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PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLE

# The Full SPECTRUM: Developing a Tripartite Partnership between Community, Government and Academia for Collaborative Social Policy Research

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## Abstract

**Problem:** In Canadian society, public policies guide the development and administration of social services and systems, including the public education system, the justice system, family services, social housing and income support. However, because social services are often planned and implemented in a 'siloed' manner, coordination and collaboration across departments, sectors and organisations is sorely lacking. Data and resource constraints may prevent services being evaluated to ensure they meet the needs of the people for whom they are intended. When the needs of individuals are not addressed, the result is poor outcomes and wasted resources across multiple areas.

**Our Response:** In 2018, we formed the SPECTRUM Partnership in response to a recognised need for collaborative cross-sector approaches to strengthening the policies that shape social services and systems in our country. The tripartite SPECTRUM partnership comprises representatives from community organisations, government and academia, and is an entity designed to conduct social policy research and evaluation, incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives and expertise from its members. Guided by community-driven research questions and building on existing data resources, SPECTRUM seeks to address specific knowledge gaps in social programs, services and systems. New research findings are then translated into viable public policy options, in alignment with government priorities, and presented to policy-makers for consideration.

**Implications:** In this practice-based article, we describe the key steps we took to create the SPECTRUM partnership, build our collective capacity for research and evaluation, and transform our research findings into actionable evidence to support sound public policy. We outline four of SPECTRUM's achievements to date in the hope that the lessons we learned during the development of the partnership may serve as a guide for others aiming to optimise public policy development in a collaborative evidence-based way.

## Keywords

**Partnership; Social Policy; Government; Community; Research; Knowledge Translation**

## Introduction

Effective public policy supports a fair and just society, enabling all citizens to realise their full potential. In Canada, public policy guides administration of the public education system, the justice system, and services supporting child and family welfare, social housing and income assistance. However, the way these services have been designed and implemented often lacks coordination across departments and sectors, and the services are rarely evaluated to ensure that they meet the goals they were intended to achieve. The often 'siloed' nature of policy development, policy implementation and service delivery can result in lost opportunities to optimally serve individuals, families and communities whose needs span multiple sectors. In many cases, those who stand to benefit from social services do not receive them, resulting in poor outcomes for citizens and inefficient use of public resources.

Recognising the inadequacies in organisation and delivery of social services and systems in Canada, the authors of this article developed an idea for addressing these shortcomings. We established a tripartite partnership between community organisations, government and academia to facilitate collaborative research and evaluation of social policies. Members of the three parties appreciated the benefits of working across disciplines, departments and sectors, but the infrastructure we needed to communicate optimally, share and discuss ideas, and ensure our work had an impact in the policy realm was not well established. While there are many pertinent examples of collaborative approaches between government and academia that aim to address issues in child welfare ([Fallon et al. 2017](#)), climate change ([Australian Public Service Commission 2012](#)) and Indigenous health ([Martin 2012](#)), a tripartite relationship between community organisations, government and academia focused on social policy was a relative rarity for Canada. However, each party

had significant and complementary expertise to bring to the ‘trialogue’. We would contribute to identifying specific issues, designing research approaches to address them, contextualising and interpreting the findings, and developing policy options that would improve social outcomes. Thus, the partnership would allow us to work across sectors to strengthen public policy and government decision-making.

The partnership, which we call SPECTRUM (Social Policy Evaluation Collaborative Team Research with Universities in Manitoba), grew out of the well-established collaborative research model at the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP), University of Manitoba ([Bowen, Martens & The Need-to-Know Team 2005](#); [Martens & Roos 2005](#)). MCHP maintains the unique and comprehensive Manitoba Population Research Data Repository, which contains administrative, registry and survey data from the health system, social services, the education system and the justice system. The data are linkable across these sectors, which makes the Repository a powerful platform on which to conduct intersecting and sophisticated analyses ([Katz et al. 2019](#); [Smith et al. 2015](#)). Researchers at MCHP have a long history of working closely with government staff and health region representatives to identify policy questions and conduct research to address critical policy issues. Furthermore, over the last decade, our government and community partners have become increasingly important contributors to the research process because of their first-hand knowledge of the available data, the knowledge gaps and the contexts in which services are delivered ([Bowen, Martens & The Need to Know Team 2005](#); [Katz et al. 2021](#); [Martens & Roos 2005](#)). Their lived experience and their frontline work with recipients of services has made them invaluable to our research.

Thus, MCHP’s health policy research model formed the basis for SPECTRUM. Starting in 2017, we developed a similar model for research conception and design, analysis and knowledge translation that would leverage untapped databases in the Repository and incorporate input from stakeholders and rights-holders to address social policy issues. The SPECTRUM partnership is our response to the need for a collaborative, cross-sector approach to social policy research and evaluation.

In this practice-based article, we describe the key steps we took to develop the SPECTRUM partnership, build our collective capacity for research and evaluation, and transform our research findings into actionable evidence to support sound public policy. We then discuss SPECTRUM’s achievements and lessons learned, which hopefully will serve as a guide for others aiming to optimise evidence-based public policy development in their own jurisdictions.

## Developing the SPECTRUM Partnership

SPECTRUM originated from researchers at MCHP reaching out to their long-standing network of colleagues and collaborators and inviting them to a series of brainstorming meetings. At these meetings, the researchers shared their early ideas for shaping SPECTRUM and received feedback from the other participants on the scope of the partnership’s work and membership. A core leadership team with representation from each of the three parties was formed. Academic members took the lead initially in securing grant funding for SPECTRUM, but government and community organisation representatives played an important role in establishing the governance structure during the earliest stages of the partnership. In 2018–19, we were awarded a three-year Partnership Development Grant by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

## SPECTRUM partners: Inviting others to the table

SPECTRUM was designed as a true collaboration of a diverse range of experience and expertise, not merely a sounding board from which leaders, funders or designers of the programs could solicit feedback on decisions already made. We consider all partners to be co-learners engaged in the ‘what if/what should be’

of policy research, design and implementation. As we work together, we continuously consider whether any stakeholders and rightsholders are missing from our conversations.

The groups currently represented in SPECTRUM are:

- i) Representatives of community organisations providing social services and support to Manitobans
- ii) Indigenous leaders whose wisdom and knowledge remind us to honour the traditions, goals and knowledge of First Nations and Métis Peoples in Manitoba
- iii) Government officials tasked with implementing policies and programs from various provincial departments and organisations;
- iv) Academic researchers engaged in research and teaching at universities and colleges, primarily in Manitoba (but now expanding outside the province), dedicated to using their expertise to improve the wellbeing of our society;
- v) Undergraduate and graduate students (whom we call the SPECTRUM fellows) with research interests in removing barriers for historically excluded populations and ensuring justice and equality for all Manitobans; and
- vi) Community members with lived/living experience, who are invited to join SPECTRUM as part of advisory circles for our research projects.

In total, the membership of SPECTRUM is about 100 individuals, representing 18 community agencies, 9 government departments and 14 university or college departments. A non-exhaustive list of SPECTRUM members is provided in [Table 1](#), and additional information on current membership can be found at [www.spectrum-mb.ca](http://www.spectrum-mb.ca)

Table 1. Members of the SPECTRUM Partnership

Manitoba Community Organizations	Manitoba Government Departments	Departments & Faculties at the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, Red River College and Athabasca University
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abilities Manitoba</li> <li>• Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg</li> <li>• Boys &amp; Girls Clubs of Winnipeg</li> <li>• Canadian Community Economic Development Network</li> <li>• First Nations Family Advocate Office</li> <li>• First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba</li> <li>• Harvest Manitoba</li> <li>• Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre</li> <li>• Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central Services</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Families</li> <li>• Finance</li> <li>• Health and Seniors Care</li> <li>• Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations</li> <li>• Justice</li> <li>• Mental Health and Community Wellness</li> <li>• Status of Women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Health Sciences</li> <li>• Economics</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Environmental Studies</li> <li>• Governance, Law &amp; Management</li> <li>• Law</li> <li>• Nursing</li> <li>• Peace and Conflict Studies</li> <li>• Political Studies</li> <li>• Psychology</li> <li>• Social Epidemiology</li> <li>• Social Work</li> <li>• Sociology</li> <li>• Urban Studies</li> </ul>

Table 1. continued

Manitoba Community Organizations	Manitoba Government Departments	Departments & Faculties at the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, Red River College and Athabasca University
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations</li> <li>• Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre</li> <li>• Manitoba Métis Federation</li> <li>• Métis Child and Family Services Authority</li> <li>• Neeginan Centre</li> <li>• Public Interest Law Centre</li> <li>• United Way Winnipeg</li> <li>• Winnipeg Police Service</li> <li>• Youth Agencies Alliance</li> </ul>		

## Partnership approach: How we work together

A visual representation of our partnership is shown in [Figure 1](#). The core leadership team designed the circular structure to emphasise that SPECTRUM is not hierarchical, but instead we are connected to each other through our relationships, not by lines of authority. The open circles along the outer border of the circle represent spaces for new partners.

Our partners share a commitment to a non-hierarchical, iterative and consensual approach that flows from the design, partnership and participatory action research literature. Our Statement of Commitment and Reciprocity builds on the principles of the anti-oppressive and decolonising lens we have adopted, so that all partners know what they may expect and what is expected of them (a copy is available from the corresponding author on request).

## Partnership roles: Leveraging our areas of knowledge and experience

SPECTRUM's core leadership team is responsible for the administrative tasks and overall coordination of partnership development. During the partnership development phase, the core team planned and hosted quarterly workshops attended by the entire partnership. The aims of the workshops were to form closer relationships amongst partners, define how we would build the various capacities needed for conducting research and evaluation together, and design our first research (demonstration project). The workshop topics included an overview of the Repository at MCHP; learning to apply a decolonising and anti-oppression lens to our work; and framing new evidence to influence public policy. The workshops served as our primary mechanism for advancing our capacity in social policy research and evaluation during the development of the partnership.

Smaller working groups were formed to address specific tasks determined by the partnership as a whole. They have been responsible for workshop design and content; analysing and incorporating partner input and feedback on ideas and priorities after each workshop; creating a governance structure for the partnership;

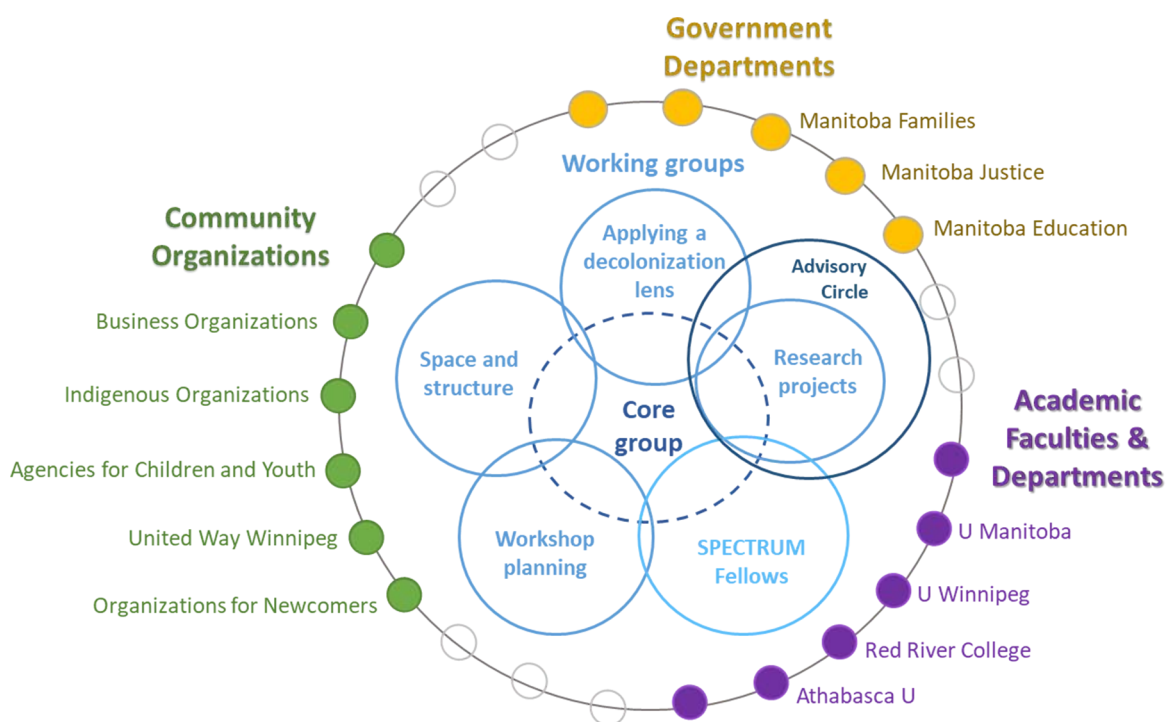


Figure 1. Structure of the SPECTRUM Partnership

discussing how to apply an anti-oppressive and decolonising approach to the partnership's work; designing the demonstration project and drafting data analysis plans; writing academic manuscripts; creating a communications strategy; and planning funding applications. SPECTRUM fellows are active contributors to the working groups and bring their own lived experiences, community connections, diverse backgrounds and academic disciplines to the partnership.

The fellows are each mentored by members of the core leadership team using an approach grounded in 'work-integrated learning' frameworks (Cantor et al. 2015; Hondzel & Hansen 2015; Spence & McDonald 2015), where fellows direct their own learning and reflect on their professional development with their mentor and on their own. Mentorship offers fellows deeper subject-specific learning while also promoting a range of training experiences. SPECTRUM provides the fellows with opportunities to connect with key stakeholders, be involved in various working groups, participate in capacity-building workshops, and to experience writing papers and funding submissions. These experiences enrich not only the partners' work, but also the fellows' abilities to understand key issues, core competencies in research, evaluation and analytic skills (e.g. data analysis, critical thinking, communication, knowledge mobilisation), and professional skills (e.g. leadership, collaboration, networking and dialogue).

## Governance principles: Shaping our partnership activities

The working groups have accomplished key partnership development tasks, such as articulating the partnership's mission and values. In workshops and working groups, we have considered questions such as: What do we want this collaboration to look like and feel like? How do we ensure that everyone in the partnership feels welcome and valued? How do we amplify the voices of those who are typically silenced in conversations about services and policies? What does consensus look like in SPECTRUM? How do we deal with the inevitable disagreements that arise when groups talk about challenging issues? (The resulting mission statement and core values of SPECTRUM are included in the appendix.)

Building further on these values, we established a decolonising/anti-oppression working group to guide us in putting our partnership approach into practice. We hosted presentations by the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and the Associate Vice-President Indigenous at the University of Manitoba, who emphasised the systemic and ongoing reality of racism, colonialism and oppression based on gender, disability and class (among other markers) in Canadian institutions. Recognising that marginalised people cannot do the work of decolonisation and anti-oppression alone and that partners with relative privilege bear a particular responsibility, the partnership determined that this working group should build on initiatives already undertaken to support community partners (e.g. *Speakers Corner*, a workshop segment that highlights our partners' work, and supporting partners' funding applications). The group works to ensure access to opportunities for students and continues to make room for additional SPECTRUM partners by creating a toolkit of resources featuring leaders in our community. This work is an integral part of SPECTRUM and will be the ongoing responsibility of all partners.

## The Manitoba Population Research Data Repository: A Key Data Resource

Manitoba is the ideal setting for SPECTRUM as it is home to the comprehensive, world-class and globally unique Data Repository at the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP). The Repository contains person-level data records for the entire population of Manitoba. These data are routinely generated during the administration of social services, family services, income support, the education system, the justice system and the health system, and are provided annually to MCHP by the government departments that collect them. Other data sets may be transferred to the Repository by community agencies for particular research projects. All of the Repository records (nearly 100 different datasets) are linkable across different sectors and over time (back to 1976), and all are de-identified (names and addresses removed), ensuring that personal information is protected. Some of the recent studies completed at MCHP were on the wellbeing of First Nations children in Manitoba ([Chartier et al. 2020](#)), immigrants to Manitoba ([Urquia et al. 2020](#)), and exploration of the intersection of child welfare and youth criminal justice system involvement ([Brownell et al. 2020](#)).

Over the last 30 years, MCHP has built a reputation for applying cutting-edge analytic methods, statistical modelling and data science technologies to integrated knowledge mobilisation strategies, while involving government and community partners to use the data in the Repository to address policy priorities. This knowledge exchange has resulted in meaningful insights and recommendations for policy-makers and other knowledge users, and impacts the design and delivery of new and existing policies and programs in Manitoba ([Fortier et al. 2018](#); [Katz et al. 2021](#); [Lewis 2011](#); [Roos et al. 2010](#)). In SPECTRUM, we are building on this approach by more fully integrating our partners into the research process. We speak of co-creating or co-producing research evidence: to us, this means that all parties have the opportunity to have input into the research questions and how they are addressed, resulting in research outputs that benefit all parties.

For SPECTRUM, the Repository is a key resource that gives partners a reason to join forces and work together. The wealth of information in the Repository and the cross-sector expertise in the partnership are helping SPECTRUM produce high-quality evidence to support social policy development.

## Our Research and Evaluation Approach

Traditionally, research at MCHP using the Repository has been undertaken using a quantitative data science approach ([Brownell et al. 2016](#); [Enns et al. 2021](#); [Falster et al. 2021](#); [Nickel et al. 2021](#)). The data in the Repository lend themselves to answering questions like 'how many?', 'how often?' and 'at what cost?', but

numbers and statistics tell only part of the story. Particularly in equity-focused policy research, the data also have a critical limitation: they are generated by systems and services that are steeped in the societal biases that permeate Canadian society ([Felt et al. 2017](#); [Jasanoff 2004](#); [Krieger 2011, 2013, 2015](#); [Oreskes 2019](#); [Ziman 2000](#)). The data can thus end up reflecting the values and norms of the dominant culture, while the values of others are oppressed. This means we must ask who produces and controls the data and to what end they are using them ([Felt et al. 2017](#); [Jasanoff 2004](#); [Krieger 2011, 2013, 2015](#); [Oreskes 2019](#); [Ziman 2000](#)). The societal biases reflected in whole-population administrative data can end up 'baked into' the research to deleterious effect. For example, we have seen this occur in research on Indigenous child welfare. When the impacts of colonialism on the child welfare system go unexamined, Indigenous world views are ignored and deficit-based frameworks are applied ([Choate et al. 2018](#); [Cram et al. 2015](#); [Krakouer, Wu Tan & Parolini 2021](#); [Sinha 2021](#)). Failing to take account of these biases when using administrative data for social policy research at best results in a picture with the same inherent biases that are reflected in the administrative data. At worst, the research may perpetuate and exacerbate the harms of social and structural biases against this group.

In SPECTRUM, we address this limitation by incorporating additional research methodologies into our science data approach. Guided by a standpoint influenced research framework from Indigenous Statistics ([Walter & Andersen 2013](#)), we acknowledge our positionality and practice reflexivity when we design our research studies and analysis plans, interpret the results of our data analyses and plan our knowledge mobilisation activities. The critical context provided by the lived and living expertise of our partners and advisory circle members remains centred throughout the research process. Although this practice cannot remove the biases present in the data, our awareness of how they permeate Canadian society and systems reorient our understanding of the findings and the impacts they may have on historically excluded individuals and populations, and inform the actions we take as a result.

We also draw on elements of participatory action research, a collective, self-reflective approach that seeks to empower historically excluded individuals and groups, to actively contribute to all aspects of research ([Garcia-Iriarte et al. 2009](#)). This approach is well-suited to SPECTRUM, which is organised in a non-hierarchical structure to emphasise that the partners are equal contributors to shared goals despite differences in power. Above all, we strive to remain aware of how our respective positions and perspectives serve as critical tools to conduct respectful, reciprocal, relevant and responsible research ([Kirkness & Barnhardt 2001](#)).

## Putting our Research Approach into Practice: A Demonstration Project

Our first research project demonstrates the feasibility of our partnership approach in addressing common challenges and improving social programs, policies and services. We identified our first research question through focused priority-setting discussions at workshops, reflections on and analysis of workshop feedback, and further refinement by the working groups. The partnership agreed to focus on children whose families were involved with child protection services. Despite child protection policies and legislation explicitly designed to keep families intact, the rate of children in out-of-home care in Manitoba is unacceptably high and disproportionately impacts Indigenous families ([Brownell et al. 2015](#); [Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal 2018](#)). While out-of-home care can at times be a necessary and effective intervention ([Gilbert et al. 2012](#); [O'Donnell, Scott & Stanley 2008](#)), there have been no rigorous evaluations comparing outcomes of children taken into out-of-home care compared with children involved with child protection services but remaining at home ([Gilbert et al. 2012](#)). Our community and government partners indicate such evidence would support advocacy and policy efforts. The research team for this project exemplifies the cross-sector expertise and co-learning emphasis that defines SPECTRUM. The team includes policy-makers from



Manitoba Families and Government Services, community organisations representing First Nations families, academics from social work, psychiatry and community health, and five fellows.

Using the Repository and advanced statistical modelling techniques ([Stukel et al. 2007](#); [Tchetgen, Michael & Cui 2018](#); [Uddin et al. 2015](#)), we identified children involved with Child Protection Services for whom there was some discretion in the decision to place them in out-of-home care or keep them in their family home while providing support. Following the trajectories of these two groups of children over time, we are examining their mental and physical health, educational achievement and justice system involvement, while accounting for factors that may have contributed to these outcomes, such as family income and maternal mental health. The research is adhering to rigorous and well-established ethics and privacy approval processes, and the ownership, control, access and possession (OCAP®) principles ([The First Nations Information Governance Centre 2014](#)), and is guided by an advisory circle comprising First Nations Knowledge Keepers and the First Nations Family Advocate. Preliminary findings will be shared at an upcoming partnership workshop, where our policy leads will facilitate discussions on framing the evidence for policymakers. The policy options generated by the partnership will be reviewed by our advisory circle and youth with child protection services experience. The Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth's office will facilitate engagement of their Youth Advisory Squad for contextualising and mobilising our findings. Within Manitoba, the implications of our research are promising because government officials have been involved in shaping this project from the beginning and are committed to evidence-based policy-making. This is not a situation where academics are telling government how to do their jobs – this is government, community members, organisations and academics working together with the shared goal of better outcomes for children.

## Evaluating SPECTRUM

SPECTRUM is using a developmental evaluation framework for design-based research ([Wang & Hannafin 2005](#)) to ascertain whether the partnership is meeting its goals. This process aims to reduce power imbalances between partners and prevent potential harms where differences exist. We are conducting this evaluation under 'conditions of complexity' ([Patton 2010](#)), which involves purposefully collecting information from our partners about SPECTRUM's processes, workshops and projects as they unfold, and applying what we learn from that feedback to adapt and improve the partnership and the work we do. For example, in a series of dedicated meetings and email surveys, we sought partners' input on what our first research question should be, and this process will be refined and used again as we identify subsequent research questions. Focused surveys are also integral to evaluating the specific research projects conducted through SPECTRUM to determine whether the research evidence we generate is ultimately implemented at program and policy levels.

## Ethics and privacy considerations

All research projects at MCHP are reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) at the University of Manitoba, the Manitoba Government Health Information Privacy Committee (HIPC) and all other data providers. Any research involving Indigenous Peoples is subject to review and approval by the Health Information Research Governance Committee of the First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba and the Manitoba Métis Community Research Ethics Protocol at the Manitoba Métis Federation, as appropriate. For the demonstration project, we obtained ethics (HREB No. HS22962 – H2019:254) and HIPC (HIPC No. 2020/2021– 85) approvals, as well as approval from the Health Information Governance Committee at the First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba. There are multiple additional layers of protection in place at MCHP to ensure personal privacy and data security for the people represented in the Repository ([Katz et al. 2019](#)).

## Key Achievements and Lessons Learned

The iterative, ever-evolving nature of SPECTRUM gives rise to a myriad of learning opportunities, requiring us to listen carefully to our partners and exercise creativity in problem solving. Reflecting on our successes and the lessons we have learned *en route* to those achievements has informed our partnership approach, strengthened SPECTRUM's capacity to address future challenges and allowed us to envision further growth of the partnership.

### 1. Partner Engagement in SPECTRUM

*The Achievement:* SPECTRUM has a large membership from diverse fields and sectors and excellent engagement from many individuals.

*The Lesson:* Maintaining this level of engagement from multiple groups who have many other demands on their attention requires dedicated time and energy, and a purposeful engagement and communications strategy. SPECTRUM has helped keep partners informed, involved and engaged by:

- a) Ensuring a range of representation on the core leadership team and in working groups. This serves two important functions: First, involving all three parties in shaping the partnership and carrying out research and evaluation means we have input from all key stakeholder groups, which helps us balance our different agendas. Second, partners have the experience of being involved as equals in the work of SPECTRUM from the very beginning, and seeing how their expertise and perspectives shape the work. This is in contrast with the experience from other contexts of merely being consulted, often late in the research and policy process. SPECTRUM's approach exemplifies that reciprocity is foundational to how the partnership works.
- b) Setting up a robust communications network within the partnership with specific responsibilities among the fellows and core leadership team members. For example, following each workshop, the fellows solicit and collate feedback from the partnership and these communications are used to improve the quality and relevancy of future workshops. The core leadership team sends out quarterly newsletters with updates of progress from workshops and research. Each core team member also maintains ongoing one-on-one contact with a small group of partners to foster close relationships and stay in touch with regard to position changes and new staff members at partner organisations.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented multiple challenges to engaging with partners, including (but not limited to) additional time and resource constraints among all partners, challenges associated with partner organisations serving some of the most vulnerable and transient populations in Manitoba during the pandemic, and the need to pause the in-person workshops that were the main way members of SPECTRUM connected with each other. In response to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on community partners, in particular, SPECTRUM has been investigating how to better support the time commitment necessary for their meaningful engagement, e.g. by building in more funding and honorariums for community partner time. SPECTRUM has also made use of online communication tools such as Zoom, Mailchimp and Survey Monkey to keep all parties safe and engaged, with plans to gather in-person again as the pandemic recedes further.

### 2. SPECTRUM as a Learning and Capacity-Building Platform

*The Achievement:* We took time to develop the partnership through a three-year SSHRC-funded Partnership Development Grant, and this was key to helping us find common ground, form relationships and build capacity to advance the partnership's goals.

*The Lesson:* The partnership's diverse range of experience, knowledge and skills was one of its greatest strengths, but also represented a significant challenge as we worked to articulate our needs and goals. To overcome this challenge, we used our quarterly workshops as our primary mechanism for learning

and capacity building. Guided by our value of *collaboration*, workshop content is co-created with our partners who share their expertise and experiences. We strive to create co-learning opportunities to ensure that it is not just the researchers who are speaking but also the partners. Workshops are designed to provide the necessary learning opportunities and to build skills, knowledge and resources that help all partners understand the research and policy-making process and how to engage in meaningful discussions about social policy research and using evidence to inform policy.

SPECTRUM workshops have a segment dedicated to providing a space for partners to share their work and discuss their needs with the partnership. The *Speakers Corner* serves as a forum for the voices of community organisations and the population they serve to be centred and heard. The working groups are another setting in which partners have a meaningful impact on the partnership. Partners provide critical context to research design and output, enriching the partnership's understanding of the issues under discussion, and helping to formulate practical solutions.

### 3. Building Authentic Relationships within SPECTRUM

*The Achievement:* SPECTRUM partners strive to build authentic relationships with one another. In this context, authenticity can be described as the desire to be true to one's own purpose, values and beliefs, regardless of pressures to act otherwise, while respecting and making room to discuss others' ideas and motivations.

*The Lesson:* Authentic partnerships require integrity, open mindedness, vulnerability, honesty, integrity and willingness to be vulnerable. They rely on the partners' commitment to creating safe spaces. Building authentic relationships takes significant time and cannot be rushed. During the development phase of SPECTRUM, we used our workshop discussions, working group meetings and other open channels of communication to find our footing as a partnership, become comfortable sharing thoughts and ideas, and begin to build authentic relationships in SPECTRUM.

Throughout this process, we had several occasions to practise our values by responding to situations in which partners with differing views disagreed with one another. For example, in deciding what the research question for Demonstration Project would be, the team of community organisation representatives, Indigenous experts, senior government staff and academics brought a wide range of differing views to the table. It took many discussions to come to a place where all agreed that the research had to be something that was responsive to the concerns community organisations faced in daily program delivery, that government could potentially respond to, and that was within the limits of what could actually be accomplished through data analysis. The deep commitment of all participants to our relationships with each other allowed the team to take the necessary time to work through the differences and arrive at a shared plan.

In another example, one partner sent an email days before a partnership workshop, posing some very blunt questions about how well the partnership was including Indigenous expertise and perspectives and creating space for Indigenous leadership. Although the initial response of members of the core leadership team organising the workshop was emotional, defensive and distressed, we quickly realised that they had provided a compelling example of courage in speaking their truth. We revised the workshop agenda to create space at the opening of the gathering to reflect on the invitation to be authentic in our relationships and created breakout rooms for small discussions. We came away from the conversations with a clearer sense that SPECTRUM was not a 'research project', but a partnership that was all about our relationships, shared values and working together in new and different ways to better meet the needs of all people. It reminded us that the concerns raised were neither the beginning nor the end of our commitments to decolonising anti-racist and anti-oppressive ways of working because the partnership had been changing and evolving since the beginning. It reaffirmed everyone's commitment to a decolonising and anti-oppressive approach and helped us appreciate how much the informal connection times during coffee and lunch

breaks allowed us to listen to and clarify things more easily than in the online work we were doing because of the pandemic. Most importantly, all partners had the experience of pushing past feeling uncomfortable to find our shared purpose, which was a necessary part of the hard work we were committed to in SPECTRUM, and our partnership was stronger because of those experiences.

#### 4. Translating the Work of SPECTRUM into Meaningful Action

*The Achievement:* We designed a purposeful knowledge mobilisation strategy for SPECTRUM that will focus on developing evidence-based policy options for the Government of Manitoba. We will start with our demonstration project, which follows the trajectories of children whose families are involved with Child Protection Services. The working group leading this project includes government officials, community organisations representing First Nations families, and academics from multiple disciplines concerned with child and family welfare. The advisory circle includes the First Nations Youth Advisory Squad, who will provide additional context to the interpretation of results. As the project unfolds, preliminary findings will be shared with both the partnership and the advisory circle, who will have an opportunity to provide input. Then, the SPECTRUM partnership will transform the evidence into sound public policy options and present them to government for review and deliberation. Actions and non-actions taken by the government in response to the public policy options provided will be monitored and inform the development of subsequent research projects conducted by SPECTRUM.

*The Lesson:* We know from previous years of experience working with government, community partners and the public that knowledge translation and knowledge exchange are critical for moving evidence to action and achieving research impact. Connections formed and expertise shared within SPECTRUM are driving our knowledge translation efforts to bring about sound public policy and social change.

## Conclusion

The SPECTRUM partnership can serve as an example for other collaborative research models aiming to influence policy development and evidence-based decision-making. Our key recommendations for developing a collaborative partnership for social policy research and evaluation include: taking the time to lay a foundation for the partnership, making space for authentic relationships and remaining open to new members as the work evolves; dedicating significant resources to continuous partner engagement and capacity building; and following through to take action on the research findings that result from the partnership's work. With SPECTRUM now well established, we turn our attention to ensuring its sustainability. Efforts to secure more funding for SPECTRUM are underway, and we are planning new research projects that will support evidence-based decision-making and stronger public policies in Manitoba.

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## Appendix

### SPECTRUM

#### Our Mission:

SPECTRUM brings people together to use **data** and **lived experience** to inform how we can become a fairer and more just society. We share a conviction that we can achieve more by working together than we could working alone.

**WHO** – we are a collaborative partnership of community organization representatives, government officials, researchers and students from across Manitoba

**WHY** – we are seeking creative ways to make human services, programs and policies better serve people’s needs

**HOW** – we are doing this through applied research, predominantly using the Manitoba Population Research Data Repository

**WHAT** – our ultimate goal is to achieve equity across the complete spectrum of outcomes, including health and well-being, education, justice, housing, income, and employment

#### Our Values:



Appendix Figure 1: SPECTRUM’s Mission and Values