Context for Research. There is growing interest in research-practice partnerships (RPPs): long-term collaborations between practitioners and researchers formed to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving educational outcomes (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Advocates argue that such partnerships enable greater research use in decision making (Tseng, 2012) and address persistent issues in education (Donovan, Snow, & Daro, 2013). Funders share enthusiasm for the approach, investing considerable resources to develop and support RPPs (e.g., Institute for Education Sciences, National Science Foundation, Spencer Foundation). Research in fields outside of education (public health, mental health, criminology) provides evidence for promising outcomes of RPPs (McKay et al., 2011).

However, there has been little research on RPPs in education (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). The existing research base consists primarily of single case studies (e.g., Hubbard, 2010) or of retrospective, first-person accounts from researchers, focused on challenges they experienced creating and sustaining partnerships (e.g., Rosenquist, Hendrick, & Smith, 2015). We do not have a good sense of the range of ways researchers and practitioners structure their work together, the challenges that emerge, the value of such approaches, or the degree to which participation in partnerships fosters research use among educational decision makers.

Purpose. Our project aimed to examine the processes, successes, and challenges of the partnerships funded by the Institute for Education Sciences’ Research-Practitioner Partnership program. Key areas of focus of our descriptive study include the processes of forming and maintaining a partnership; partnerships’ goals and activities; the educational organization’s capacity to use research; and feedback about IES’ support for the RPP program.

Setting. We studied the first three cohorts of research-practice partnerships funded by the Institute of Education Sciences. This two-year grant program supports exploratory research within a partnership context. Researchers and practitioners collaborate on a research project to explore a problem of practice and identify strategies to address the key issues.

Participants. Participants included principal investigators (n=26), researchers (n=35), and practitioners (n=43) who were involved in the partnership work (n=27 RPPs). We began with the publicly available list of the 28 research-practice partnerships funded by IES. Funded partnerships included collaborations among universities or research organizations with school districts, departments of education, higher education...
organizations, and/or other educational or social services agencies. Using a snowball sampling technique, we asked the principal investigators of each RPP to nominate three to four other key researchers and practitioners most involved in the partnership.

**Research Design.** The study used a mixed-method, cross-case design. We developed two survey instruments, one for researchers and one for practitioners. Surveys included five previously-tested scales of items from the National Center for Research in Policy and Practice’s national survey of educational leaders’ research use and attitudes as well as new items specific to the proposed study. New items were tested and revised through a cognitive piloting process. We also developed and pilot-tested interview protocols for each group, as well as a systematic document review process for grant applications.

**Data Collection and Analysis.** The first phase of the study, in summer 2016, involved grant application review, surveys, and interviews. For each grant application, we systematically coded for age of partnership at grant start date, as well as stated goals, activities, and impacts.

We administered two different survey forms (researcher and practitioner) and received responses from 104 grantees (response rate = 82%), including 26 principal investigators, 35 researchers, and 43 practitioners across 27 RPPs. Survey items focused on research use, organizational culture for research, partnerships’ goals, activities, future plans, barriers, and communication strategies.

We conducted interviews with 98 researchers and practitioners (response rate = 73%), including 24 principal investigators, 32 researchers, and 42 practitioners. The interviews focused on the partnerships’ initial formation, their identification and pursuit of specific goals, the ways in which involvement in the partnership has changed both researchers’ and practitioners’ engagement with research, the strategies they used to overcome challenges in partnership work, and their advice about funding and supporting RPPs.

To analyze the first phase of the study, we integrated the qualitative and quantitative data in our analysis and writing phases, using evidence matrices organized around specific claims (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second phase of the study in 2017 will consist of a second survey and interview with these participants.

**Results.** The RPP program is highly valued by researchers and practitioners alike, with 100% of those survey agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would participate in an RPP in the future. Goals most frequently named by both researchers and practitioners included building a foundation for partnership work, developing shared understandings of how researchers and practitioners can learn from each other, increasing the capacity of the educational organization to use research, developing a deep understanding of and addressing a focal problem through research activities, and developing findings that apply to other contexts. Partnerships engaged in a wide range of activities, including design and evaluation activities that are more typical of development grants. They reported the greatest progress in their initial work in building relationships and in refining their understandings of problems the partnership could address. RPPs also noted how the
partnership experience has led to shifts in the ways that research informs and is informed by problems of practice. Challenges included organizational turnover (particularly in the educational organization), differing timelines and scheduling difficulties, and the short duration of the partnership grant.

Conclusions. Study participants were overwhelmingly positive about the potential of research-practice partnerships. Almost all reported that RPPs are worth continued investment from IES and that they had made substantial progress toward their goals. At the same time, they recognized that the time needed for activities to influence policy and practice would be more than the grant period allowed. Findings of this study will not only inform the IES RPP program but will also contribute to knowledge on the processes, successes, and challenges of RPPs in education. This work provides new information about the reported value of these collaborative efforts for researchers and practitioners interested in developing partnerships.

References


