

Community Partners Strengthen TREE Center Pilot Grant Reviews

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Since 2017, the TREE Center has had the privilege of providing one-year pilot research grants totaling nearly \$450,000 to 11 early career investigators at the University of New Mexico. These projects partner with diverse communities to address mental and behavioral health disparities in New Mexico.

The Center's Investigator Development Core (IDC) leads this effort in collaboration with the Community Engagement and Dissemination Core (CEDC) and the Administrative Core. Researchers submit applications based on a community-informed request for application with a listing of behavioral health priorities (e.g., adverse childhood events, suicide, depression). Each application undergoes a rigorous review process that takes considerable time and effort, but results in the selection of high-quality, multi-level community engaged research projects for funding.

Beginning in 2018, at the suggestion of the CEDC and with the support of our National Institutes of Health program officer, 4 community partners were invited to participate as members of the Research Proposal Review Committee. Their participation greatly enhanced the review process and it provided a voice at the review table on community engagement and research design. Community partners identified potential challenges, highlighted well-developed community-academic partnerships, and questioned timelines and budgets. Their viewpoints led to improved decision-making and insightful reviewer comments, which inevitably improved the proposals.

Community members also shared that participating on the review committee was a positive experience for them. They enjoyed being part of the process and learned about expectations for research proposals and were glad to have played a role in selecting which research projects to recommend for funding. One community reviewer commented that, *"it was a great learning experience...it is important for community members to participate in this process so that they can learn what goes into a grant review and also provide insight from community members on proposals specific to their community or population."*

As the TREE Center works to advance mental and behavioral health in New Mexico through rigorous, timely research, it is critical to have the voices of community partners at the table. Integrating community perspectives into the TREE Center pilot project review process has resulted in more informed decisions and has improved the potential impact of the TREE Center on advancing behavioral health equity.

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