LEARNING THROUGH FAILURE
Letter from the Director

Failure. We encourage our children to embrace failure the minute they begin to explore. We praise their experimentation, help them process the feelings of failure, and cheer on their problem solving. Somewhere along the journey to adulthood we lose that permission to fail but instinctually we know there is a wealth of learning and growth from failure.

This year our annual report is focused on “Learning Through Failure”. CUP grounds its work in a CBPR approach as we engage in many complex partnerships and projects. The very nature of our work means we need to be open to not knowing exactly how an action or decision will turn out. We can plan, discuss, and anticipate as much as possible but there are times when things don’t always turn out as we expect, when challenges result in smashing success, or when the plan simply doesn’t work. There are times when we simply fail. Failure can be associated with blame or it can be associated with exploration and growth. When we fail we need to create opportunities for reflecting, learning, and growing within our teams, partnerships,

and projects. These are essential steps in praising experimentation, in processing the failure, and problem solving our way forward.

Over the past few years, we have identified our failures organizationally, dissected the learning from these failures, and in turn developed new dimensions and depth to our work with our partners. Our Directors and Steering Committee identified our failure to impact public policy through some key projects. Triaging this failure has led to new staff, skill development, and a purposeful public policy lens in our work. For years we have supported partner organizations to conduct evaluations for their programming yet we failed to embark on that process ourselves. This organizational failure has led to an embedded annual cycle of reflective practice amongst our teams, partners, and our broader network.

The stories in our report this year allow us to not just identify failures we have experienced in our work but also to talk about why the failure matters, what was learned, and what is changing as a result. Our intent is to enhance our ability to analyze and learn through our failures - while they’re happening - not just from them when they are in full view. Thank you to all CUP’s staff, students, faculty, Steering Committee members, and partners who share their stories of failure in this report. Oh the places we’ll go!

Karen Edwards
Director
Michael Jordan, arguably one of the greatest basketball players ever, puts it this way:

“I have missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. 26 times I have been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

We’re not yet as prolific as Jordan but, at CUP, we have experienced failure. On more than one occasion we have failed on really important grant applications. In some projects, we failed to achieve essential participant recruitment targets. In others, we failed to translate our results into meaningful policy changes.

In each case we try to move quickly beyond disappointment and fault. Instead, CUP is committed to using failure as a space for reflecting, learning and growing. The Steering Committee plays an important role in supporting our teams and partners through this transition. Our members bring their experience and insights to the conversations to help frame and triage our failures into a meaningful narrative that can be usefully shared. Our goal is to contribute to community learning and enhance CUP’s ability to learn through our failures in real time—rather than only after the fact.

By sharing our failures more freely and with a wider audience we hope to encourage us all to own our failures ... so we can all learn from them.

Thomas A. Edison has a different take on failure:

“I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

Although not in the same league as Edison, we’re trying to ensure that we keep finding different ways. Finding the same way that doesn’t work, over and over again, is not learning and growing.

AUTHORS: DR. JEFF BISANZ & MARTIN GARBER-CONRAD (STEERING COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS)
Stepping into the unknown: willingness to take a chance

It is difficult for an organization to find courage and say, “we are not sure how exactly this decision will turn out, but we are willing to try.” It is especially challenging when the decision is an organizational precedent, founded in the sense of ethical obligation, but guided only by theoretical knowledge and the rare experience of others. The excitement of trying something new and challenging can swiftly alternate with the fear of failure and personal and organizational disappointment.

In the spring of 2018, the Women and Children Health Research Institute (WCHRI) elected to engage non-academic reviewers for the CRISP (Clinical/Community Research Integration and Support Program) research grant process as an addition to conventional peer review. Dedicated to funding research that could directly impact the needs of patients, practitioners and community members, it is hoped that engaging community members with professional and personal experience and a keen interest in women and/or children’s health as reviewers will contribute to achieving that goal.

The following months were spent searching for appropriate candidates through existing community networks; learning about their interests and life experiences; explaining WCHRI’s mandate; describing the role and the task of research grant reviewers, and understanding how this opportunity could be mutually beneficial. These conversations deliberately ended on the same note directed to the candidate: “WCHRI is trying something new. It is an experiment and a learning opportunity for all involved. Are you willing to take a chance?” Remarkably, everybody was in agreement, confirming that the motivation to engage the community in research grant review is well-intentioned, the decision to act on it is principled, and the plan to make it happen is feasible.

It has been heartening to receive such affirmative responses at the beginning of the new process. Yet, the actual work is yet to come. Therefore, the uncertainty remains: the fear of procedural mistakes, unintentional missteps, miscommunication or miscalculated outcomes. So in the face of uncertainty, we have the opportunity to reflect on these possible failures and translate them into learnings. Hopefully, this results in wisdom that will ultimately take us closer to the goal of effectively engaging patients, practitioners and community members in the health research that stands to benefit us all. We know there are important lessons ready to be learned.

AUTHORS: TATJANA ALVADJ & DR. LORIN CHARLETON

THE CRISP PROGRAM IS FUNDED BY THE GENEROSITY OF THE STOLLERY CHILDREN’S HOSPITAL FOUNDATION AND SUPPORTERS OF THE LOIS HOLE HOSPITAL FOR WOMEN THROUGH THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN’S HEALTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE.
Dancing with failure: Constituting meaning(fulness) in evaluation

Presented here is not so much a clear-cut failure as an ongoing struggle that presents the possibility of failure in every conversation navigated, every capacity building opportunity developed, and every evaluation completed through the Evaluation Capacity Network. This failure-prone journey is centered on what constitutes meaningful evaluation, in what context, and for whom.

It had seemed fairly straightforward, the goal of developing a network that could collectively advance meaningful evaluation through dialogue and educational opportunities. Straightforward, at least, until you consider that evaluation itself is in a constant state of transition, in which newer forms of evaluation arise to challenge conventional forms of evaluation. It is also highly political, creating a push-and-pull between the old and new, and between seemingly dichotomous definitions of meaningful-ness.

In this space there are a number of tensions; one between more accessible evaluation that can be used as a learning tool by all practitioners and policy-makers, and technocratic, professionalized evaluation that requires particular expertise; another between the relational frameworks of evaluation that challenge notions of objectivity to the extent that maintaining distance is no longer the assumed role of an evaluator; and finally a tension with linearity, portrayed perfectly through the emblematic logic model, that starts to bend under the weight of the digressions and messiness inherent in evaluation.

This constantly changing evaluation landscape makes the task of advancing meaningful evaluation both exciting and more complicated than we had originally anticipated. How do we know what meaningful means in this context and who decides? Can there ever be only one story of what meaningful evaluation is and do we want there to be? With no clear answers, the Evaluation Capacity Network’s work moving forward will be in bridging the gaps between these contrasting entities to find new forms of evaluation that have meaning to wider groups of people in different contexts. In doing so, a constant dance with failure also becomes one layered with new possibilities.

AUTHORS: DR. BETHAN KINGSLEY & DR. REBECCA GOKIERT
Try, Fail, Learn, Repeat as Necessary: CUP and the Early Learning and Care Steering Committee

It would be almost fair to say that EndPovertyEdmonton’s Early Learning and Care Steering Committee (ELCSC) was set up to encounter failure from the start. The ELCSC was created in January of 2017 with the ambitious goal of designing and implementing an integrated system of early learning and care for Edmonton. Having such a system in place is one of the core elements of EndPovertyEdmonton’s plan to eliminate poverty within a generation. CUP has been working with the ELCSC since September 2017.

The problem is improving early learning and care in Edmonton isn’t clearly any one organization’s job. Even worse, defining an “integrated system of early learning and care” is no easy task—in fact, every word in that quote other than “of” and “and” has been up for debate both inside and outside the ELCSC. And it quickly became apparent that setting up that system—no matter what specific form it took—would no doubt require considerable cooperation between multiple levels of government and multiple organizations outside of government.

So the ELCSC has always had a tough road in front of it, and failing in various ways—and learning quickly from those failures—has been part of the journey. As one example, the ELCSC, in partnership with CUP, has searched for data to help understand the state of early learning and care in Edmonton, and to help guide efforts to improve it. This search has not been a rousing success, but neither was it an abject failure. We searched and searched again, and though there are bits and pieces, we haven’t been able to put together a complete picture. The simple fact is that for many reasons, there are just not enough data about early learning and care in Edmonton to fully understand it, much less to design and implement an integrated system for the city. There is a bright spot, though: now we have a much better idea of what data we are missing, and how we might get it.

Ironically, we are not done failing. In fact, CUP and the ELCSC might just be getting started. We are entering our riskiest phase yet, as we start producing public proposals for how an integrated system of early learning and care might work in Edmonton, along with proposals for what data would be needed to support and inform that system. It is not only possible, but probable, that on some points we are naïve, misinformed, or just plain wrong. But this kind of public “failure” may be just what is needed to spur on the next phase of this conversation. Stay tuned.

AUTHORS: DR. ROB BUSCHMANN & DR. JEFF BISANZ
Failure to Impact Sustainable Practice and Policy Changes: Perspectives of a Community Partner

As a grassroots community-based organization, the Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative (MCHB) has spent the past 20 years making visible the realities of immigrant, refugee and newcomer populations. MCHB strives to effect change towards responsive practices in all systems.

For 18 of those 20 years, MCHB has worked with CUP as a community partner, an intermediary between researchers and our families, and a liaison between other CUP partners and our communities.

Meaningful multi-year research studies have been pursued and salient knowledge about immigrant, refugee and newcomer children, youth and families has been generated to impact shifts in practice and policies. Yet, we continue to witness and feel helpless in the deepening of poverty and social economic marginalization of our families.

Why? Have we failed as a community partner to engender relevant and sustainable changes?

This failure matters. Twenty years of unrelenting efforts towards this end means devoted time and energy towards practice shifts have been wasted.

Perhaps, instead of asking why, we should ask ourselves what we have learned and what can we change as a result?

What we have learned as a community partner is that we don’t have adequate knowledge and understanding of the way formal systems work in bringing about and sustaining changes to practice. As “system outsiders” collaborating to effect change, we seem to lose ground easily with shifts in leadership. We also seem unable to sustain “systemic memories of change” when new priorities come into focus. We feel deep discouragement and at times pain in the failure.

In collaboration with research colleagues, we often fail to declare from the start and uphold explicit principles and ethical guidelines to ensure true egalitarian relationships that lead to deeply meaningful research for our communities.

In both types of relationships, we seem to have overlooked the fundamental fact that we are crossing deep cultural divides, necessitating “cultural brokering” in our constant liaising, to provide each side with cultural knowledge of the other and on-going mediation to minimize cultural misunderstanding and conflict. We, ourselves, need relational intermediaries to support the development of egalitarian relationships, engage in joint reflection and minimize the pain of failure to impact.

Author: Yvonne Chiu, Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative
Complex, community-based initiatives that involve children and families with complex needs and engage with multiple stakeholders can be challenging to evaluate. Unfortunately, failure can occur when assumptions are made about the evaluation and we realize too late that, because of these assumptions, we are not all on the same page. So how did we get here? Failure can elicit self-reflective questions such as this and can create powerful learning moments. Our failure unfolded over a period of time and not until it was in full view could we critically reflect on what ‘got us here’.

The failure was not monitoring our assumptions about the evaluation needs of our partners. Over the past year, we worked closely with our partners from school boards, funding agencies, and support service organizations to explore how a collaborative model of social service delivery embedded in schools could work effectively and successfully to impact the lives of children, youth, and families. Our partners wanted to inform their practice and demonstrate impacts of the initiative’s work. The evaluation produced a tremendous amount of learning about how this collaborative service delivery model works well, where there are challenges, and how the program is being received by school children and their families. We thought we had established a shared understanding of what outcomes would be measured and how findings would be reported, but we failed to fully examine these assumptions. This failure has provided the opportunity to enhance communication, revisit expectations and roles, and gain a deeper understanding of each individual partner’s needs within the evaluation. In addition, an evaluation subcommittee has been established to help us regularly examine the assumptions that we and our partners have. We want to improve the clarity of our assumptions and ensure the data being collected is meeting the needs of all partners. We all share a commitment to successful and meaningful evaluation and it is this shared commitment and willingness to work together through our failings that will continue to push this work forward.

AUTHORS: CUP EVALUATION TEAM & AIFY EVALUATION COMMITTEE
Filling the Gap in Applied Learning

Many faculties across the university offer courses focused on the conceptual and methodological foundations of community-based research and evaluation (CBRE). As part of these courses, our university colleagues regularly reach out to CUP to help provide graduate students with the skills and experience to effectively translate theory into practice. Applied learning gives students the opportunity to relate the concepts and methods from their courses to real-world partnerships and projects. The gap between CBRE theory and practice can be hard for students to negotiate and reconcile the first time they encounter it which reinforces the need for a well facilitated, safe, and reflective learning experience. CUP’s projects and partnerships provide authentic learning opportunities where students can apply and integrate knowledge, skills, and theories with relevant experience. These opportunities cultivate a broader understanding of CBRE concepts and theories while reinforcing the skills and qualities required to build strong partnerships and work effectively with community partners. Students also gain a deeper understanding of the realities and complexities that community agencies and organizations balance in their work and sometimes lead to future graduate research projects or employment opportunities beyond the life of a CUP project.

Here are reflections from CUP graduate students on how the applied experiences with CUP have offered them new perspectives on their theoretical background into CBRE.

**Working with CUP, I have learned a tremendous amount and have a new appreciation for the importance of community-based research and evaluation as well as the time and efforts required to execute such a project.**

Emma Wallace, Master of Arts in Community Engagement Student, Faculty of Extension

**CUP provided me with the opportunity to collaborate with community partners and to connect with various project stakeholders. This opportunity has allowed me to feel truly engaged and immersed within research.**

Cassandra Pirraglia, Master of Educational Psychology Student, Faculty of Education

**My experiences with CUP have enabled me to better understand the process of engaging collaboratively in CBR and CBE. I have a greater awareness of and respect for building relationships with community partners, co-creating research and evaluation plans, and producing reports/frameworks that are usable for community organizations.**

Chelsea Durber, PhD Student, Dept of Educational Psychology

20 students and 3 Postdoctoral Fellows brought nearly 7,000 hours of capacity to CUP and WCHRI projects
Failing to Evaluate Ourselves

One of the core activities in CUP’s work that we fail to talk about is brokering. Based on requests, we broker connections for community partners to academic expertise and capacity and we also broker relationships between academic partners and community organizations. Eighteen years of building academic and community partnerships uniquely positions CUP to bring together people with diverse needs, experiences, and expertise to develop mutually beneficial collaborative and sustainable partnerships¹. One brokering example this past year was received from the Zebra Child Protection Centre. The Zebra Centre received funding to integrate their existing services with Addiction and Mental health services (delivered by Alberta Health Services and Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton). As these new services unfolded they wanted to explore the long term health care savings of timely access to trauma/treatment services and to provide strong recommendations regarding effectiveness, sustainability, and program efficiencies. CUP acted as an intermediary for this community request and brokered a partnership with Dr. Christina Rinaldi (Educational Psychology, UofA) and one of her graduate students. Dr. Rinaldi and the Zebra Centre were able to leverage Industry Canada Mitacs funding to support the graduate student work for two years which commenced in May 2018. The student has been working on building a strong foundation for the project including conducting a literature review, supporting the development of the Zebra Centre’s client database, and working with Zebra staff to create a psychoeducational parent program. In addition, the graduate student is developing her thesis around the community project which in turns builds a longer term partnership and opportunity for learning for both partners.

Despite the many valuable brokering opportunities that CUP has responded to over the years, we have failed to track and critically reflect on how this process unfolds over time and the expected and unexpected outcomes. Brokering has become second nature for us; consequently we have failed to stop and reflect on how we could broker more effectively. Are we fostering mutually beneficial and equitable partnerships? Why do some brokered connections work and others don’t? What are the outcomes? As we build CUP’s organizational evaluation, we need to take a more thoughtful approach to evaluating our brokering role and learn how we can be more intentional in our community supports. We look forward to sharing our successes, failures, and insights in the year to come.

CUP Financials

CUP’s funding is received from a variety of university, community, government, and funding agency sources. Funding targeted specifically for research and evaluation projects enables CUP to develop strong teams of research assistants and students to work collaboratively with community partners on these projects. Funding received for operational purposes enables CUP to support project development, brokering, administration, and coordination roles that are critical for the development of new initiatives. Personnel costs are our largest expense which includes experienced researchers through to future engaged scholars. We are fortunate that the University of Alberta, through the Faculty of Extension, provides funding for 3 faculty members who provide leadership for CUP’s research and evaluation projects. This year CUP managed over $1 million in funding from agencies, levels of government, community partners, and the University of Alberta.

**CUP CONSOLIDATED FUNDING 2017-18**

- **University of Alberta - 42%**
  Funding that supports research initiatives as well as faculty positions.

- **Other Granting Agencies - 8%**
  Funding from a variety of community and granting agencies to support specific research initiatives.

- **Tri-Council - 7%**
  Funding received from SSHRC in support of research initiatives.

- **Municipal & Provincial Government - 14%**
  Funding from City of Edmonton and the Government of Alberta to support both operational and research initiatives.

- **Community - 29%**
  Funding from community organization partners to support research initiatives as well as the core operations of CUP.

**CORE FUNDERS**

We would like to acknowledge the following funders for their generous and ongoing support of our core operations.
Publications and Presentations

PUBLICATIONS
(Publications, Abstracts, Refereed Publications, Book Chapters, Video)


CONFERENCES, PRESENTATIONS, GUEST LECTURES

(Local, national /international, workshops, panels, conferences, keynote, invited)


Mayan, M. & Spiers, J. [June 2017]. Introduction to Qualitative Research. Thinking Qualitatively Workshop Series, International Institute for Qualitative Methodology, University of Alberta.


Quintanilha, M., Mayan, M., Raine, K., Bell, R.C., & The ENRICH Study Team. [June 2017]. From alpine climbing to walking around the block: What being physically active means for rural pregnant women. Poster presentation at the International Society of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity. Victoria, British Columbia.

