

Designing a user-centred approach to interdisciplinary research on aging: A case study

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OBJECTIVES:

The McMaster Institute for Research on Aging (MIRA) supports interdisciplinary research in aging within a context where discovery to implementation may take decades (Morris, 2011). One way to accelerate impact is to incorporate multiple perspectives, including end-users, into the formation of research questions, methods, and implementation strategies. While interdisciplinary, user-centred research has clear benefits (Bratt, 2012; Domecq, 2014), it can be logistically and functionally challenging. Here, we describe our experiences applying design thinking and user-engagement strategies to address these challenges in research.

METHODS We first conducted an environmental scan of the University's six Faculties (Health Sciences, Engineering, Social Sciences, Humanities, Business, and Science) and its aging research platforms, before creating two funding mechanisms to support interdisciplinary research in aging. The first- a "low-touch" approach - imposed requirements for multi-Faculty involvement and encouraged researchers to apply design thinking, but involved minimal project development on the part of MIRA. The second funding mechanism, a "high-touch" approach, was a facilitated process, including workshops, stakeholder consultations, and mechanisms for iterative proposal development. Throughout both approaches we attempted to capture researchers' perceived challenges, barriers and benefits.

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

Recognizing the diverse motivations, challenges, funding and reward systems across Faculties and disciplines allowed MIRA to inform its approaches to supporting interdisciplinary research. Contrasting the high- and low-touch approaches, we observed differences in the quality and quantity of interactions with stakeholders and the uptake of iterative research design. Future analyses will assess how design thinking and user-engagement can influence the impact of interdisciplinary research.