

Engaged Scholarship: A Model for Creating an Education Research Lab

This presentation delineates a model for developing a university-based education research lab that (1) provides opportunities for faculty and students to collaborate in conducting authentic community-based research and (2) facilitates professional development for mentors and mentees by fostering opportunities for scholarship, teaching, and service. Logistical considerations are also explored.

Improving the quality of education research, has been a conspicuous theme in the education literature for a number of years (e.g., Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). This paper proposes a model for local, School of Education-based education research labs (ERL) that share characteristics similar to the IES-funded Regional Education Labs (RELS) found throughout the U.S. (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/>) and also with the type of research labs commonly found in basic and social science (e.g., psychology, sociology) departments at institutions of higher learning, but less often seen in schools of education. We argue that the proposed ERL model can play an important role in (1) student training, (2) faculty scholarship, (3) and meeting community needs for research and program evaluation in local education entities, from school districts to non-profit community programs with an education component.

Theoretical framework Characteristics of the model

Making research accessible to the local community

In institutions of higher learning that are characterized as “research institutions” the research training model is traditionally for students to work as research assistants with faculty and other student researchers on projects that fall within the purview of the faculty research mentor’s own scholarly research agenda. In a community based research model the agenda is driven by community needs (Sadler, Larson, Bouregy, LaPaglia, & Bridger, 2012). Through this professional service, researchers and research students are often engaged in research and evaluation projects that address social justice issues, such as reducing education inequities (e.g., Skiba, Shure, & Williams, 2012).

From an applied developmental sciences perspective, Jensen and Hoagwood (1999) articulated a community-based model (Centre for Community Based Research, n.d.) that challenged research scholars to move outside the confines of their institutions to study real world issues in real world settings. These authors contend that it is only in the context of community collaboration that we come to understand the true nature of circumstances in order to be able to have impacts that are valuable. Similarly, Boyer (1996) talked of a scholarship of engagement, which called for universities to engage as an active partners in addressing problems of the local community and larger society. Similar models, including design-based implementation research model (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011) promote the same message of authentic, relevant, and collaborative research that meets the needs of the local community (e.g., Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009)

Partnerships/Collaboration

The potential of community-based research is only achieved through authentic partnerships between experts (often university faculty) and community stakeholders that can include organizations, individuals, families, and/or practitioners (e.g., Sadler, Larson, Bouregy, LaPaglia, & Bridger, 2012). We contend that an ERL is most vibrant and successful with the inclusion of student research assistants who gain the benefits of experiential learning through participation in an authentic research experience.

A Student's Perspective

As an undergraduate, most upperclassmen psychology students warned, and sometimes frightened, incoming students about “the research class”. Awareness of community issues, and believing that research can bring about positive change in communities, allowed me to enjoy my research course. I completed the course no longer *believing* that research was valuable, but *knowing* it through conducting annotated bibliographies and completing a research proposal. Many opportunities can pave the way for students to become researchers. I was fortunate to have these experiences as an undergraduate.

- Taking a research class that requires a research project or proposal puts into practice what is read in text books.
- Exposure to different research laboratories with the opportunity to choose a lab that matches their research interest(s). I joined the Youth Development Project lab.
- Begin at the beginning by inputting data for a research team or an upperclassmen working on their thesis or dissertation. This person can be an excellent mentor.
- Participation in research programs allows students to conduct original research, attend conferences and symposiums, and provides presentation opportunities.
- Collaborating with university faculty with similar research interests.

Reciprocal and Synergistic Benefits

Figure 1 depicts the reciprocal nature of the benefits of this practical and authentic relationship. First, experiential learning creates unique opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to engage and to apply academic understandings through hands-on experience, while developing new knowledge and perspectives on topics that are the focus of research. Students are involved with real life projects, not just hypothetical exercises. The full range of research activities, such as completing an IRB protocol, constructing a research proposal, developing proposals for presentations and presentation of findings, and opportunities to co-authoring articles for publication, are real. The work of a researcher becomes real. It is no longer an abstract concept, or a distant entity in which only faculty engage. Students are involved in developing an understanding of real world problems and issues. Being engaged in the research agenda of a faculty member also ensures an authentic mentoring experience.

Second, university researchers benefit by access to timely and authentic research that is especially valuable in its ability to impact positive change in the local community. In addition, working with student research assistants increases a faculty researcher's ability to be engaged in research in that the students do much of the hands-on work, thus limiting a mentor's time

commitment. It is important that the research mentor ensure that the student research assistant is engaged in challenging tasks that promote the development of new technical and scholarly skills (e.g., developing IRB proposals, attending IRB meetings, gathering data, analyzing data, preparing and giving presentations, or scholarly writing), rather than other types of administrative tasks.

Third, community education partners similarly benefit from both the expertise of university researchers and the hands-on work completed by the students under the guidance of their research mentors. This model stands in contrast to more traditional models of education researchers as consultants, often paid through grant funds or organizational budgets. We contend that the benefit to all partners outweighs any potential monetary gain. In addition, the synergy generated by the continuous and authentic interaction of all partners, and the reciprocal nature of the benefits in this model, enhance both value and quality of the work.

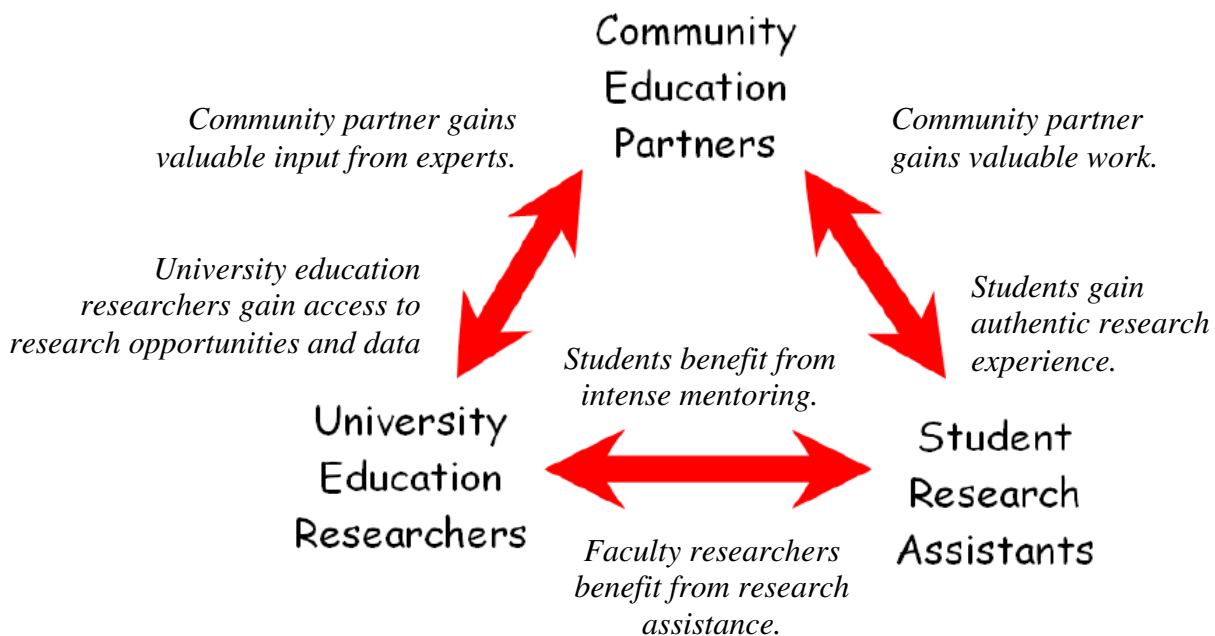


Figure 1. Reciprocal benefits for all ERL stakeholders

Structure of the ERL

Comprehensive research agenda

Consistent with both a community-based research model and a developmental evaluation model (McNeil, Newman, & Steinhauser, 2005; Patton, 2011), an ERL must ultimately be guided by a cooperative research agenda, developed in partnership with all stakeholder groups, based upon community need and the interest and expertise of partners. The development of a research agenda that is broad, deep, and authentic, facilitates faculty scholarship opportunities. A strong research agenda that is driven by local need also facilitates student researcher development as critical thinkers in developing solutions to real and complex problems. The

collaborative nature of the work facilitates building relationships that support understanding of complex problems. Budgets for small and large grant opportunities can be written to include tuition stipends for student research assistants. Of course, an active ERL, conducting relevant and authentic research may have an increased chance of funding, as well.

Collaboration

Research students working in teams foster a successful ERL, in that collaboration will occur among graduate students, between graduate and undergraduate students, among students working in different disciplines (e.g., counseling leadership, curriculum and instruction), between faculty mentors and students, and between students and community members. Mentoring should also specifically extend to the student's development of skills in professional communication. Student collaboration allows undergraduate and graduate students to engage in academic discussion, joint problem solving, and critical thinking. The building of relationships also fosters the development of higher levels of interest in the subject matter, the methodology, and research in general. Students from various departments and at varying stages of their academic careers share knowledge, clarify misunderstandings, work together toward a common project. These rich and diverse relationships allow for hybrid opportunities and an integration of multiple perspectives.

In a similar way, faculty also benefit from collaboration with the students within a junior colleague model, where the students are encouraged to attend research meetings at all levels, encouraged to explore and contribute new ideas, and make decisions about all aspects of the work. The development of cross-institutional relationships can be valuable for both faculty and students. Faculty can model successful and respectful collaboration and provide opportunities to connect students across institutions.

Leadership Development

Leadership development is a particular focus of the successful ERL, wherein faculty model leadership and provide opportunities for the students to take positions of leadership in relation to the work. Seniority is determined either by years in the academic program (e.g., doctoral students mentor masters students and/or masters students supervise undergraduates) or years in the ERL (i.e., students with a longer history in the ERL supervise and train incoming research students). Leadership skills that are cultivated in the ERL are then transferred to other academic situations and areas. The research assistant (RA) then becomes a point of reference and a knowledge source for their peers.

Meeting structure

A number of different types of meetings may be developed. (1) It is beneficial to have small group meetings related to the details and ongoing work of specific projects. (2) However, it also supports continuity and consistency of vision to have larger meetings of the ERL to facilitate the development of relationships and support an ongoing focus on the overall research agenda. (3) Attendance of researchers at community meetings is important to maintaining relationships, especially in those cases when much of the research work is taking place behind

the scenes. (4) In general, students are welcome to sit in on any research meeting being conducted for any purpose. This is an opportunity to both observe professional collaboration and to learn new theoretical and methodological skills. (5) Although all meetings follow a have a professional development purpose, some workshops are more focused and can be institutional or cross-institutional in nature. For example, a recent cross-institutional dissertation boot camp provided the opportunity for students who explore the process for developing a research question that is aligned with a research purpose. (6) We have had success with targeted Open biweekly student research meetings can serve a number of purposes, including workshops on ethics, navigating the IRB, how to conduct interviews and focus groups, transcription, etc. With the goal of making research more accessible to students, the open meeting format allows for the involvement of any interested students at their chosen level of engagement and commitment. The biweekly research meetings are open to any students who are interested, including those who are committed to ERL projects and those who simply want to explore the possibility that research might be an area of interest. Some students will simply attend meetings and observe, while others will begin by observing for a time and transition into a more involved or committed role within the research team. It is also possible for students to engage intimately on a research project for a period of time and then scale back their engagement at a future point in time due to time constraints or competing academic responsibilities. Consistent with the leadership development strategy, more senior students can conduct training during these meetings for those newer to the ERL program.

Scholarly development

All aspects of the ERL are aimed at providing students with opportunities for scholarly development. These include, presentation and publication opportunities, guidance in building a *Curriculum Vitae* and a research profile. Students learn how to talk about their data in research forums. Both undergraduate and graduate students have the opportunity to participate in a research experience and, more importantly, showcase their research through oral and/or poster presentations to the university, local, and broader professional and/or stakeholder community. Conference opportunities allow students to become more competent and confident public speakers and presenters.

Lab manual

In order to support the continued growth and development of an ERL, attention must be paid to logistical considerations. Standardizing procedures can go a long way to facilitating, operationalizing, and institutionalizing an ERL, which can also promote stability over time. To that end, a lab manual can be a valuable tool by documenting procedural details that facilitate collaboration and the implementation of rigorous and valid measures. The lab manual can include everything from how to complete and submit hours as documentation of work on the project for the purpose of stipends, file naming conventions that allow students to share a database of resources, guidelines for transcription to ensure that data are comparable across researchers, transcription guidelines, or standardizing procedures for conducting focus groups and interviews.

Conclusion

The federal government (http://ies.ed.gov/funding/ncer_rfas/partnerships.asp) and AERA (<http://www.aera.net/tabid/13163/Default.aspx>) have identified as a priority the need to build partnerships between local education authorities and education researchers in their respective communities. A School of Education-based ERL can contribute to this work. Tuckman (1965) notes that the development of maturity for a group develops through a process of predictable stages related to both task orientations and socio-emotional issues. The development of a collaborative ERL will require attention to both the social phenomena (e.g., relationship-building leadership development, and constructing a CV), and the logistics of tasks (e.g., how to navigate the IRB, how to conduct an interview, how to communicate with stakeholders). We contend that this model has the capacity to facilitate authentic and valuable work that benefits all stakeholders in unique, equitable, and important ways.

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