

## CONCLUSION

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The essays included in *Reflections on Connecting Research and Practice in College Access and Success Programs* are diverse but have in common that they highlight the value of researcher and practitioner collaboration in working together to promote better outcomes for students. The essays also address the important but complex practical question of “how researchers and college access practitioners can best work together to inform one another and promote better outcomes for students.”

This collection presents examples of multiple forms of “research” conducted in TRIO and GEAR UP and other college access and success programs. While the current policy focus on federal programs is associated with strong pressure to use evidence-based interventions that are supported by quantitative random assignment, “rigorous” research (as reported by Cahalan and Yamashita), the examples of research included in this work are not limited to this type of research. The essays report studies that use qualitative, mixed-methods, and participatory action research. Furthermore, while some “researchers” conducted more theoretical research, others conducted specific program evaluations (Bell, et. al, Kimball, et al). TRIO programs have a long history of requiring extensive performance measurement at the individual student level, often involving years of tracking all the students served by the program. Essays written by college access professionals (Mullen and Felix) demonstrate how practitioners can use available information to produce internal knowledge that supports program improvement in the absence of external researchers. Some essays (Beasley and Cahalan) present lessons learned from the challenges of collaboration between researchers and practitioners such as in some of the national evaluations of TRIO programs.

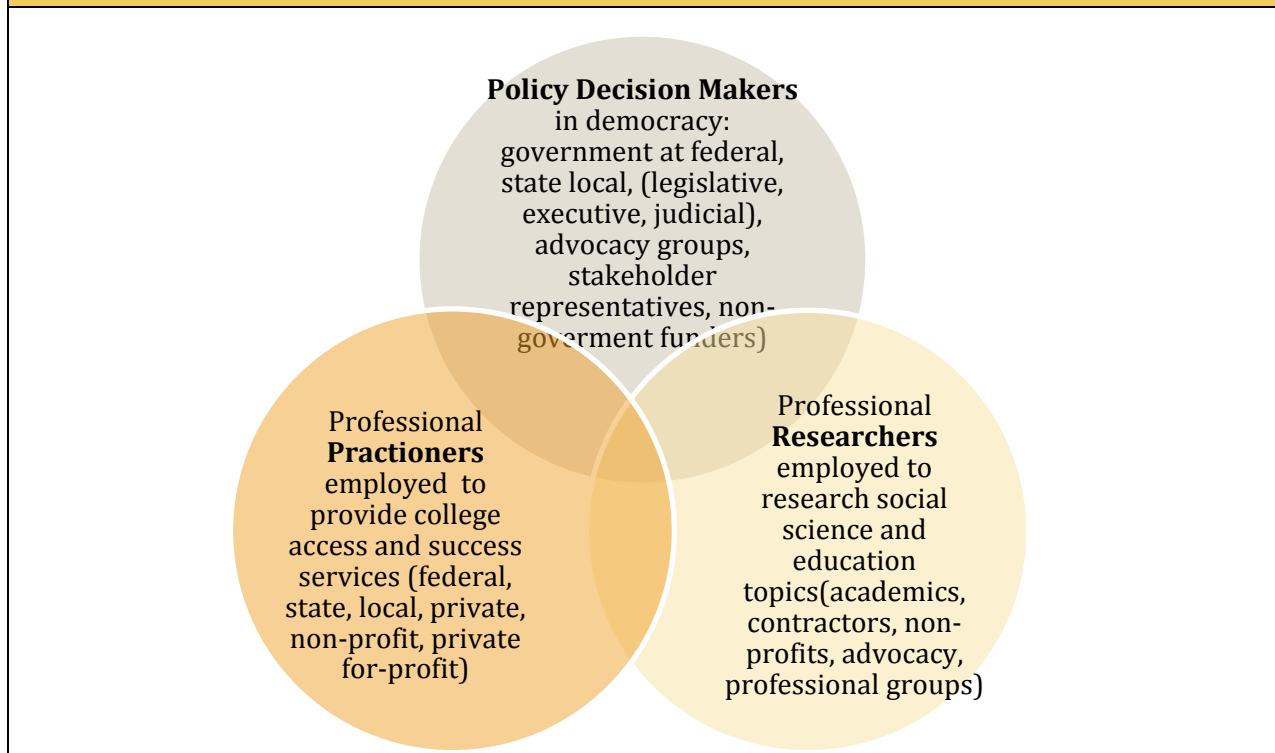
Although researchers and practitioners are frequently viewed as two distinct groups, the essays show that this distinction is becoming blurred in an era of increased technological tools for processing and analysis of data, and the increased demands for routine use of data to inform programming. This distinction also becomes artificial when we define research broadly as “activity that employs systematic, empirical methods to address a specific question” (Cahalan). Performance monitoring could also be seen as research as it collects information systematically to answer a specific question, i.e., if a program meets pre-determined performance standards.

The authors also showcase the wide variety in who is doing this work. Often we see that academic researchers have a strong ongoing connection to college access and success programs, either as a staff member or even as a participant during their own pre-college/college experience. While one might automatically default to a researcher as a professor working in academia, in actuality researchers doing this important work are part of a much larger group, including program evaluators, staff of intermediary organizations, and university administrators.

In reflecting on this work, we recognize that the dichotomous designation of “researchers” or “practitioners” is an oversimplification. For one thing, it leaves out the important group of

policy decision makers that influences the context and rules under which the college access and success programs operate, and that provides research funding and at times mandates the exact types of research to be conducted. As Figure 1 below illustrates, the identities of “practitioners” and “researchers” involve considerable actors and overlap in practice.

**Figure 1: Groups of overlapping actors concerned with fostering better college access and success outcomes for students**



As described by Perna’s essay, however, researchers and practitioners continue to be different just as research tasks and the day-to-day services provided by practitioners continue to be different. Researchers and practitioners work under different norms and incentives. They are expected to produce different types of knowledge. The essays written by researchers describe challenges that researchers face when they negotiate research questions with program staff (Vergas, Kimball, et al.). The researchers need to be able to design a study that can respond to a program’s interest in order to keep their support for the research, and to improve the quality of the study. At the same time, their study design needs to respond to their particular research interest. Program staff needs to be able to ask questions that are meaningful for their programs (Mullen, Yamashita). One of the important questions we need to ask, beyond researchers acquiring buy-in from program staff to conduct research, is how both researchers and practitioners can formulate research questions that are meaningful for both groups.

Below we list some recommendations that have emerged from the diverse essays that we hope will improve future collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

- 1. Think About Adequate Research Needs During the Program Planning and Funding Process But Decouple Competitive Funding Decisions From Results of***

***Research Evaluations of Particular Interventions.*** One of the key recommendations is that the research question should be meaningful to programs and there should be adequate resources to adequately address the research questions; however, it is important to ensure that funding for research does not reduce or supplant ongoing program services. Ethically, when college access and success services are at stake, it is important to not deny services to any student simply for the sake of a study. To ensure an honest and open study, it is also important to decouple funding for future needed program services from the outcomes of evaluations of a particular intervention. TRIO practitioners and researchers should collaborate on creating feasible, ethical, valid, and accurate research and evaluation plans, as highlighted by Laura Perna and Bell and colleagues. These collaborations can empower TRIO practitioners to have a voice in the research process and ensure that the research will meet relevant knowledge needs for TRIO practitioners. For researchers, the voice of practitioners is essential to ensure the quality and validity of the data (as discussed by Bell) and to determine whether the research plan is feasible and ethical, as detailed by Cahalan in her essay on lessons learned from the Mathematica Upward Bound Study. Yamashita added that TRIO practitioners need to share their own logics of evidence use that reflect how TRIO professionals work in practice, since randomized control trials provide little information about actual interventions for individual program improvement. More research is needed to reflect how TRIO programs actually work.

2. ***Seek Authentic Collaborations from the Time of Conceptualization.*** One challenge that many researchers and practitioners face is that collaborations can often be one-sided. A researcher may show up on the doorstep of a program director asking to study program students in a certain way; or a program staff member may reach out to a researcher with a request to collect data in a particular way. While these transactional relationships may work, they are not true authentic collaborations built from a point of mutual understanding. As Kiyama discusses, collaboration develops through relational networks of people who share the same social justice concerns. Vergas discusses researchers need to ask meaningful questions by first listening to program staff.
3. ***Build on Existing Relationships and Particular Contexts. Structure Frequent Communication.*** While the collaboration between researchers and TRIO practitioners is an asset, the process is rarely easy and it takes effort to build and maintain a successful partnership. As Kiyama and Kimball and colleagues shared, partnerships that develop out of previously formed relationships can be most helpful. As Beasley shared, these relationships can work to develop interventions that are “custom fit” to the particular program and/or campus context. As was highlighted in all of the essays focused on collaboration, open and frequent communications and dialogues are needed between the staff and researchers throughout the life of the partnership. Kristan Venegas and others also highlighted that the key to developing authentic collaborations is to build trust between the participants and the researchers. One way to do this is through some shared areas of responsibility such as data collection. Both the researchers and practitioners will need to be flexible, as shared by Bell and colleagues. These partnerships and shared responsibilities that may be necessary to make data collection “less burdensome and more efficient” can also help break down silos and increase the likelihood of much higher quality and more comprehensive data collection.

4. ***Include both Traditional and Innovative Research Methods in Preparation of Both College Access Professionals and Academic Researchers.*** The essays highlighted the need to help in developing the competency of traditional and innovative research and evaluation methods in the academic training of TRIO professionals, as well as the need for researchers' own training to include innovative research methods such as collaborative, participatory, culturally responsive, and action research. Beasley called for development of a course of study to prepare TRIO professionals to administer effective college access and success programs. He highlighted the new certificate program, *College Access and Success Programs Graduate Certificate*, a joint initiative between Colorado State University and the Council for Opportunity in Education, as one example to provide current college access professionals with academic courses and meaningful qualifications directly related to their work. Researchers can also be better prepared for entering these collaborations through the inclusion of a variety of new methodologies such as collaborative, participatory and action research, which values and promotes authentic collaboration between researcher, practitioner and participant.
5. ***Developing Reflective Awareness of the Importance of Differences in Positionality in Influencing Outlook.*** For both practitioners and researchers, it is important to be self-aware and reflect on the importance of their different positions in influencing their interpretations of the data and its implications. This can be an asset in deepening and strengthening the research and practice.
6. ***Disseminate Research in an Accessible Way.*** As seen in our attempt to map the landscape of practitioner knowledge related to research and evaluation, there is a disconnect between the published research in this area and what practitioners are actually reading. Research results must be made available and accessible to TRIO practitioners and policymakers. In our landscape analysis presented by Yamashita, there are signs that that in the recent SSS funding cycle, practitioners accessed studies from the What Works Clearinghouse as required in their grant writing. However, it is not clear what practitioners took away from the research findings to design their programs. Researchers need to think about disseminating scholarship in ways that are available and accessible, beyond peer-reviewed scholarly publications, which is usually the most valuable product for these researchers, and use multiple outlets in the form of trade publications, reports, executive summaries, and other alternative formats to get the findings out there to increase the possibility of recommendations for practice actually getting implemented. Felix reports that a professional community of practice network is a promising path to inform practitioners about evidence-based practices.
7. ***Acknowledge Program Improvement and Excellence is the Goal.*** As can be seen in all of the essays, practitioners and researchers alike strive to produce programs and conduct research with the intent of improving practice to benefit students. Bell and colleagues emphasize the importance of formative evaluation as findings could contribute to improve programs and services throughout the process. Mullin presented how leadership and effective management can facilitate using data to make mid-course improvements and to explain performance and highlight program improvement. As Cahalan highlights in her

piece about evaluation errors in random assignment studies, one cannot assume that implementation of “rigorous” study will be free from errors and that these issues need to be acknowledged early. Checks and balances need to be in place in examining the data, and if mistakes are found, they need to be corrected.

8. ***Recognize the Dynamic Quality of both Practice and Research.*** As the essays illustrate, just as there is not always a clear distinction between researchers and practitioners, there is also no clear linear pathway from research to practice—or from practice to research. Rather, one might think of multiple pathways with continuous feedback loops. Practice is dynamic, whether it is informed by research or not— with a necessity for continuous adaptation and responding to new circumstances. Useful research also needs to build in a dynamic and adaptive quality. A study begun in one year may find that the program has changed substantially by the next year for reasons out of the control of the researchers.
  
9. ***Consider the Importance of the Federal Context and Competitive Grant Making Process, and Reconsider the Current Federal Approach to Evidence Use.*** The nature of operating as a federally funded entity is an important aspect to be considered when we discuss how to improve collaboration between researchers and TRIO practitioners. Because TRIO is a federally funded program, the role of federal government needs to be examined. As Beasley and Cahalan described, TRIO experiences a strong top-down policy pressure to use a specific type of research evidence and to participate in specific research studies that may affect individual program funding and the existence of the programs themselves. Despite this strong pressure to be evaluated, the focus of data collection at each program is on performance outcome monitoring rather than evaluation or a focus on a particular set of interventions that might be studied. Because of this structure, federal-level decisions and guidance on what constitutes evidence and how programs should use evidence has a direct consequence for each program. Government’s evaluation policy matters for TRIO programs. Practitioners put a great deal of time into their competitive proposals, conforming to government requirements, but while they may meet the requirements on paper, these responses are often not feasible in practice. The CPP requirement in all of the 2015-2017 competitions was based on the idea that “interventions” supported by “rigorous evidence” if implemented in the TRIO programs would improve the program outcomes for students. As Cahalan described in her two essays, this is a very limited view of how evidence can or should inform practice and what constitutes practice in a particular context. As shown in the landscape survey and in the essays in this volume, there are multiple ways evidence feeds into various aspects of practice. For example, Bell and colleagues’ essay reports on the use of research to improve program processes, and Kimball and colleagues’ essay reports how the program saw Action Research as helpful. Essays written by TRIO practitioners and researchers highlight the complex policy context in which TRIO programs operate and how federal government’s evidence initiatives, evaluation resource allocation, and monitoring requirement present challenges to programs concerned with conducting useful research that might meet each individual program’s information needs. *The essays presented here suggest there is a need to reconsider the current federal government’s approach to research use and to providing guidance to TRIO professionals in how best to use research.*

**10. Focus on Potentially Useful Questions that are Feasible to Address with the Resources and Information Available to be Collected or Compiled.** Cahalan illustrated how questions being asked by the government are often not easily answered in a valid manner and how this can lead to serious threats to validity of the study and can potentially be harmful to program stakeholders. Asking the right questions, ones that are aligned with the feasible data in the end is one of the most important collaborative actions that can occur between researchers and practitioners.

In conclusion, this collection of essays is intended to advance conversations and actions surrounding effective ways to link research and practice on the role of college access and success programs in increasing college access and attainment. We hope that the essays promote thinking and dialogue about how we can all work collaboratively to create meaningful improvements in higher education access and success.

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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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