

## INTRODUCTION BY HEATHER T. ROWAN-KENYON

There are large gaps in educational access and attainment between the rich and poor in the United States. In 2016, there was a 25 percentage-point gap in college enrollment rates for high school graduates in the top and bottom family income quartiles. There were also gaps in attainment rates, with only an estimated 11 percent of dependent students from the lowest family income quartile attaining a bachelor's degree by age 24, compared with 58 percent of students from the top family income quartile (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright, Santillan, Pell Institute and PennAHEAD, 2018).

*Reflections on Connecting Research and Practice in College Access and Success Programs* is the result of a collaboration between the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (Pell Institute). ASHE received a grant from the William T. Grant Foundation to explore collaborations with the Pell Institute and four additional partner organizations, including the Council of Independent Colleges, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE). The goal of the ASHE/Pell collaboration was to address how researchers and practitioners can best work together to address their mutual goal of reducing these gaps and fostering increased opportunity for college access and success for all students and especially for low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities that federal programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP as well as many other programs at the state and local levels are intended to serve.

The overall grant was based on the premise that too often researchers conduct studies that have little relevance to policymakers and practitioners, and policymakers and practitioners are too often unaware of the relevant research that does exist. The aim of this initiative was to improve research-and-practice connections by encouraging collaborations between members of our higher education research association (ASHE) and members of each of five organizations that seek to help higher education policymakers and/or practitioners identify, understand, and apply research-based evidence. Intermediary organizations can play an important role in connecting research and practice, but frequently these intermediary organizations have limited capacity to effectively play this role.

The goal of our specific collaboration between ASHE and the Pell Institute is focused on exploring links between research and practice in TRIO and GEAR UP programs to increase college access and attainment. In particular, we focused on how researchers and college access and success practitioners can best work together to inform one another and promote better outcomes for students. While our examples are primarily from the federal TRIO/GEAR UP programs, it is our hope that this compilation will inform the work of researchers and

practitioners who are working generally in the field of college access and success, especially those with a focus on low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities. Some of the primary questions that emerged from our working group include:

- How do we know what works, when, in what context, and for which students?
- How can TRIO and GEAR UP practitioners make the best use of the extensive tracking data required for performance reporting in a manner that gets beyond compliance? The data has detailed individual student records of the outcomes of the students that are served. We ask the question of how this data can be used to institutionalize using data for program improvement.
- How do we bring together external and internal evaluators to promote internal program improvement and external program evaluation?
- How do we build relationships and trust between researchers and practitioners?
- What is the map of practitioner knowledge related to research and evaluation?

This essay collection is comprised of contributions by researchers and practitioners based on some of the above themes. In the first chapter, *Historical Reflections and Thoughts Moving Forward on Connecting Research and Practice*, Laura Perna from the University of Pennsylvania focuses on inequality in connecting research and practice. Paul Beasley from the University of South Carolina shares some historical perspectives of TRIO programs and connecting research and practice in college access. Then, Margaret Cahalan from the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education shares 16 lessons for researchers and practitioners from the Mathematica Policy Research's National Evaluation of Upward Bound Study.

Chapter two, *How to Make Collaboration Work*, is composed of seven essays focused on researcher and practitioner collaborations. Judy Marquez Kiyama from the University of Denver and Kristan Venegas from the University of Southern California each talk about building trust between researchers and practitioners. Ezekiel Kimball, Tyson Rose, Yedalis Ruiz, and Ryan Wells illustrate one of these partnerships with researchers and practitioners from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and share lessons learned from their work. Angela Bell, Robert Anderson, Georgia Hughes-Webb, and Adam Green explore why relationships between researchers and staff of college access and success programs can be difficult but argue that the benefits for all are significant, using an example of the West Virginia GEAR UP program evaluation. Christopher Mullin from Strong Start to the Finish examines how to structure programs to acknowledge both program improvement and excellence, with a specific focus on leadership and management. Oscar Felix from Colorado State University and past COE Board Chair talks about formulating communities of practice to better link research and practice in the TRIO community. Mika Yamashita from the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education discusses the origin of the competitive preference priorities that appeared in Student Support Services and Talent Search grant applications in recent years and urges TRIO programs to articulate their own specific logics of evidence use that reflect how TRIO professionals work in practice.

In our final chapter, *The Relationship between Research and Practice: The Recent Landscape*, Margaret Cahalan explores the implications of the What Works Clearinghouse and

the Competitive Preference Priorities (CPPs) for TRIO programs and services. Mika Yamashita then shares our attempt to map the terrain of practitioner knowledge related to research and evaluation. Members of our working group conducted an on-line survey of TRIO project directors to map the landscape of practitioner use of data and evaluation, issues of collaboration between practitioners and academics and contractors--- and to some extent tried to map the substantive knowledge base of practitioners. We had 80 TRIO program practitioners respond to our 80-question survey, and Mika shares these findings in her piece. Finally, Heather Rowan-Kenyon, Mika Yamashita, and Margaret Cahalan provide a wrap-up of the work of the collaboration.

## REFERENCES

Cahalan, M., Perna, L.W., Yamashita, M., Wright, J. & Santillan, S. (2018) *2018 Indicators of higher education equity in the United States: Historical Trend report*. Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) of the University of Pennsylvania.

### About the Author:

Dr. Heather Rowan-Kenyon's research focuses on postsecondary student learning and success, particularly for students underrepresented in higher education. Her book, *Technology and engagement: Making technology work for first generation college students*, co-authored with Ana Martinez Aleman and Mandy Savitz-Romer, was recently released by Rutgers University Press.

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