Informing Improvement: Strengthening the use, utility and value of program evaluations  
Panel Submission to spring 2018 SREE Conference

Panel Justification:
This panel addresses enduring challenges related to conducting external evaluations that provide utility and value to key organizational, programmatic and philanthropic stakeholders. The panel features leaders across three sectors – an LEA research and evaluation unit, a research and evaluation intermediary organization, and a philanthropic organization focused on research use – who frame the challenge from their particular perspective and together suggest potential solutions. Specifically, each panelist will address how elements of conventional program evaluation design can inadvertently undermine larger learning goals. Panelists will cite challenges related to designs that privilege the refinement of theory over improvements in practice, fail to either account for or contribute to modifications of the intervention being tested and produce findings that, because they considerably lag project timelines, risk irrelevance. Panelists, along with a moderator steeped in improvement science approaches, will discuss ways to re-think program evaluations for the purposes of improvement. They will consider how developmental evaluation approaches can be used to bring evaluators and practitioners in closer approximation and around shared purposes, enhancing the understanding, value and overall contribution of the work. The panelists will consider how new approaches to program evaluation, can be used to enhance and expand Research Practice Partnerships across a variety of settings.

Abstract One – Norma Ming, San Francisco Unified School District
Reimagining the role of a LEA Research and Evaluation Unit in the Context of a Multi-District Improvement Initiative.

This paper examines on how leaders of a Research and Evaluation unit of a diverse, urban school district are attempting to reframe and recast program evaluation resources to better support the district’s academic mission. The paper calls attention to the myriad demands on LEA R&E units that undermine the impact of program evaluations, including a focus on compliance reporting rather than program improvement, multiple concurrent “micro-studies” that fail to adequately identify or address larger systems’ challenges, and managing university-based studies that can be weighted more heavily toward the needs of the researcher than the school district partner. As the LEA broadly and the unit specifically have been engaged in studying and testing improvement-science based approaches, the Research and Evaluation unit is actively re-thinking it’s approach to program evaluation. In particular, it draws from the LEA’s participation in a Network Improvement Community (NIC) focused on improving middle grades mathematics performance. As part of the NIC, the R&E unit has been closely integrating researchers and practitioners in identifying the overarching evaluation goals and engaging one another at regular intervals to examine data produced through PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) cycles. Similarly, the R&E unit has new opportunities to collaborate with units across districts and re-examine the roles that they play to develop innovative evaluation approaches specifically oriented to supporting larger district initiatives. The paper focuses on the changing role of Research & Evaluation units in the
context of multi-district collaborations organized around building cultures of continuous improvement.

Abstract Two – David Silver, RTI International

Balancing Rigor and Relevance: Evaluation Designs that Inform Improvement Initiatives

This paper draws from improvement science approaches to illustrate new approaches that practitioners and researchers can work together to make progress on longstanding problems of practice. Integrating the tools and methods of research and evaluation into program improvement efforts may offer promising alternative to conventional external evaluations. Because evaluation studies typically provide after-the-fact analyses of program implementation and impact, practitioners may derive more practical benefits from analytic approaches and measures that guide and shape programmatic work as it unfolds. Whereas traditional evaluations may rely on available (sometimes simplistic) measures to assess program impact, evaluation for improvement shifts focus to measures supporting practitioner learning and system improvement. This paper, written by a leader of a non-profit intermediary organization, focuses on how implementation and impact measures designed for improvement can nonetheless have rigor that makes them suitable for causal analysis. To the extent that systems adopt these versatile measures, they can do better evaluation work internally, and prepare for rigorous evaluation when necessary, or when opportunities arise. This paper identifies elements of such research-based, practice-improvement focused framework designed to shift the discourse between educational evaluators and practitioners from one focused on having “data about them that is used by others” to one focused on “having data for them to use.” Examples will be shared from recent evaluations for the California Governor’s Office, the Hewlett Foundation, and the Fund for Shared Insight.

Abstract Three – Vivian Tseng, William T. Grant Foundation

Increasing Program Evaluation ROI: The View from Philanthropy

This paper focuses on how philanthropic leaders seeking to use research to improve practice are investing in new program evaluation designs that increase the accessibility and utility of research and data. While typical evaluation designs provide credible estimates of program impact (thus enhancing credibility of the program and justification for the investment), these approaches can fall short on a number of dimensions. For example, the technical language and methods of these approaches can undermine an in-depth understanding of the underlying research -- potentially reducing buy-in and uptake among practitioners. Similarly, by decoupling knowledge production from knowledge application in practice-based settings, the schism between researchers and practitioners can be reified rather than reduced. The paper showcases recent efforts to “democratize” research and data by engaging practitioners more closely in the research enterprise, particularly in identifying problems of practice and orienting the work around problem-solving in equal measure as publication. In particular, the paper identifies ways of leveraging program evaluation resources to increase the understanding and use of research by far more stakeholders than academic and/or technical audiences. The paper explores early efforts to repurpose program evaluation resources toward research-practice partnerships designed to help support change in local systems and new networks -- and support a broader social trend toward embracing research-use in education.