

Why You Need a 'Science Prenup' for Successful Collaboration

Source: Advance Clinical and Translational Research at Brown University. <https://www.brown.edu/initiatives/translational-research/about>

Anyone who has conducted research understands the benefits of collaborating with individuals of various backgrounds – whether academic, institutional, demographic, or all of the above, diversity leads to improved problem solving. When investigators use team science approaches, they set themselves up for more successful outcomes.

This idea sounds like a no-brainer, but researchers often find that challenges arise when they begin to incorporate team science approaches into their work. Many investigators either lack knowledge about how to implement team science smoothly, or they don't have access to the necessary supports.¹

Enter the “science prenup.” A science prenuptial agreement is a catchy name for a simple, straightforward tool that anyone can implement to set ground rules for a burgeoning collaboration. It will save you the time, confusion, and frustration of having to navigate the common miscommunications and misunderstandings that arise when researchers team up.

Step 1: Be Specific

The basic format of any successful science prenup is as follows²:

- 1) Determine who will do what:
 - a. Hint: Be specific
- 2) Define the organizational structure:
 - a. Time and effort
 - b. Meetings and communication
 - c. Regulatory responsibilities
- 3) Address any potentially sensitive issues:
 - a. What does conflict resolution look like?
 - b. Authorship
 - c. Compensation and financial management

Step 2: Confront Uncomfortable Conversations Before They Arise

A common trouble spot investigators encounter is avoiding conversations around potentially sensitive subjects. Questions about authorship and credit often go un-asked. But these are crucial conversations that any good, working relationship includes, and confronting them head-on before they arise helps eliminate misunderstandings and conflicts.

When discussing authorship and credit, consider having a conversation with your co-investigators that asks the following questions³:

- 1) What will be the criteria and process for assigning authorship and credit?
- 2) How will credit be attributed to each collaborator's institution for public presentations, abstracts, and written articles?
- 3) How and by whom will public presentations be made?
- 4) How and by whom will media inquiries be handled?
- 5) When and how will you handle intellectual property and patent applications?

Step 3: Don't Forget the Big Picture

Working through the details of your research project with your collaborators is crucial, but equally important is not to get lost in the weeds and forget the big picture. Even if you've worked with your collaborators

before, or you know them well, remember to discuss the overall goals and vision of your research project before you get started. It's not a given that everyone is on the same page about what success looks like for your project.

Some helpful questions to discuss are:

- 1) What is the overall vision for this collaboration?
- 2) What are the scientific issues, goals, and anticipated outcomes or products of the collaboration?
- 3) When is the collaboration over?
- 4) When is the project over?

Now that you have the basic outline for your science pre-nup, you are ready to get started talking through these important details with your collaborators.

1. Vogel AL, et al., Journal of translational medicine & epidemiology 2014;2.
2. Gadlin H and Jessar K. Preempting Discord: Prenuptial Agreements for Scientists Office of Research Integrity, US Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://ori.hhs.gov/preempting-discord-prenuptial-agreements-scientists>
3. Bennett, M. L. (2011, October 4). Collaboration and Team Science: Collaborative Agreement Template. Retrieved from [https://ccrod.cancer.gov/confluence/display/NIHOMBUD/Collaborative Agreement Template](https://ccrod.cancer.gov/confluence/display/NIHOMBUD/Collaborative+Agreement+Template)