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CHARLES E. McJILTON

To cite this article: CHARLES E. McJILTON (1982) Can an erc consortium work?, American Industrial Hygiene Association Journal, 43:2, 133-134, DOI: [10.1080/15298668291409479](https://doi.org/10.1080/15298668291409479)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298668291409479>



Published online: 04 Jun 2010.



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Can an erc consortium work?

CHARLES E. McJILTON

Environmental Health, School of Public Health, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

The Midwest Occupational Safety and Health Center is one of twelve regional NIOSH funded Educational Resource Centers. This Center is unique, however, in that it was formed as a consortium between five geographically distinct institutions — The University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus, The University of Minnesota, Duluth Campus, Mayo Clinic, St. Paul-Ramsey Medical Center and The University of Iowa, Oakdale Campus. The advantages and disadvantages of such a consortium are discussed with respect to the five functional roles of an ERC: program, faculty, research, continuing education and outreach. The author views this consortium as a success, particularly with respect to the latter two functional roles.

introduction

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) funded Education Resource Centers (ERC) represent a new approach to the preparation of professional occupational health specialists. The first centers are about to begin their fifth year and it is important to examine what has been learned.

The premise upon which the ERC is built is that Occupational Health is better learned, taught and experienced when the four basic disciplines of medicine, nursing, industrial hygiene and safety are melded into a single coherent unit. This task is a difficult one at best, but when the ERC is formed through a consortium of physically separate units, the job is further compounded. Since there is evidence of success at the Midwest Occupational Safety and Health Center which is comprised of five units, there are important lessons to be drawn from its experience. If the key elements which function to bring separate units together into a cohesive educational system can be identified, a model will emerge which can be used elsewhere in the country where a consortium is the only way to integrate the four basic occupational health disciplines. There may be a greater need for consortia as occupational health programs continue to be initiated throughout the country.

The Midwest Occupational Health and Safety ERC is made up of programs at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus and Duluth Campus, Mayo Clinic, St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center and the Institute of Ag Medicine and Environmental Health at the University of Iowa in Oakdale, IA. The geographical separation between the units is significant and possibly represents an extreme example. The five functional areas which were reviewed were: program, faculty, research, continuing education, and outreach.

program

Since students in occupational nursing, industrial hygiene and residents at St. Paul Ramsey and Mayo shared a common academic year at the Twin Cities campus of the University of Minnesota, there was ample opportunity for mixing. They took core courses in epidemiology, industrial hygiene, radiological health, biostatistics and environmental health together. These students also participated in an occupational health seminar and a field course where they were required to problem solve as a team. This integrating experience led to additional field studies using a team approach. The weakness of a consortium is the difficulty of involving students at Duluth and Iowa in this experience.

faculty

It is true, of course, that faculty of any given school can establish lines of communication with faculty at another school. However, it has been the experience of the Minnesota-Iowa consortium that the existence of an ERC which provides or perhaps even imposes unity in the form of a single grant, a single center director, and a single objective, is a powerful driving force to bring faculty together. The industrial hygiene program at Iowa has existed about as long as the program at Minnesota and yet only in the last four years has there been a sharing of ideas, exchange of faculty and cooperation to make both programs better. Graduates in the health care delivery area from Minnesota have gone to the rural areas for many years without the benefit of the educational resources of Iowa's Institute of Ag-Medicine and Environmental Health. The opportunity is now available for these people to go out better prepared to solve the occupational health problems of the rural areas.

research

Research is one of the areas that offers great potential for integrating the components of an ERC. A consortium has the specific advantage of bringing together the strengths of more than one institution. There are many examples of the exchange of research information within the Midwest Consortium. The strong research program in agricultural health at Iowa has influenced other units of the consortium in a positive way. In time a model of collaboration should develop that could assist joint efforts of other ERCs.

continuing education

A consortium can use its geographical separation to advantage in carrying out the continuing education responsibilities of an ERC. Experience has shown that the distribution of the various units of the consortium has provided contacts and resources throughout both regions. It is possible to assemble a faculty for a short course from among the professionals in the area. The one-week industrial hygiene review course given in March, 1981, used instructors from all areas of Region Seven and the Twin Cities area of Region Five.

One of the most important fringe benefits from the Continuing Education program has been the integrating effect it has had on the consortium. The Continuing Education coordinator has to be in regular contact with faculty in all units of the consortium and has become a vehicle for facilitating communications and the exchanging of ideas. More travel is required than is the case for a single campus ERC, but a larger geographical area is served. The Center has attempted to bring continuing education to the constituency as much as possible and to make use of local health professionals as faculty, which requires the continuing education coordinator to spend time at the course site. This investment appears to have been a good one. The response to the courses has been excellent, and the Continuing Education effort has become a key ingredient in the glue that holds an inter-site and outer-region ERC together.

outreach

The outreach activities of the Midwest ERC have been one of the most exciting aspects of the program. This Center was one of the first to take an active role in providing technical support to "New Direction Grantees" who share the Twin Cities campus. This assistance began in the proposal writing stage in the case of the Agricultural Engineering grant which OSHA funded at the development level in 1979. Since then, a close working relationship has developed so that both OSHA grantees have used the expertise of all parts of the ERC and the ERC continues to benefit from the labor experience. The ERC has provided such assistance as participation in seminars, made input into workshop development, loan of field instruments and sample analysis. Students have participated in projects rising out of labor's concern about workplace hazards. This relationship has been a model of OSHA-NIOSH cooperation to promote safety and health in the workplace.

conclusion

An ERC formed by a consortium of educational units that are physically and administratively distinct is of necessity different from a single campus ERC. The Minnesota-Iowa experience has shown that there are some specific advantages in a consortium, and some weaknesses also. It is possi-

ble to have an impact on a larger geographical area simply by reason of the physical presence of the unit of the consortium and the acceptance that it has in its local area. Thus the Minnesota-Iowa consortium has been able to influence occupational health from the iron range in northern Minnesota to the states in Region VII such as Iowa, Nebraska and Missouri. We believe that the impact in any of these widespread areas has been greater than was possible when the educational units function independently. Simply having a mechanism for a unit to draw on the expertise and resources of another unit enhances the effectiveness of all units. One can even argue that a consortium is more cost effective for achieving certain goals of the ERC, than a single campus ERC. Continuing Education and Outreach are good examples. One of the units of the consortium can provide the base for a short course given in its area and draw on the resources of the other units as needed. Local resources can usually be identified best by the local unit and this has been our experience.

In the area of research, the strong focus on agriculture-agribusiness health problems has evolved out of the unifying force that the ERC grant has provided. The ERC has provided the glue that holds together resources and strengths from several different campuses.

Lastly, the key to the success that the Minnesota-Iowa consortium has experienced, appears to be the strong core on the Minneapolis Campus where the industrial hygiene, occupational medicine and nursing programs are now flourishing. From this core, continuing education has drawn its resources to cover western Region V and VII. While some holes remain in the Midwest ERC, they are being closed and a substantial contribution to occupational health has resulted which would not have happened simply by supporting the various units individually.

A summary of those factors which are essential to a successful consortium are as follows:

1. The existence of a strong central unit which provides a nucleus for the Center.
2. Strong leadership and commitment from all cooperating units of the Center.
3. A willingness to exploit to the maximum the individual strengths, resources and diversity of the various units of the Center.
4. Strength and a certain amount of functional independence among the units.
5. The existence of a focusing point of occupational health concern.

The Minnesota-Iowa experience has provided evidence that an ERC consortium can work and accomplish all the goals of the Center concept. This model may be the most important one in the future as it becomes necessary and cost-effective to develop Centers from existing units.