
2020

Encouraging Practitioner Research Engagement: Overcoming Barriers

Annie M. Cole
Pacific University, cole.annie.m@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Cole, Annie M. (2020) "Encouraging Practitioner Research Engagement: Overcoming Barriers," *Journal of Practitioner Research*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.
<https://doi.org/10.5038/2379-9951.5.2.1165>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jpr/vol5/iss2/2>

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Encouraging Practitioner Research Engagement: Overcoming Barriers

Abstract: *Despite a body of evidence showing the vast benefits of practitioner engagement in higher education research, the literature suggests that many practitioners do not regularly engage in research activities due to three main barriers: the busyness of daily practice, perceived irrelevance of research to practice, and inadequate training to engage in research. This article reviews the literature on each of these three barriers, providing practitioners in higher education insight into how to overcome these barriers to successfully engage in regular research. Through an analysis of current literature, this article furthers the understanding of practitioner research engagement despite common barriers.*

Practitioner research in higher education is essential for many reasons. First, practitioners who engage in research obtain deeper insight into the personal experiences of their students (Nguyen et al., 2019), which in turn leads to constructive adjustments in practice and in student learning outcomes (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010) and supports research-informed decision making (Schuh et al., 2016). Second, with the cost of higher education at an all-time high, student affairs professionals must show proof of higher education's value to the public by studying and reporting on the positive outcomes of college programs and services (Blimling, 2013); an increased call for accountability in higher education has been ever more present in the higher education literature since the beginning of the 21st century (Blimling, 2013; Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010; Keeling et al., 2008; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014; Suskie, 2015). Finally, by continuously engaging in research, higher education practitioners can grow their ability to serve diverse members of the college student body, including non-traditional and first-generation students, student with disabilities, and minority student groups. As college student enrollment continue to grow in diversity, so does the need for practitioners to engage in research and develop programs that support diverse students (Dungy & Gordon, 2011; Hardy-Cox & Strange, 2010).

Given the benefits and the necessity of practitioner research engagement, it would seem reasonable that practitioners would be drawn to engage in this work regularly. However, the literature suggests that many practitioners do not engage in regular research activities (Hatfield & Wise, 2015; Jablonski et al., 2006), which can negatively impact practitioners' ability to make data-informed decisions regarding services and programming (Carpenter, 2001; Schuh et al., 2016; White, 2002). This lack of practitioner engagement in research is due to three key factors: the busyness of daily practice (Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Sriram, 2011), the perception that research is irrelevant to applied practice in higher

education (Kezar, 2000), and inadequate training in research methodologies and skills (Daniel et al., 2016; Herdlein, 2004; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Sriram, 2011; Waple, 2006; Young & Janosik, 2007).

Article Purpose

How can practitioners overcome the barriers of busyness, perceived irrelevance, and inadequate training to attain the benefits of engaging in regular research activities? This article provides a synthesis of the literature on each of these three topics, providing the higher education practitioner with practical ways to overcome barriers and engage in regular research activities. Higher education program administrators, faculty, and university leaders can use this review as a guide to promote practitioner engagement in regular research across their college campus. This article extends the current literature by bringing together the works of various scholars into one cohesive text that can be used to move the field forward toward regular practitioner engagement nationally.

Overcoming Busyness: Making Time for Research

Higher education practitioners are often known for wearing many “hats”, from that of administrator to teacher to advisor. It is no surprise then that many practitioners have difficulty finding time in their busy schedule for research, with the “tyranny of the urgent” demanding most of their attention (Sriram, 2011). How can practitioners find the time and energy to incorporate research activities into daily practice? Scholars offer a few suggestions, including committing to learning, developing an assessment disposition, integrating scholarship and practice, and collaborating with peers.

Commit to Learning

Sriram (2011) suggests that practitioners make a personal commitment to lifelong learning, viewing research activities as a way to continuously learn about best practice. Specifically, practitioners can set aside time for reading scholarly literature each day, explore topics that are personally interesting, or start a reading group with colleagues on campus. Through a commitment to learning, practitioners are also taking responsibility for student learning, a quality that Elkins (2015) argues is essential of higher education practitioners. When it comes to practitioner research, Elkins quite bluntly challenges practitioners to “just do it” (2015, p. 46).

Develop an Assessment Disposition

Higher education practitioners who perform assessment regularly have common dispositional qualities: a sense of curiosity and inquisitiveness, a value for assessment's positive impact on decision making in the field, and a dedication to assessment that is unwavering regardless of personal skill or confidence. Those without these natural qualities can develop them by engaging in regular assessment work that is directly aligned with professional practice and supported by the department and campus culture (Theonnes, 2017).

Integrate Scholarship and Practice

Many practitioners find scholarship in higher education to be overly focused on theory without application to practice (Kezar, 2000; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Kezar (2000) asked higher education researchers and practitioners to comment on the types of literature they found most helpful to their work, finding major differences between the two groups. While researchers valued studies that pushed the field forward through critical questions, practitioners found the most value in solutions-focused studies that offered practical advice for work in the field. Similarly, Hanson and Denzine (2000) identify differences between the work of institutional research offices on campus and higher education practitioners, with practitioners generally focusing on student transition, development, and engagement in college. Identifying the differences between departmental objectives, while also working collaboratively across departments, can help practitioners understand their unique role in research taking place across campus.

Collaborate with Peers

Collaborating on research projects can help practitioners benefit from their colleagues' skills in different research methodologies, practices, and instruments (Hanson & Denzine, 2000). Practitioners should not limit themselves to collaborations with colleagues; graduate students studying higher education are especially interested in engaging in research in the field and tend to be frustrated by the lack of opportunities available to them (Bettencourt et al., 2017). Practitioners can invite graduate students on campus to assist with research projects to ease the burden of work and to support the development of research skills in the next generation of higher education practitioners.

Changing Perceptions: Perceiving Research as Relevant

Even with the suggestions above, some practitioners may find it difficult to prioritize research engagement due to a perception that research is just not worth their time. Kezar (2000) finds that higher education practitioners see a disconnect between research literature and daily practice, with most research neglecting to offer practical advice for work in the field. How can practitioners shift their own perceptions and the perceptions of their colleagues to create a practitioner culture that values research engagement? They can answer meaningful research questions, find ways to connect research to practice, and create an assessment culture within their department and institution.

Answer Meaningful Questions

Higher education practitioners tend to find interest in specific topics of research, including student body demographics, learning outcomes, student development, and the transition to college (Hanson & Denzine, 2000), whereas researchers who are not practicing in the field work toward theoretical and methodological significance (Kezar). If practitioners are encouraged to engage in research that is meaningful to their own practice, then they are more likely to find value in that work. Additionally, allowing higher education practitioners to take ownership of their own work has been found to help in the development of scholarship skills (Ribera, 2012). Practitioners who take the lead on developing and pursuing their own research projects tend to find such projects meaningful, and the skills of scholarship will emerge as a result of this work.

Connect Research to Practice

Similar to the first suggestion of answering meaningful questions, practitioners who can connect their research engagement to personal practice will find more value in it. Theonnes (2017) explored how to develop an assessment disposition in higher education practitioners, finding that when practitioners engaged in assessment that was connected to a larger mission, they began to find value in the work and developed an assessment disposition as a result (e.g., qualities of curiosity, inquisitiveness, and a value for continuous learning). When practitioners find themselves solving issues through research that result in improved practice, they tend to find more value in it (Kezar, 2000).

Create an Assessment Culture

The value that practitioners place on research engagement can be influenced by the culture of a campus and its pursuit of research activities. Seeing regular assessment practiced in one's department helps to develop an assessment disposition in those individuals involved (Theonnes, 2017). Baum (2015) discovered that higher education practitioners who have clear and defined departmental goals related to research tend to feel empowered, rather than frustrated, by research engagement. A sense of cultural encouragement helps practitioners feel like they are supported in their engagement in research (Sriram, 2011). Further, engagement in team-based research projects has been found to aid in the development of a scholar-practitioner identity (Bettencourt et al., 2017). In sum, practitioners who are engaged in a community that supports research practice are more likely to find value in the research process itself.

Improving Training for Practitioner Researchers

It is possible that practitioners who are not finding value in research activities do not have the skills and knowledge to engage in such activities. The literature shows that training in research skills, whether through graduate programming or hands-on experience, leads to greater competency in the subject (Jones, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2019; Theonnes, 2017). Therefore, it is important to explore how practitioners can best obtain these skills through training. Training for practitioners can be improved by identifying possible low competency levels and then selecting appropriate training methods to meet practitioner needs.

Practitioner Research Competency

Of the many competencies outlined as essential for higher education practice, research competency (including research skills, values, and behaviors) is rated among the lowest by practitioners themselves (Sriram, 2014). Practitioners tend to have medium to low competency across many research skills and areas, including knowledge of qualitative research methods, the publication process, Institution Review Board (IRB) processes, and program evaluation (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Hoffman, 2015). Interestingly, practitioners consistently rate their proficiency in research skills much lower than their perceived value of its importance (Hoffman, 2015), suggesting that practitioners value research engagement but are not confident in their skills to do the work.

Improving Research Competency

What type of training is most helpful in raising practitioner competency in research skills? First, the literature suggests that a few methods do not work so well in improving competency. In an effort to help practitioners overcome their busy schedule, Sriram (2011) sent a brief weekly newsletter to practitioners that summarized research in the field. Unfortunately, Sriram found that the newsletter intervention did not have a significant impact on practitioner research engagement. Hoffman (2015) asked higher education students which delivery methods they found most helpful when learning about assessment, revealing that training videos, teleconferences, webinars, and online courses were least helpful. These findings suggest that a variety of commonly used methods for practitioner training, including webinars and training videos, may not be having the positive impact that one would expect.

What Works – Engage in the Right Research Training

Training that incorporates an in-person component and ongoing feedback, such as workshops, conferences, and full-time work, are found most helpful by practitioners (Hoffman, 2015). Levine (2007) states that excellent research training includes teachers who are experienced in the field, suggesting that a teacher of research should be knowledgeable of both higher education practice and education research skills. Practitioners benefit from taking multiple courses in research skills, methodology, and writing, rather than one standalone course (Cooper Mitchell Jr. et al., 2016; Levine, 2007). Lastly, practitioners who partner with fellow educators who are working on similar projects, including Institutional Research staff and faculty on campus, benefit from the sharing of research instruments and methodologies that are often unused by higher education practitioners (Elkins, 2015; Hanson & Denzine, 2000).

Conclusion

Overcoming the barriers to practitioner research engagement begins with identifying the barriers that stand in the way: the busyness of daily practice (Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Sriram, 2011), negative perceptions surrounding research's value to daily practice (Kezar, 2000), and a lack of competency in performing research activities (Daniel et al., 2016; Herdlein, 2004; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Sriram, 2011; Waple, 2006; Young & Janosik, 2007). Although these barriers may feel overwhelming to the practitioner, there are simple steps that can be taken to overcome these challenges, such as collaborating with peers (Bettencourt et al., 2017; Hanson & Denzine, 2000) or identifying questions that

are related to one's daily practice (Hanson & Denzine, 2000). By providing practitioners with small, practical actions, engagement in research can become more achievable and less of an intimidating venture.

The literature provides hope that increased practitioner research engagement is possible but requires attention and consideration at the level of the practitioner, department, and university. To continue progress in this direction, future studies should explore 1) If and how practitioners actually use this literature to make changes in practice, 2) How ongoing training in research methodologies could be easily incorporated into practitioner professional development beyond graduate school, 3) Other factors that influence practitioners' perception of research as valuable to practice, and 4) How campus leaders can create a culture of research on campus.

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