboration was more apparent at the grant stage than the publication stage. Given the lag time between grant submission and resulting publications, a delayed change in publication patterns is to be expected and should be more apparent at later intervals. Consistent results indicate that the ICTS aim of providing infrastructure for interdisciplinary research is being fulfilled.

METHODS

Participants

387 members who joined the institute in its first year (2007) to examine the longest period of follow-up.

Measures/Analysis

Social network analysis was used to examine collaboration between ICTS members on grants and publications. Members were linked if they worked on the same grant or were authors on the same paper for a single year. A collaboration was considered interdisciplinary if both members were from the same discipline, and considered interdisciplinary if they were from different disciplines.

Collaboration activity from 2007 (before the award) was compared with 2010 patterns.

Hypothesis: Both overall and interdisciplinary collaborations were expected to increase over time.