RESEARCHER AND PRACTITIONER COLLABORATION TO ADVANCE INQUIRY AND ITS USAGE *BY ANGELA BELL, ROBERT ANDERSON, GEORGIA HUGHES-WEBB, AND ADAM S. GREEN*

Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between researchers and staff of college access and success programs. Although collaborations between the two are at times challenging, the outcomes are significant for all. The essay goes on to show a case study example from the West Virginia GEAR UP, and concludes with a list of recommendations.

Introduction

Researchers and evaluators of college access and success programs come to their work armed with knowledge of both research methodologies and the field gained from their education, experience, and immersion in literature and research. As they begin framing a study, gathering background information, and planning data collection, however, researchers are faced with an aspect of their work for which schooling and research literature provide little guidance—working with program staff. Researchers are dependent on and must work with practitioners of college access and success programs to gain crucial information ranging from contextual information to student participation and outcome data. This essay argues for a collaborative approach to conducting research on these programs both for the values collaboration embodies and the benefits it offers. While it may be more applicable to qualitative inquiry and program evaluation, these are solid precepts for quantitative inquiry as well. We 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. We follow with a brief case study of the West Virginia GEAR UP program evaluation and conclude with recommendations to be applied to research more broadly.

Challenges to Collaboration

Educational researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders are invested in understanding what works in college access and success programs. So why is the relationship fraught with challenges? While their area of work is similar, the choices made in how to engage in that work are different. Choosing to be a researcher versus a practitioner belies different orientations and even different values that can lead to differences of opinion and priorities. Both groups possess knowledge and experience about these programs from their education and work. This deep knowledge can work to prevent one from seeing the different knowledge and perspectives of the other and how the two might be complementary. Research ethics themselves may deter researchers from developing relationships with program stakeholders and staff. Researchers may fear for real or perceived lack of objectivity due to relationships with the people implementing

the program of study. Another substantial challenge to building relationships between researchers and practitioners is simply time. Jointly framing inquiry, understanding perspectives, and collaborating take a significant amount of effort and time that must be prioritized in order to be coordinated and carried out. From the perspective of the practitioner, being an active participant in the research process can be seen as time taken away from actually implementing the program.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle in fostering relationships and collaboration between researchers and college access and success program staff is the development of trust. Practitioners may be skeptical that research can adequately capture the program's complexity and the constraints and context that frame its outcomes. Practitioners have responsibility for program success and have loyalty to its stakeholders, employees, and participants. This can foster very real fears about the uses of research and how it will make the program look, especially to funders. Unfortunately, such fears could lead to curtailed participation and candor. Researchers then may fear they are not getting complete and unbiased information.

Consequences

When mistrust prevents good relationships, research or evaluation is something done to rather than with the program, resulting in less than full cooperation and incomplete information and data provision. This threatens the validity of the research and limits the likelihood of appropriate conclusions and recommendations. A poor relationship and a sense among practitioners that they have been the subject of assessment as opposed to participants in a learning process decrease the chances of recommendations actually being implemented.

On the other hand, a good relationship and collaboration lead to better research design, more complete information and data, and therefore higher quality research. Ownership of and participation in research processes by practitioners increases the acceptance of findings and conclusions and the application of recommendations (Patton, 1997). A unified front between researchers and practitioners about recommendations can also enhance the response from decision makers, funders, and policymakers. On a more philosophical level, working collaboratively shares power and responsibility for research design and decisions between researchers and program practitioners (Patton, 2002). This puts into practice the sense of equity that drives educational access and success researchers and practitioners in the first place. More globally, it holds in balance professional principles of competent and systematic inquiry with respect for people both immediately and indirectly affected by the process and outcomes of research (American Evaluation Association, 2004).

While we might philosophically agree that collaborative research and evaluation are good and have clear benefits, actual implementation requires planning, communication, flexibility, and responsiveness to feedback. Following is a case study of how the staff and evaluators of a college access program collaborated to improve both the evaluation and the program itself.

Case Study

Background of West Virginia GEAR UP. In July 2008, the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WV HEPC) was awarded a U.S. Department of Education GEAR UP grant

totaling nearly $18 million. GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) aims to help more students prepare to be successful in some form of education and training beyond high school.

The 2008-14 WV GEAR UP grant was comprised of two structural components: (1) annual early academic interventions for a cohort of 7th grade students who would graduate high school in 2014 (called the 2014 Cohort) and (2) a priority student approach focusing on just-in-time outreach interventions for 11th and 12th grade students in need (called the Priority Group). Over the six-year period, more than 13,000 unduplicated students received services in a total of 48 public schools. College access services included, among other interventions, tutoring, mentoring, college and job site visits, financial aid advising, and summer residential academies. Parents and family members participated in college and career planning, including FAFSA completion workshops. Educators in GEAR UP schools participated in meaningful professional development aimed at helping them prepare students to aspire for and be academically prepared for postsecondary education.

Proposed WV GEAR UP Evaluation. Like many college access and success programs, the WV GEAR UP project included broad goals to ground its program evaluation. Specifically, WV GEAR UP sought to significantly increase (1) the academic performance and rigorous preparation of 2014 Cohort students for participation in postsecondary education; (2) the number of high-poverty, at-risk students prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education; (3) the rate of high school graduation and participation of 2014 Cohort students in postsecondary education; and (4) 2014 Cohort students' and families' knowledge of postsecondary educational institutions, admissions requirements, and financial aid. WV GEAR UP also had a fifth goal that aimed to ensure effective, efficient, and appropriate use of resources through intentional collaboration with identified partners committed to GEAR UP goals.

To determine the extent to which the program achieved its five broad goals, the evaluation plan included in WV GEAR UP's grant proposal transcended a design aimed simply at answering questions required by the Federal Annual Performance Report (APR) due each April (e.g., number of student and parents served, perceptions of college affordability). WV GEAR UP proposed a rigorous evaluation that was grounded in research questions framed to address both project implementation (the quality and quantity of project activities and interventions) and impact (the degree to which project objectives and goals were achieved). According to preliminary plans, implementation findings were intended to allow project managers to make formative decisions about activities and interventions on a day-to-day basis to provide the greatest benefit to stakeholders. However, the ultimate evaluation plan was designed to look across project implementation and outcomes to make summative statements about the project as a whole.

Early Challenges: Building a Trusting Relationship. WV GEAR UP selected an external evaluator through a Request for Proposals process based on the evaluation company's model to evaluate the impact of the program through effective data collection, creation of a web-based data warehouse for all data sources, and reporting of program implementation and outcomes data beyond APR requirements.

Developing a trusting relationship between WV GEAR UP practitioners and the selected external evaluators was a challenge at first. This was partially because the program was well underway by the time the evaluator was awarded a contract (January 2009). The program had begun in July 2008, giving program staff and local stakeholders several months to prepare for implementation before the evaluator was brought on board.

At the outset of any project, much coordination and planning are required to establish expectations and timelines to which all parties agree. In the case of the WV GEAR UP project, program staff had to undergo the process twice—once following the grant award and again after the selection of the evaluator. Although the repeated process required time and effort for planning and coordination at two different points in time, this coordination was important to the integration of the parallel activities of the grant and its evaluation. The proposed evaluation plan included a variety of methods and strategies for collecting and analyzing data. Following award of the contract, the nature and scope of the data to be collected had to be finalized, data collection tools had to be designed, and strategies and protocols for collecting the information had to be established.

Although WV GEAR UP staff at the state level understood and appreciated the need for comprehensive data collection, site coordinators (local liaisons responsible for planning and implementing services) did not have the same understanding of the need or appreciation for the possibilities the information might afford them. Site coordinators also did not understand why survey response rates were set so high (80% for students and 50% for parents). Repeated, consistent explanation of the importance and need for the information helped site coordinators become active participants in data collection, particularly for surveys; however, some continued to perceive the magnitude of data collection to be a burden.

Through their efforts, WV GEAR UP staff learned that reaching down from the higher education sphere into the K-12 sphere to provide and evaluate college access programs is not a successful model. The approach must be collaborative and inclusive, valuing the perspectives, experiences, and expertise of stakeholders at both levels. If all parties feel they are valuable to the effort, they will be more likely to value and utilize the available data to make decisions and scale best practices.

Cultivating a Strong Relationship. Because there were minor bumps in the road at the outset of the WV GEAR UP evaluation—as in most studies of a similar scope and complexity—WV GEAR UP staff and the external evaluation team worked intentionally to develop a relationship that was mutually agreeable and capable of producing high-quality, useful information. Ultimately, the shared goal of implementing a strong research design and developing valid and usable knowledge about the program's implementation and outcomes united program staff and evaluators in a common effort. The evaluator's general philosophy of collaborative, utilization-focused, and pragmatic (Patton, 1997, 2002) evaluation practice likely gave the team a greater propensity toward cooperation with program staff than researchers who subscribe to other philosophies. The philosophical outlook alone, however, did not result in a strong relationship or a high-quality evaluation. Both the program and evaluation teams took explicit action to build, refine, and reinforce the partnership.

Communicating Regularly. An important and fruitful strategy for building understanding and trust between WV GEAR UP staff and evaluators was regular interaction through in-person meetings and other forms of communication. Evaluators often met with the WV GEAR UP Advisory Board to discuss evaluation progress and findings. They also attended monthly site coordinator meetings to provide information or materials, collect data, and answer questions. In addition to formal interactions, WV GEAR UP staff and evaluators interacted regularly through in-person office visits (both scheduled and impromptu), telephone calls, emails, and text messages. The frequent communication helped ensure the evaluation team had a comprehensive understanding of program administration, operations, and priorities at all levels of operation. Likewise, program staff developed an extensive understanding of evaluation processes, requirements, and constraints. Maintaining regular communication promoted responsiveness to emerging needs (e.g., programmatic or evaluative adjustments, data requests from policy makers). Further, the varied communication methods allowed both partners to see and hear the knowledge and passion each brought to the partnership.

Over time, the interactions between WV GEAR UP staff and evaluators helped members of each team get to know each other personally. These personal relationships further enhanced the sense of trust and respect. Some researchers and evaluators may be hesitant to develop personal relationships with program stakeholders due to a fear of compromising their objectivity. However, in the case of the WV GEAR UP project, the development of personal relationships across teams was in keeping with traditional Appalachian cultural values (e.g., hospitality, personalism; see Jones & Brunner, 1994) and promoted mutual trust and appreciation for the knowledge and perspectives of each team. Neither team perceived that research objectivity was compromised through positive personal relationships. The fact that the Year 6 WV GEAR UP evaluation report won the 2015 AERA Division H Outstanding Publications Competition in the Program Evaluation category further suggests that the quality of the research was not detrimentally affected.

Maintaining Flexibility. Although an evaluation plan and other documented agreements (e.g., contract, scope of work) formed the basis for the formal relationship, the evaluation team and WV GEAR UP staff acknowledged from the outset the possibility that changing circumstances may necessitate flexibility in preliminary plans and agreements. For program staff, such flexibility manifested itself in various ways: revisions to requirements of local sites' annual work plans, changes in emphasis from year to year, addition of programmatic opportunities, and so on. Programmatic flexibility was both a necessary response to changes in federal requirements and a determined response to emerging needs and evidence of program effectiveness. One may expect that program staff will adapt or refine implementation strategies throughout the life of a program in order to achieve goals. However, evaluators had to remain mindful that programmatic changes may demand corollary adjustments to evaluation plans. Again, the shared goal of building knowledge about the program as implemented—complete with formative modifications—ensured that evaluators and WV GEAR UP staff collaborated to make adjustments when needed and appropriate.

Flexibility in the evaluation was not merely a response to programmatic changes. It was also needed in revising the scope of work and data collection to meet WV GEAR UP's needs. The integrity of the underlying research design was never compromised or altered; the quasi-experimental design was carried out largely as initially envisioned. However, the scope of the

data collected transformed over time in response to the needs of the program. Content and format (paper versus online) of student, parent, and school personnel surveys was revised carefully over time to ensure that the instruments efficiently captured all information vital to both the evaluation and to program staff's evolving needs. Items in survey instruments were routinely reviewed collaboratively; unnecessary items were deleted, and response options were revised as needed. Additionally, new survey or interview items or sections were added to ensure that data were available for areas of critical importance to WV GEAR UP staff. In Year 3 (2010-2011), the annual student and parent surveys were revised to include items assessing familiarity with and utilization of the College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV) web-based planning and information portal. Although not designed specifically for the WV GEAR UP program, the portal did provide information and services relevant to GEAR UP goals, and WV GEAR UP staff promoted its use as part of the program. Program staff needed information about students' and parents' knowledge and use of the portal to design further awareness campaigns and training efforts. Therefore, evaluators included relevant survey items to provide additional value in the evaluation with minimal additional cost.

Changes to the scope of evaluation reporting were also negotiated in Year 1. As initially designed, the evaluation team was to provide quarterly summaries of evaluation activities and progress, along with key findings and policy implications. Comprehensive reports of findings and recommendations were to be delivered in Years 3 and 6. During the first year, however, the Chancellor of the WV HEPC expressed a desire for more regular formal reporting of comprehensive findings. As a result, evaluators restructured the scope of the reporting plan to include quarterly progress summaries three times a year, annual reports of formative findings, and a final summative report at the conclusion of Year 6. In revising the project's reporting requirements, the evaluation team and program staff worked to ensure that changes in the time and cost burden was still within the scope of the original contract and budget. All of these instances of changes to program and evaluation activities required and exemplified close collaboration between staff and evaluators that resulted in taking advantage of rising opportunities and meeting stakeholder needs.

Sharing Responsibilities. One of the most powerful examples of the benefits of collaboration between program staff and evaluators involves the administration of annual student and parent surveys. Each year, participating students and parents completed surveys about their knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to WV GEAR UP and students' postsecondary options. Every other year, students and parents in a comparison group also completed surveys. Over six years of the project, 18,135 student surveys and 10,303 parent surveys were collected.

The surveys provided valuable information for the evaluation; they were also a required component of the federal program. Federal requirements mandated an 80% response rate for student surveys and a 50% response rate for parent surveys. Although response rates of that magnitude are not entirely unattainable, they are incredibly difficult to achieve. Evaluators would not have been able to gain the cooperation of several thousand parents and students each year without significant assistance from GEAR UP site coordinators. WV GEAR UP staff and evaluators worked together to coordinate local survey administration through the site coordinators who distributed and collected parental consent forms and surveys.

Strategies for the consent process and survey administration changed over time both to ease the burden on site coordinators and to improve response rates. After the first year, WV GEAR UP staff and evaluators collaborated to develop a durable consent form for participants that covered all data needs and the entire anticipated time-frame of the research—a shift from the preliminary strategy of requiring a new opt-in consent form annually. As it became clear that reliance on paper-based surveys might pose a barrier in achieving required response rates (and posed a substantial burden on site coordinators), the evaluation began to incorporate online surveys. Different web-based survey strategies were tried (with paper surveys available as needed), and by Year 4, the program met or exceeded response rate requirements (see the figure below). Moving to an online survey format both improved response rates and facilitated easier to implement processes for site coordinators. These solutions met the needs of both program staff and evaluators.

Figure 1: WV GEAR UP student and parent survey response rates increased over time as a result of improved administration practices developed collaboratively by evaluators and program staff.
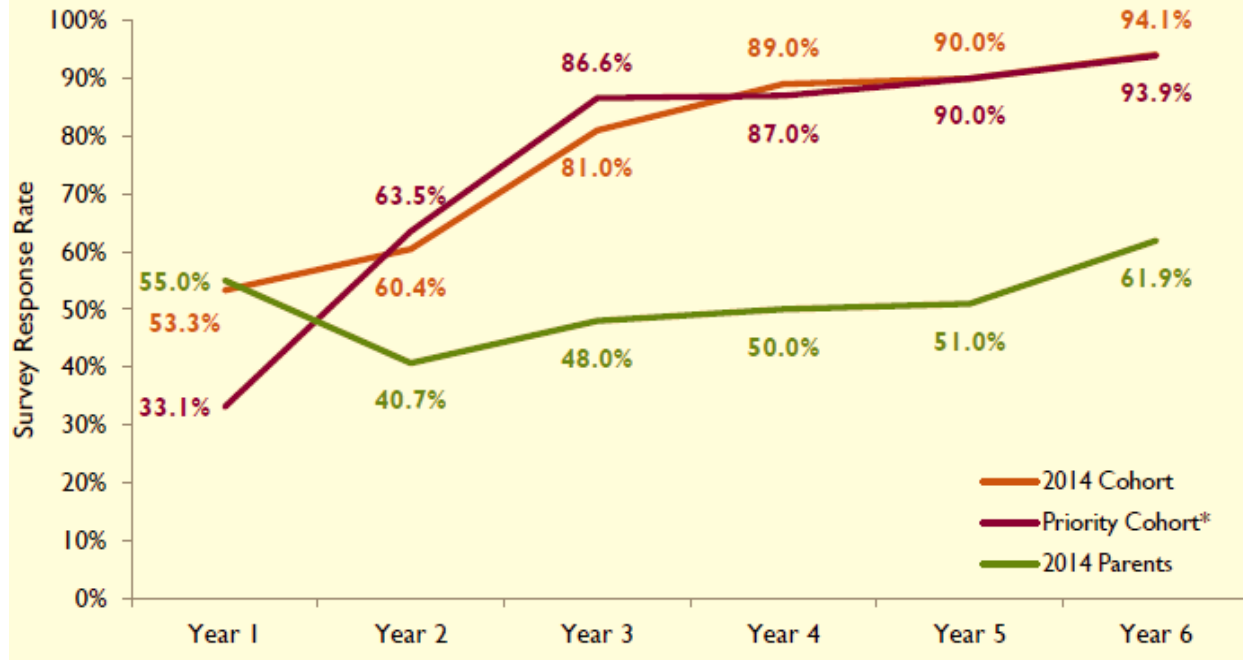
Beginning in Year 3, the evaluation team provided ongoing updates about survey response rates, and in Years 4 through 6, evaluators provided site coordinators with real-time survey completion updates through an integrated survey tool and participant management system. Providing timely information about response rates helped site coordinators develop targeted lists of non-responders for follow up. Response rates steadily improved over time—and exceeded minimum requirements—as WV GEAR UP staff and evaluators adjusted survey administration strategies.

Triangulating Results and Interpretations. As part of reporting processes, evaluators routinely shared preliminary drafts of all reports with program staff for review. Reviews

conducted by WV GEAR UP staff primarily served as validation checks for reported data and the evaluation team's interpretations of findings. Asking program staff to review the interpretation of findings and proposed recommendations was an important strategy for evaluators to ensure they properly understood the program's context. Some researchers may be hesitant to invite program staff to be part of the reporting process; they may have justifiable concerns about the possibility of clients asking them to modify or exclude findings. Building a strong foundation of trust, understanding, and respect, however, can work to prevent such actions. WV GEAR UP staff never asked evaluation staff to change or exclude findings. Program staff only reviewed findings to ensure their accuracy and completeness and to provide additional insight or information to assist evaluators in drawing comprehensive and contextually meaningful conclusions and recommendations. The strategy, built on trust, ensured that all appropriate perspectives were taken into account. This opportunity to provide feedback on early reports also fostered program staff trust in the evaluation as well as a sense of ownership that fed future collaboration.

Utilization of Findings. Evaluators' trust in program staff typically increases when staff make use of evaluation findings. Professional evaluators design evaluation studies to be useful and used by stakeholders. In fact, the program evaluation standards specifically address the utility of an evaluation for intended users (Yarbrough, Schulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). When stakeholders do not use findings of evaluation studies in meaningful ways, evaluators may become frustrated and skeptical about stakeholders' motives. Throughout the WV GEAR UP evaluation, however, program staff regularly reviewed and used evaluation findings to guide and inform decision- making. At the state level, findings were used to revise annual work plans, which were included in annual sub-grant agreements and site coordinator contracts. At the site level, friendly competition for results led to incorporation of findings. For instance, at the close of Year 3, when results showed that for a third year, only 17% of students or fewer could correctly identify the cost of one year of tuition at a four-year public college or university in West Virginia, WV GEAR UP staff designed and implemented specific interventions to improve understanding of tuition costs. By the end of Year 4, approximately 34% of students and 30% of parents correctly identified the cost of one year of tuition at an in-state college. By the end of their senior year in high school, students in the 2014 Cohort were three times more likely than their non-GEAR UP peers to accurately estimate the cost of tuition.

The evaluation team also used feedback to adjust not just tools and processes but also how they interacted with program staff. For instance, in an ill-fated attempt to bring both clarity and levity to a description of survey administration procedures, evaluation team members devised and presented a skit to demonstrate the process. Rather than finding the skit light-hearted and helpful, however, site coordinators found it condescending and unnecessary. Their comments on the evaluation form WV GEAR UP staff administered following the event clearly voiced their displeasure. Evaluation staff took this feedback into consideration when deciding how to improve interactions with site coordinators. At the next site coordinator meeting, evaluators specifically referenced the offensive skit (and site coordinators' poor opinion of it) in a good-humored way and promised not to offer any more theatrical performances. Evaluators' willingness to accept and use that feedback improved the relationship between the evaluation team and site coordinators, which became very positive over time.

Within the partnership, utilization of data and findings was only possible because both partners were open to critiques and suggestions. That openness was enabled and enhanced by the trusting relationship the partnership built throughout the life of the WV GEAR UP grant.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The fruitful relationship between WV GEAR UP staff and external evaluators was developed through intentional acts by both groups. What follows is a list of recommendations based on their experience.

> 1. Include program staff in the development and/or finalization of research or evaluation plans.

> 2. Evaluation/research staff and program staff should communicate regularly in varied formats to foster the relationship and so that each is abreast of the other's progress and needs.

> 3. Develop from the onset and maintain an openness to flexibility. Both program and evaluation/research needs require it.

> 4. Share responsibilities for data collection and its improvement. Data collection that is less burdensome and more efficient is respectful of everyone's time and increases the likelihood of comprehensive collection.

> 5. Utilize formative findings. Both evaluators and program staff can improve their work and the relationship by doing so.

The WV GEAR UP program and its evaluation are an example of how intentional collaboration can result in deeper trust between parties and a more productive evaluation relationship. The collaboration resulted in a high-quality evaluation that met federal requirements, responded to changing needs on both sides, and ultimately provided information that improved the program. To learn more about WV GEAR UP and its evaluation and research efforts, visit www.wvgearup.org

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