

The Partnership Pact: Fulfilling School Districts' Research Needs with University-District Partnerships

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Abstract

There has been a recent shift in university-district partnership models from traditional transactional partnerships, which lack a shared purpose, to transformational partnerships that are mutually beneficial to both universities and school districts. These transformational research-practice partnerships have gained popularity in the United States as a means of extending university research resources. To date, limited research has investigated the impact of district-driven research on the community. This qualitative study helps fill that gap by examining the impacts of one newly formed research-practice partnership on district stakeholders. Our findings suggest that authentic district-driven research projects have the potential to provide rigorous and timely research deliverables for school district partners in the community through the production of public scholarship. The themes that emerged suggest that these projects can both meet the district needs in an era of dwindling budgets and can result in a change of practice.

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Throughout the past two decades, independent liberal arts institutions have remained integral parts of their communities, sharing strong values and goals congruent with the community needs and with their university missions. Liberally trained educators are dedicated to creating an educated society and promoting equitable access for all students; they promote learning by utilizing best practices and making decisions based on evidence. Thus, it is natural for liberal arts universities to develop formal partnerships with local schools, and the role of these partnerships between universities and school districts has been gaining national and state interest. Even the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), which oversees the accrediting of educator preparation providers (EPPs) in the United States, adopted in 2013 as one of its five new standards for EPP accreditation, a standard that is focused on partnerships between universities and school districts. Specifically, CAEP's Standard 2 clearly states that EPPs must develop "effective partnerships" in which "partners co-construct mutually beneficial P-12 school and community arrangements" (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2015, para. 2).

University-district partnerships are abundant across the United States; however, they are most commonly traditional *transactional partnerships*, in which the institutions pursue their own goals without a shared purpose. These traditional partnerships usually have one or more of the following three goals: (a) to educate and prepare future teachers and administrators; (b) to provide professional development experiences for current teachers and administrators; and, (c) to collaborate in conducting *university-driven* research projects (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Holen & Yunk, 2014).

These transactional partnerships are certainly necessary and evolve from some individual need (i.e., universities need student teaching placements or districts need professional development providers); however, the missions of liberal arts institutions, as well as CAEP's new standards, are also calling for developing more *mutually* beneficial partnerships. This shift from transactional partnerships to more *transformational partnerships* focuses on building common goals and mutual benefits among stakeholders (Butcher,

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Bezzina, & Moran, 2011; Orr, 2006, 2011). Such transformational partnerships are ongoing, expansive, ever growing, relationship-oriented, and “expand the capacity of each institution for educating students, conducting research, and serving communities” (Sutton, 2010, p. 62). Additionally, transformational partnerships have a shared purpose, collaborative leadership, feelings of trust, adequate resources to meet partnership goals, and openness to learning and change by the partners (Butcher et al., 2011).

One potentially transformational partnership is the *research-practice partnership*, which occurs “when researchers and district leaders develop long term collaborations [where] they leverage research to address persistent problems of practice and policy” (William T. Grant Foundation, n.d., para. 1). Research-practice partnerships exhibit the following characteristics: “1) long term, 2) focused on problems of practice, 3) committed to mutualism, 4) use intentional strategies to foster partnership, and 5) produce original analyses” (Coburn et al., 2013, p. 2). Examples of such partnerships include the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, the Houston Education Research Consortium, and the Los Angeles Education Research Institute.

Butcher and colleagues’ work (2011) extending theories of leadership (i.e., Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978) into theories of partnerships, and Coburn and colleagues’ (2013) research-practice partnership framework, form the theoretical basis for this work. Beyond these, though, this is also an investigation of how research-practice partnerships can be seen as *joint work at boundaries* (i.e., “across institutional, cultural, and professional divides”), as defined by Penuel, Allen, Coburn, and Farrell (2015, p. 194). This theoretical framework argues against the translation metaphor, a process aimed at reducing the gap between research and practice only in a one-way fashion; this framework views it not only as research to practice but also as practice to research. Further, this work seeks to investigate whether “researchers and practitioners working in partnership are engaged in processes of collaboration and exchange that are both messier and potentially more transformative than

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the one-way translation of knowledge of research into practice” (Penuel et al., 2015, p. 183).

Developing a Transformational Research-Practice Partnership

Despite the growing popularity of transformational research-practice partnerships, to date limited research has examined the claims that school district and university partnerships are truly *mutually* beneficial (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine if and how one new research-practice partnership met district research needs by examining the perspectives of district leaders.

The partnership in this endeavor was developed in conjunction with the creation of a new Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program at the University of Portland, a small (approximately 5000 students), private, Catholic, liberal arts university with an urban campus located in Portland, Oregon. It was established in 2013 by the School of Education in collaboration with a non-profit evaluation association and six public school districts that collectively serve over 90,000 students. A strong feature of the composition of the partnership was the addition of one full-time university faculty member and two doctoral research fellows, in addition to the creation of a specific partnership-devoted Ed.D. course, *Research for Evaluation and Action*. The six participating school districts are among the most diverse and high-need districts in the state; up to 74 different languages are spoken in these districts’ schools, and approximately 65% of the students are economically disadvantaged.

This partnership seeks to capitalize on *boundary crossing*; to facilitate a method for the six districts and the university to jointly plan and produce high quality research focused on learning, equity, and results. The partnership’s goals also reflect the mission of our liberal arts university, which emphasizes service to the community (i.e., the human family) as reflected by the Mission Statement of the University of Portland (2016) as it is featured on its website:

...we pursue teaching and learning, faith and formation,

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service and leadership in the classroom, residence halls, and the world. Because we value the development of the whole person, the University honors faith and reason as ways of knowing, promotes ethical reflection, and prepares people who respond to the needs of the world and its human family.

To align with this mission, the research questions for each of our projects are identified first by the school districts, not by the university, before being jointly conceptualized. This identification procedure involves four to five university faculty members and non-profit research scientists meeting with school district superintendents and their top cabinet members to learn of district research needs. These district requests varied from literature reviews on effective language interventions, progress monitoring and assessment tools for English Language Learners, and how educators can address the mental health needs of students who have experienced trauma. There were also requests for data analyses on topics including the relationship between exclusionary practices and high school graduation, school climates for males of color, and summer school program evaluations. These research questions were answered during the school year by the doctoral fellows and the faculty member and during the summer in the *Research for Evaluation and Action* course by Ed.D. students. Faculty members conducted school on-site observations and interviews. After the research was completed, the university faculty members and non-profit research scientists met again with the school district superintendents and their top cabinet members to present formal reports. The success of these efforts is detailed in the results section.

Conducting the research through the summer course provides an opportunity for students to learn how to conduct research in inherently messy and complex situations, situations they will soon or presently encounter in their current positions. Further, this model actively engages the doctoral students in the university's foundational value of giving back to one's community. While it is evident

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that this model offers many such benefits to the university and its doctoral students, the benefits to the districts have not yet been studied until now.

Methodology

Since a multi-dimensional perspective was desired, the opinions of 13 senior district leaders who participated in the partnership were examined to investigate the perceived value placed on the research deliverables. Therefore, faculty members of the university asked district leaders three open-ended questions to gather feedback to help identify areas for improvement in the partnership. These questions are listed as follows:

- To what degree is the research partnership meeting the research needs of the district?
- How is your district using the information provided by the research partnership?
- What else do we need to know about improving this partnership?

The questions were distributed to the district leaders over a two-week period in both paper/pencil and in-person interview format, depending on preference, and 65% of the 20 possible district leaders participated. Positions held by the district leaders included: Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and various department directors. District leaders had varying degrees of prior connection to the university; yet all of them joined the partnership upon its inception and had equal access to the research capacity the partnership provided. The participant responses revealed perceptions and experiences supporting a perceived benefit to the districts (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Results were compared to theoretical perspectives highlighted in earlier partnership research, including an emphasis on examining examples of boundary crossings and joint work at boundaries (Penuel et al., 2015). All responses were open coded by two raters to ensure reliability and agreement to identify potential themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

District leader perspectives were examined to investigate to what extent the research-practice partnership was addressing the research needs of the districts. Emergent themes, detailed below, suggest that authentic district-driven research projects have the potential to both meet the district needs in an era of dwindling budgets and can result in a change of practice.

Meeting District Needs for Research Capacity

First, it appears that this partnership is one method to engage the local districts in teaching and research with mutually beneficial results, while employing values congruent with a liberal arts school of education. Not only is the university benefiting from this community engagement by providing authentic program evaluation experiences for its Ed.D. students, but the district leaders also described reciprocal district benefits: “We are very appreciative of the partnership, and the communication has been stellar” and “Having actual analysis completed with our data lends relevance and credibility.” Positive feedback included: “We feel very fortunate to be a part of this partnership,” “This partnership has been invaluable,” “To us this is the gold standard in partnership,” and “The whole concept is brilliant.” Further, it appears that district leaders valued the partnership in its ability to make data meaningful, both to themselves at the district level and to teachers. One superintendent said:

I think we’re all grappling with having so much data. Being... data rich, information poor. Just feels like we’re layering assessment upon assessment upon assessment. And our teachers are frustrated, and we’re just trying to move ahead. [The partnership] talked me through the various data results [from the assessments], which helped me realize that some of the assessments weren’t useful and could be dropped while others provide a lot of information and we might want to drill down some more.

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This was an example of the *joint work at the boundaries* (Penuel et al., 2015), in that this work is performed collaboratively and was not merely provided to the districts with a one-way directionality of research to practice. It also is an example of how oversimplified the translation metaphor can be, and how much more complex the decisions of what to “do” with research in practice truly are.

Moreover, it appears the partnership helped districts in organizing and analyzing existent, often exhaustive, data. District leaders described how the partnership “synthesized a lot of information that was collected over time in multiple databases.” Many districts have limited resources for research in regards to the implementation and management of new and existing programs in their schools. For example, one respondent said the partnership “allows our district to expand our research and evaluation capacity with a strong and credible partner.” Additionally, districts have felt the burden of dwindling budgets in recent years: “Our district’s ability to do the research is limited and the partnership’s support has been invaluable to helping us shift paradigms in supporting our youth.” The partnership seemed to fill a research needs gap for districts by providing high-quality, yet affordable, data analysis and scholarly research.

In an age of assessment and accountability, the partnership also seems to be helping districts use data in meaningful ways. The partnership may therefore be helping with implementation science, as indicated by district leader statements such as: “Their recommendations about data collection will be very helpful as we try to streamline information so data collection across systems aligns,” and “I feel that the partnership went over and above expectations because they provided us not only the data we needed, but an improved template for going forward.” This feedback demonstrates how the partnership has provided the opportunity for Ed.D. students and district leaders alike to develop great expertise in program evaluation design, data alignment needs, and the practices necessary if causal statements are desired.

How Districts Used the Data in Practice

This study about community-engaged education also explored how districts used the research provided by the research-practice partnership. Thematic analysis indicated that district participants used the provided information in multiple ways. Decision-making is one of the significant ways that various stakeholders used the recommendations. For example, one district's report on balanced assessment led them to determine and publicize their philosophy of assessment, develop an official assessment calendar, and determine a professional development plan around assessment literacy for their teachers. The district reported that this work helped them determine a direction and move forward, with an emphasis on the joint work conducted across the boundaries of university and district: "You got us going on what we needed to do. We had bits and pieces but not the momentum, so thank you."

Other stakeholders reported that the work helped them decide whether or not to continue implementing a current program: "This report helps us to better understand [the program] and, specifically, whether we should continue to invest in this program at all, maintain the current program, or expand the program." In other cases, the research helped district personnel design future implementation plans or "how to adjust current practice." One district leader emphasized how the work will directly impact the community: "This will help us improve the overall program and thus increase the positive impacts on families." Another data analysis on a back-to-school conference helped the district determine first if they should repeat the experience in the subsequent year, and then what changes should be made: "I'm going to take this information and I'm working with our leadership this week to start to draft a plan for next year. So we're going to learn from what we didn't do well and absolutely capitalize on what we did do well to build it again. It's nice to legitimize a great big effort." Conversely, the faculty, doctoral fellows, and Ed.D. students learn about the effects of new and innovative practices like this professional development initiative, leading to further cycles of practice-to-research and research-to-practice.

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Overall, much of this work was cyclical, beginning with the districts wanting to learn more about best practices, then working within the partnership to make instructional decisions about programs and policies, and finally leading them to develop, to implement, and to analyze the results of the implementation plans. One district, for example, requested a report on how to diversify the Advanced Placement (AP) courses offered at their schools to better accommodate low-income students and students of color. The district leader said, “[The partnership is] looking at how do we take these [AP] classes and make them help students be more successful. What are the barriers in the classes?” This information then led to disaggregating the data for the district, which then led the university and district to create a data-driven action plan focused on making advanced courses attainable for all students. This research allowed the district to investigate their own equity policies and practices: “This project is really leading to some deep future work that we’re planning, particularly for underrepresented groups, so we’re really diving in deep with this now and having conversations at our schools.” In this particular instance, the partnership research had practical and meaningful application in working for more equitable student outcomes that led to action and future research. The flow of knowledge was two-way, across the boundaries of the different institutions (i.e., Penuel et al., 2015), with the research ideas stemming from practice, flowing to research and back to practice, and often leading back again to further research and evaluation.

Recommendations

This study examined the impacts of one research-practice partnership between a liberal arts university’s school of education, a non-profit research organization, and six public school districts. Our findings suggest that this partnership is mutually beneficial as defined by Coburn et al. (2013), in that these district-driven research projects comprise a method of providing rigorous and timely research deliverables for public school district partners, while the university’s Ed.D. students gain imperative and authentic knowledge about conducting research in real contexts. This work

is even more important given that most of the Ed.D students also work in the participating six districts as teachers and administrators, providing a ‘trickle-down effect’ of the knowledge gained through conducting the research. There is also a ‘trickle-up effect’ when these Ed.D. students take knowledge back to their districts that they have learned during completion of these district research reports, such as best practices in program evaluation and planning, creating effective databases, and effective data collection procedures.

As others, have found, this partnership model may be a means of extending university intellectual resources to the larger community (Coburn et al., 2013). It is clear, however, that more research is needed. Subsequent phases of the research should track the long-term perceptions and outcomes of district leaders as well as investigate the impact on other stakeholders (e.g., students and teachers). Current research efforts beyond this paper’s scope seek to explicitly understand the perspectives of the Ed.D. students.

Although transformational partnerships are growing in popularity, they can be difficult to establish and maintain (Turley & Stevens, 2015). Despite well-intentioned goals, both universities and school districts may struggle with collaboratively developing the desired experiences, curriculum, professional development opportunities, and/or research projects that improve the profession. Research-practice partnerships are inherently more messy, complex, and challenging than the translation metaphor of “research to practice” implies (Penuel et al., 2015); however, scholars remain optimistic in the potential of authentic, *transformational* collaborations between universities and public school districts (Orr, 2011).

Several key recommendations for implementation of a university-district partnership have emerged from our research and are suggested to those interested in implementing a transformational research-practice partnership. We present these recommendations here.

- **Secure sustainable funding for an extended period.**

Our funding partnership involves a six-year rollout that included the addition of a full-time faculty member and two

doctoral fellows. The importance of both setting-up and maintaining research-practice partnerships has been emphasized through funding initiatives sponsored by prestigious institutes and foundations (e.g., the Institute of Education Sciences, Spencer Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation) and funding can therefore be sought through either outside agency sponsorship, institutionalized as part of the college or university, or developed as a new model of shared funding to ensure longevity of the partnership. Traditional funding models typically place the researcher as the authority figure; therefore, secured funding is necessary for successful boundary practices to truly allow joint partnerships between the district and the university (Penuel et al., 2015).

- **Engage district leaders both collectively and individually.**
The university hosts a breakfast for all partner district leaders each year to report on overall project completion and allows members to share feedback with the whole group; individually: university faculty meet with district leaders at the district administrative offices to receive RFPs and to provide reports with well designed (or “engaging”) visual research briefs.
- **Establish strong communication networks.**
Determine the most effective means of securing timely meetings, obtaining data, and knowing whom to contact for clarification in data analysis, as district data are often “messy;” Schon (1983) described engagement in solving real-world problems as the “swampy lowlands” of professional practice. Strategic and explicit boundary practice planning is necessary to “better understand the cultural worlds of participants in the partnership” (Penuel et al., 2015).
- **Empower graduate students.**
Engage graduate students in partnership research projects that relate directly to their own professional practice.
- **Strike the appropriate balance.**
Continuously strive to achieve a balance between seeking meaningful research projects from the districts and not over-promising project completion, recognizing the limited capacity

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of the university partners in providing research for districts.

- **Mutually prioritize the highest need areas in district-driven research projects to ensure a successful partnership.**

Continue to work on mutual understandings regarding the limited university research capacity and the research needs of districts that can never be fully realized within the partnership alone.

A university-district partnership that engages community partners may be a viable means of providing school districts with needed research resources, particularly in an era of tightening district budgets and the reduction and/or elimination of their research and evaluation departments. The findings of this report reveal that this university-district based partnership may truly be transformational as defined by Coburn et al. (2013, p. 2), in that it is (a) long term (i.e., the partnership is currently in its third year, and many of the research projects are also on-going and long term), (b) focused on problems of practice (i.e., the research conducted all stem from district problems of practice jointly navigated between the institutions), (c) committed to mutualism (i.e., the partnership strives to serve the district while also meeting the needs of its Ed.D. students), (d) uses intentional strategies to foster partnership (i.e., explicit methods of boundary crossing are prescribed, utilized, and documented), and (e) produces original analyses (i.e., all joint work is original). While the districts reported benefits, as described above, the university benefits through the hands-on, real-world research experiences afforded its Ed.D. students. Further, as increased numbers of Ed.D. students graduate from the program with these experiences, especially those who already work in the six partner districts, these practitioners now have the capacity to evaluate their own programs, which extends the capacity of the district itself. In this way, this work meets the needs of our university's mission to "respond to the needs of the world" by directly addressing the needs of the local, highly diverse, K-12 schools. This beneficial partnership capitalizes on the strengths of higher education and the needs of K-12 schools in a mutual

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and meaningful way. One district leader summed it up well: “The partnership highlights how our systems should support one another and learn how to implement best practices more effectively.” As such, the university research reports can help guide effective district instructional practices and can evaluate each district’s current programs in a time-sensitive manner. In essence, the partnership provides authentic program evaluation learning experiences for doctoral candidates while enculturating them into the vital mission of a liberal arts university.

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