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From Concept to Community: Building and Sustaining Communication Research Labs

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the conceptual, practical, and relational foundations of building and sustaining communication research labs. Drawing on early models of research teams, we argue that contemporary labs function as living systems that integrate research, teaching, mentorship, and community engagement. The essay outlines practical considerations for creating and maintaining labs, including recruitment, infrastructure, leadership succession, and digital presence, while emphasizing the importance of flexibility and autonomy. Rather than viewing labs as static organizational units, we position them as relational ecosystems that evolve through connection, shared purpose, and adaptability across time and institutions. Ultimately, this work encourages scholars to view lab-building as both a structural and philosophical endeavor that strengthens collaboration, fosters belonging, and bridges the gap between academic inquiry and public impact.

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Conceptual Foundations: What Is a Lab?

As A. P. Edwards et al. (2018) suggest,

> life is a lab, which means that the skills, experiences, and sensibilities gained through involvement with a formal lab are broadly transferable to our larger, life-long pursuits of determining what questions to ask, how to answer them, and how best to live and work with others. (p. 76)

This framing positions a lab not simply as a site of data collection or project coordination, but as a relational and intellectual ecosystem that shapes how scholars learn, collaborate, and navigate the world. Scholarship on research labs echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that labs function as vibrant academic communities that unite scholars, students, and ideas in ways that traditional institutional structures often cannot (C. Edwards et al., in press).

Building on this foundation, we define a lab as a structured, collaborative environment that brings together scholars, students, and community partners to pursue interconnected programs of research, professional development, and engagement. Labs often include multiple research teams working toward complementary goals, but they extend beyond team-based inquiry by serving as sustained spaces for innovation, mentorship, and community engagement. Through activities such as graduate student job talks, public outreach events, and cross-disciplinary collaborations, labs foster both intellectual development and public connection.

This conceptualization draws inspiration from, but also expands upon, the research team model first articulated at Michigan State University in the late 1970s. Miller (1979) and later Turner (2006) formalized the idea of the research team as a collaborative, mentored group designed to train graduate students through hands-on participation in faculty-led projects. These teams played a pivotal role in professionalizing research training in the discipline of communication and continue to influence how collaborative scholarship is structured today. Contemporary labs, however, represent an evolution of that model. Although many still include research teams, labs operate as larger institutional and intellectual hubs that integrate research, teaching, service, and community engagement. They are designed not only to produce knowledge but also to cultivate mentorship, sustain shared identity, and build public-facing visibility. Whereas a research team is often project-based and time-bound, a lab provides enduring conceptual and organizational infrastructure for ongoing scholarship, professional development, and outreach.

In this way, the lab can be understood as both a practical framework and a relational philosophy, seeking to transform individual projects into collective, sustainable endeavors. Understanding what a lab is conceptually sets the stage for examining why scholars might choose to establish one. In the next section, we turn to the practical foundations of lab creation through exploring the motivations, functions, and institutional needs that drive their formation and sustain their growth.

Practical Foundations: Why Start a Lab? Identifying and Selling the Need

When designed with purpose, a lab can offer much more than an organizational space for research. It can function as an enduring infrastructure that connects people, ideas, and practices across time. At its best, a lab provides visibility, continuity, and identity for both faculty and students. Operating under a shared name offers a recognizable collective brand that communicates legitimacy and cohesion within and beyond the university. Saying, "I'm part of the ____ Lab" signals participation in an ongoing program of inquiry rather than a short-term project. This visibility aids recruitment, fosters partnerships, and strengthens professional credibility, often increasing the likelihood of attracting collaborators, donors, and external funding. Visibility alone is not the endpoint. A lab also provides the structure needed to sustain work beyond the scope of any single individual or grant. When designed with longevity in mind, labs can evolve as directors, students, and institutional affiliations change, ensuring that research lines, values, and intellectual memory persist over time and across disciplines.

Labs can function as transdisciplinary infrastructures; that is, spaces that invite scholars, practitioners, and students from across fields to engage with complex problems that exceed the boundaries of any single discipline. Communication research is uniquely positioned to anchor these efforts, as it naturally bridges technology, design, psychology, data science, and the humanities. Bringing together researchers with shared interests but distinct disciplinary training, labs become crucibles for developing hybrid theories and methods.

Another reason to start a lab lies in its potential to create sustainable systems for mentorship and professional development. Labs provide layered mentoring opportunities that are rarely possible in individual research collaborations. Graduate students mentor undergraduates, postdoctoral researchers guide graduate students, and faculty support all members in developing their research and professional identities. Transdisciplinary collaboration adds another layer to this structure, teaching members how to translate ideas across epistemological and methodological boundaries. For instance, students and faculty who work alongside collaborators across fields such as computer science, health communication, or design are developing the capacity to communicate across diverse intellectual traditions fostering skills that are increasingly vital for both academic and applied research careers. This layered model not only scaffolds research training but also promotes leadership, collaboration, and relational accountability. For many students, a lab becomes a scholarly home, or a space where learning extends beyond technical research skills to include belonging, confidence, and a clearer understanding of academic and applied career pathways. These mentorship structures can, in turn, facilitate smoother transitions between cohorts, ensuring that the lab's ethos and knowledge base continue even as members graduate or move on to other institutions and careers.

Finally, a lab can bridge the often-segregated domains of research, teaching, and service. When intentional about its mission, a lab transforms classroom learning into applied inquiry, turns scholarly projects into community engagement, and translates disciplinary expertise into public-facing work. Transdisciplinary collaboration amplifies this integrative capacity, positioning labs as a connective ecosystem where theory meets practice and where academic insights inform and in turn are informed by real-world challenges. Such integration amplifies both institutional and societal

impact, helping position the lab and, by extension, the discipline as responsive to contemporary social needs. Of course, not every lab will accomplish all of these goals, nor should it strive to. Each lab reflects the unique resources, values, and priorities of its members. When cultivated with purpose and relational care, however, we believe that labs have the potential to become enduring ecosystems that generate knowledge, mentor emerging scholars, and sustain collaborative engagement that extends well beyond any single project or person.

Building the Lab: Infrastructure and Logistics

Establishing a lab requires more than securing physical space or purchasing equipment. A sustainable infrastructure that supports collaboration, communication, and continuity must be built. Recruiting and retaining members is often the first and most critical step. Labs thrive when they cultivate a mix of students and faculty who are both invested in the lab's mission and able to contribute meaningfully to its ongoing projects. This process includes developing clear entry points for involvement, such as offering independent study or research credit, and creating structured assignments that help new members gain research experience while contributing to the lab's collective goals. For instance, students might complete annotated bibliographies, assist with literature reviews, develop recruitment strategies, or lead community outreach initiatives. Such tasks not only support lab productivity but also provide mentorship opportunities and professional growth for students at varying stages of their academic journey.

Physical and digital infrastructure shape a lab's visibility and functionality. Securing necessary equipment, navigating space limitations, and maintaining a digital presence all require strategic planning, and often, collaboration with university administration. At many institutions, especially those with strong teaching missions or limited research infrastructure, gaining administrative buy-in can be an early challenge. Faculty may need to demonstrate how a lab aligns with institutional goals, such as student engagement, experiential learning, and community partnership, rather than framing it solely as a research endeavor. Positioning the lab as a space that enhances teaching effectiveness and elevates the university's public profile can help administrators see its broader value.

Many successful labs operate partially or entirely online, using their digital footprint as both a recruitment tool and a platform for outreach. A professional website can serve as a central hub for contact information, member biographies, current projects, and links to media coverage and publications. Social media accounts can amplify visibility by sharing updates, highlighting the achievements of graduate and junior faculty, and promoting community engagement initiatives. For example, lab-wide, public-facing platforms such as *Psychology Today* blogs or community newsletters can translate research into accessible, digestible insights. When managed responsibly, shared digital tools like Google Workspace or lab-specific email accounts streamline communication and help labs establish professional credibility without relying too heavily on university infrastructure. Maintaining some autonomy, through independent websites, external contact points, and shared decision-making, ensures the lab's sustainability even as institutional priorities or administrative structures shift.

Additionally, because faculty and students often change institutions, sustaining collaboration beyond geographic boundaries is another key logistical consideration. Modern communication technologies allow labs to remain connected even when members disperse. Platforms such as Slack, Zoom, and shared cloud drives make asynchronous collaboration possible while preserving regular synchronous check-ins that maintain community and accountability. This flexibility allows labs to continue functioning across institutions and time zones, ensuring that expertise and mentorship relationships endure even after formal affiliations end. Maintaining continuity requires intentional organization (e.g., tracking projects, authorship, and data access), but it also reinforces the idea that labs are living networks rather than static entities bound by place.

In essence, building a lab involves balancing structure with flexibility: developing systems that foster stability and collaboration while remaining adaptable to change. Successful labs create ecosystems where research, mentorship, and visibility reinforce one another, supported by practical logistics that make long-term growth possible.

Sustaining and Extending the Lab

Once a lab is established, sustaining it requires attention to direction, leadership, and adaptability. The most effective labs are not static entities but living, evolving systems that balance continuity with innovation. Maintaining direction is one of the most common challenges. As membership grows and projects diversify, it becomes easy for a lab's work to drift from its founding purpose. Regular reflection on the lab's mission and values can help prevent this. Some long-standing labs, such as the Communication and Social Robotics Labs (COMBOTLABS found at www.combotlabs.org), have used creative strategies, such as selecting an annual theme or keyword, to ensure cohesion while leaving space for new ideas. Even simple practices such as end-of-semester reflection meetings, shared goal statements, or rotating discussion leaders can help preserve clarity about the lab's identity and priorities.

Sustainability also depends on intentional leadership and shared ownership. Labs thrive when directors cultivate future leaders and empower members to take initiative. Planning for leadership succession through co-directorships, graduate student leads, or postdoctoral coordination helps ensure that momentum is not lost when faculty take new positions or when students graduate. Retaining members often requires making participation rewarding and purposeful. Providing credit or compensation, acknowledging contributions publicly, and aligning tasks with students' professional interests encourage ongoing investment. Thoughtful delegation, assigning members to manage recruitment, organize outreach events, coordinate data collection, or manage social media accounts can also distribute responsibility in ways that make the lab's structure self-sustaining.

Extending a lab's reach beyond its home institution is another key marker of maturity. Many contemporary labs maintain collaborations across universities, forming distributed or *sister* sites that share data, mentorship, and programming. COMBOTLABS, for instance, have evolved into a network with affiliated sites at Hope College, Central Michigan University, and the University of Central Florida, while the Family Communication and Relationships Lab (FCRL) has co-directors at Michigan State University and Rutgers University. These distributed models show that labs can remain cohesive even when founders move institutions or when membership becomes

geographically dispersed. Maintaining such reach often relies on clear communication protocols (e.g., https://combotlabs.org/lab-measures/), accessible digital infrastructure, and consistent branding that reinforces shared identity across contexts.

Finally, sustaining a lab requires balancing institutional affiliation with intellectual autonomy. Although university support can provide visibility and legitimacy, too much dependence on institutional resources can limit flexibility. Hosting a lab website independently rather than on university servers, for example, helps ensure continuity if leadership changes or institutional priorities shift. Similarly, cultivating relationships with external partners and individual donors can help diversify funding streams. In all cases, the goal is to maintain the lab's integrity and portability, building something that can grow and travel with its people rather than existing only within one university's walls. When viewed this way, sustaining and extending a lab becomes less about preserving a structure and more about nurturing a culture. A lab's longevity depends on its ability to remain curious, collaborative, and connected, anchored by a shared sense of purpose but flexible enough to evolve as its members and contexts change.

Conclusion

Across their lifespan, research labs embody the same qualities that sustain strong relationships: connection, adaptability, and shared purpose. As this essay has outlined, labs are not static entities but evolving systems that grow through collaboration, mentorship, and community engagement. Their success depends on the intentional cultivation of identity, infrastructure, and culture, as well as the ability to balance institutional affiliation with autonomy. Drawing inspiration from earlier models such as COMBOTLABS and the FCRL, this work positions labs as living networks that continue to adapt and maintain continuity across scholars, projects, and institutions. Ultimately, *life is a lab* captures the relational ethos that underpins these spaces—a shared commitment to learning with others, creating together, and carrying that spirit of collaboration into each new phase of academic and community life.

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