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Goals and Challenges of Research-Practice Partnerships for Improvement Efforts

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Purpose

Given a growing interest in research-practice partnerships (RPPs), this study addresses a particular need to understand the goals that partnerships pursue, the progress they make towards these goals, and the challenges that emerge that may hinder progress on their goals.

Background

This study draws on a typology of RPP outcomes that was developed by Henrick and colleagues (2016) through input and feedback solicited from multiple RPPs across the country. First, RPPs aim to *cultivate partnership relationships* and build trust among researchers and practitioners, particularly as they first form (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Second, RPPs aim to *increase the capacity of researchers and practitioners to conduct partnership work* (Wentworth, Mazzeo, & Connolly 2017). Third, RPPs are a vehicle for *conducting and using research* in educational settings, particularly when focused on problems of practice identified by education leaders (Allensworth, 2015; Farrell et al., 2017). Fourth, beyond better understanding a problem of practice, RPPs may support educational organizations in making *progress toward their local improvement goals* (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMaheiu, 2015). Finally, many RPPs *inform the work of others* beyond their partnership through a variety of outlets.

We do not yet know much, however, about how prevalent these goals are across RPPs, what partnership leaders perceive as their progress toward those aims, and the barriers to accomplishing them.

Research Design

This two-phase descriptive study uses a mixed-method, cross-case design to investigate the first three cohorts of research–practice partnerships (RPPs) funded by IES (n=28 RPPs) (Creswell & Clark, 2016). We invited the principal investigators (PIs) of each grant to participate, and asked them to verify the continued participation of other RPP members and/or name currently active members. This resulted in a roster of 160 individuals.

This paper reports on findings from a systematic document review of the original grant applications as well as phase one survey and interview analysis. A total of 106 participants from

27 RPPs completed a survey, an interview, or both (see Table 1) (survey response rate = 65%; interview response rate = 61%).

Surveys included five previously-tested scales of items from a national survey of educational leaders' research use (Farrell et al., 2017) and new items that were tested through cognitive piloting. In addition to analyses of individual responses by role, we compared partnership-level responses by determining whether at least 50% of each RPP's participants gave consistent responses.

We developed and pilot-tested interview protocols for researchers and practitioners, which lasted 45 minutes on average. Three researchers proceeded in an iterative fashion to analyze the transcribed interview data through deductive coding based on the framework above as well as inductive coding of themes as they emerged. The research team met regularly to reconcile coding and agree on inductive codes. Team members wrote analytic memos documenting counts of codes and summarizing themes of particular interest, such as the challenges presented here (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Our mixed-methods analysis leveraged the strengths and limitations of each data source, triangulating findings where possible (Creswell & Clark, 2016). We developed a preliminary set of claims that were iteratively refined with evidence matrices organized around those claims (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

As shown in Figure 1, RPPs worked toward multiple goals captured by Henrick and colleagues' (2016) framework. Conducting and using research was one priority, with at least half of the participants in every RPP reporting this as a goal. The majority of RPPs proposed mixed-methods studies, which were often descriptive or exploratory and focused on a wide range of educational issues (e.g., early childhood, adult education, bilingual students, teacher effectiveness, etc.).

All 27 partnerships focused attention on local improvement efforts. At least half of participants agreed that "developing a deep understanding of the focal problem" was a goal of their work. Often, participants began with data analysis to develop a better understanding of the problem, then sought to impact local improvement efforts in longer-term ways.

Participants also emphasized the importance of developing relationships, especially for newer partnerships that needed to build a foundation, and building the capacity of researchers and practitioners to work together collaboratively. RPPs also aimed to inform the work of others inside and outside of their organizations, sharing their work in a variety of venues, including research journals, practitioner-focused magazines, conferences, websites, and videos.

Partnerships did not make equal progress on their aims, however. For each goal identified in the survey, we asked participants to rate their progress toward that goal. The highest levels of reported progress related to building a foundation of work together (mean=3.9). Somewhat less progress was reported for goals related to improving organizational policies and processes (mean=2.2) and improving student outcomes (mean=2.1). Though Figure 2 offers only a snapshot in time, the cross-sectional data are consistent with a developmental progression of partnerships.

Further, the challenges faced by RPPs may have hindered progress on certain goals (Penuel et al., 2016). Partnerships reported some progress on developing evidence toward publication (mean=3.1). This may be related to the difficulty in obtaining and creating data sets for analysis, a significant challenge identified by almost half (44%) of interviewees. Practical challenges likewise emerged as teams worked to identify, clean, transfer, and merge data from

multiple institutions.

In addition, only half of those surveyed (51%) agreed or strongly agreed that the grant program's two-year funding period was an adequate amount of time to meet their goals. Several interviewees noted that this time frame was a challenge for partnerships who were just getting off the ground or had ambitious goals. This was compounded when partnerships had to spend time in their second year applying for new funding.

Conclusions

This study provides evidence that IES-funded RPPs focused on a range of goals, from building relationships to longer-term objectives of improving student outcomes. The goals and challenges surfaced here have implications for policymakers and funders who invest in educational research or RPPs, as well for those who may be interested in working in partnerships.

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Table 1

Response Rates for PIs, Co-PIs, and Other Researchers and Practitioners

	Rostered	Participants (Response Rate)		
		Survey	Interview	Either Survey Or Interview
All	160	104 (65%)	98 (61%)	106 (66%)
Researchers	82	61 (74%)	56 (68%)	61 (74%)
PIs	28	26 (93%)	24 (86%)	26 (93%)
Other Researchers	54	35 (65%)	32 (59%)	35 (65%)
Practitioners	78	43 (55%)	42 (54%)	45 (58%)
Co-PIs	25	20 (80%)	19 (76%)	21 (84%)
Other Practitioners	53	23 (43%)	23 (43%)	24 (45%)

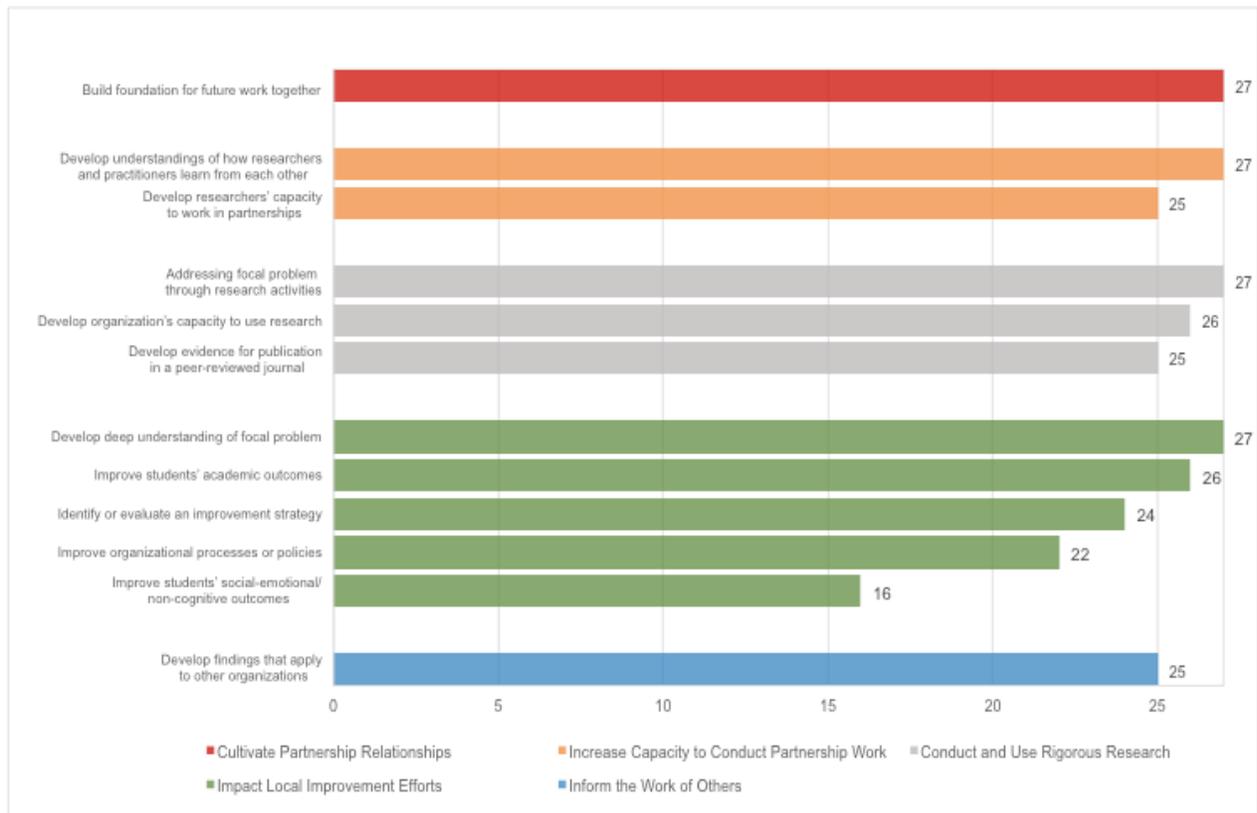


Figure 1. Goals reported by at least half of members of each RPP in survey, n=27 partnerships.

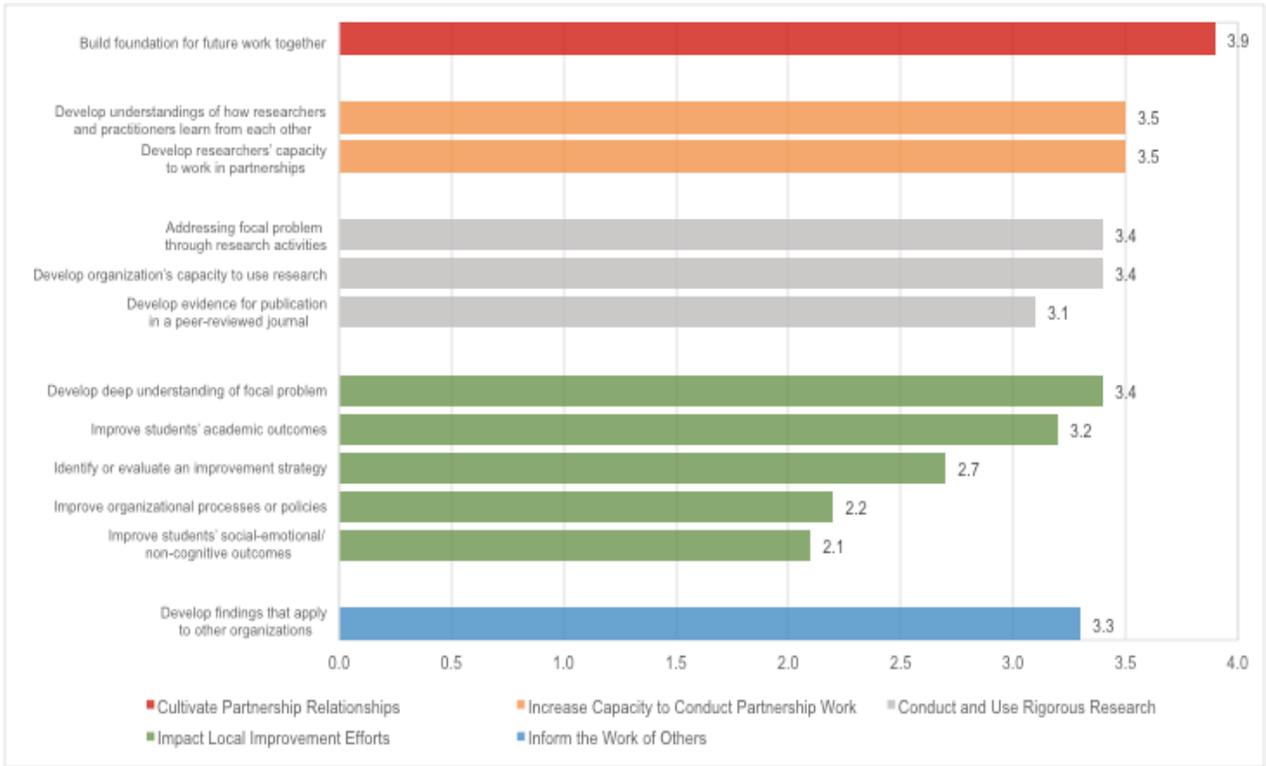


Figure 2. Progress towards partnership goals, in survey. After identifying which goals were relevant for their partnership, participants were asked to report progress. 1=No progress; 2=A little progress; 3=Some progress; 4=Accomplished; 5=Exceeded. n=104 survey respondents.