



Institutional Challenge Grant

Awarded Grants, 2018-2020

2018

Protecting Vulnerable Families and Children in the Crosshairs of the Opioid Epidemic: A Research-Practice Partnership

Rachel Dunifon, Cornell University, and Anna Steinkraus, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Tompkins County

The College of Human Ecology at Cornell and the Cornell Cooperative Extension-Tompkins County (CCE-Tompkins) will partner and respond to increasing rates of opioid abuse and child maltreatment in low income, rural communities in upstate New York. They will use a mixed-methods approach to: 1) understand the association between opioid use and child maltreatment rates, 2) examine the role of family drug treatment courts in mitigating child maltreatment among families struggling with treatment, and 3) evaluate an evidence-based intervention that may reduce the risk of opioid abuse for low-income youth and families.

Both partners are committed to advancing institutional change. At Cornell, a committee of university faculty and CCE-Tompkins staff will select highly skilled, well-recognized faculty members to serve as fellows and receive mentoring from the partnership leads. One goal is to change the image of the “successful researcher” to include those who conduct policy-relevant scholarship in collaboration with practitioners. In addition to the required match for a mid-career fellow, Cornell committed a post-doctoral fellow for the first half of the award, and an undergraduate intern to assist with activities at CCE-Tompkins. Cornell leadership is also committed to reviewing current support for research-practice partnerships campus-wide and initiating conversations about alternative tenure and promotion criteria for faculty. Finally, the partnership will build the capacity of CCE-Tompkins staff to facilitate high-quality evaluation work.

This project is supported by the William T. Grant Foundation.

2019

Mind the Gap: Partnering to Narrow Denver's Achievement Gaps by Retaining Top Teachers

Mimi Engel, School of Education, University of Colorado, Boulder; Sarah Almy, Denver Public Schools

The University of Colorado and the Denver Public Schools will continue to strengthen their partnership focused on creating a more equitable landscape of student success for a district that has one of the widest achievement gaps in the country between students of color and white students. The partners aim to do this by focusing on the district's teacher workforce. The partnership will engage in three related activities: 1) create an integrated longitudinal data archive, 2) conduct a descriptive study of teacher retention patterns, and 3) use quasi-experimental methods to evaluate district policies that were designed to attract and retain top teachers in schools serving students from historically underserved populations.

The University will build on efforts already underway to elevate and support partnerships between the university and community. In addition, the Dean of the School of Education, a co-principal investigator on the project, is working with university leadership on ways to reward partnership work as a faculty research activity and to consider a new, highly selective faculty track of research-practice professorships that would receive the same pay and voting rights as research faculty. The district is also committed to developing staff capacity to use research through mentoring and joint work.

This project is jointly supported by the Spencer Foundation and the William T. Grant Foundation.

Raising Academic Achievement in Under-Performing Schools through Improved Management: A Research-Practice Partnership

Gustavo Bobonis, Dept. of Economics, University of Toronto; Maria Christian, Puerto Rico Dept. of Education

The University of Toronto and the Puerto Rico Department of Education (PRDE) will partner to advance academic achievement in Puerto Rican public schools through improved school and system-wide managerial practices. The obstacles associated with improving academic outcomes in a historically under-performing school district are long-standing and deeply rooted, but the PRDE is deeply committed to overcoming them through decision making that is increasingly based on data, research, and evidence. The PRDE and a team of local and national researchers led by the University of Toronto will: 1) support and assess the impact of a school principal training program that is expected to result in enriched school environments and instructional practices that better serve students, and 2) shed light on the effects of school closures that have taken place in the recent past, build on positive consequences, and identify policies for reducing negative ones.

With regard to institutional change, the Department of Economics at the University of Toronto has committed to creating a policy research lab that will provide the infrastructure needed to conduct partnership work. In addition, the Office of the Vice President of Research and Innovation recently initiated and will expand a small grants program to create and nurture early stage partnerships. An evaluation officer will be housed within the department to work with the department's mid-level staff and further develop their internal capacity to produce and use research.

This project is jointly supported by the Spencer Foundation and the William T. Grant Foundation.

2020

The Impact of Upstream Prevention of Homelessness on Youth Educational and Developmental Outcomes

Gautam Yadama, School of Social Work, Boston College; Michael Durkin, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

The Boston College School of Social Work and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley will strengthen an emerging partnership and address youth and family homelessness. With roughly 4,500 homeless students in the Boston Public Schools and another 900 at risk of homelessness, the partners aim to refine, expand, and evaluate a recently-piloted intervention to prevent homelessness and mitigate the disruptions it causes at school, as well as develop a model for developing agency capacity to participate and use research in collaboration with more schools. The partnership will conduct early stage work to determine the feasibility of implementing the intervention and its potential for positive impact on youth outcomes.

The School of Social Work will build on its history of collaborative work by directing resources toward solidifying the partnership with United Way and the processes for working together. The School's Dean, the PI on the grant, has also proposed a series of institutional changes to strengthen the infrastructure and recognition for faculty engaged in partnership research, including teaching releases and the provision of a space to house partnership meetings, video conferencing with remote partners, and a venue for learning forums. Working with other administration offices, the Dean will also seek funding to create an endowed fund to support collaborative fellows, as well as identify and create university-wide funding opportunities and support for the partnership, including the possibility of a permanent position to support global and local research partnerships.

This project is jointly supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the William T. Grant Foundation.

The Northwestern-Evanston Education Research Alliance: Designing for Equity and Excellence in Education

David Figlio, Simone Ispa-Landa, Mesmin Destin, and Megan Bang, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University; Eric Witherspoon, Superintendent, Evanston Township High School District 202; Andalib Kheighati, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Evanston/Skokie District 65

Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy and the Evanston Township High School District 202 and Evanston/Skokie District 65 will conduct and use research to promote racial and economic equity and excellence in school and out-of-school learning environments. Focused in an area with some of the largest racial achievement gaps in the country, the initial projects will focus on research to promote teacher attitudes and practices that foster positive learning mindsets and smoother transitions from middle to high school, especially for Black and Hispanic youth. First, the research team will work in the middle schools to understand how teachers conceptualize and communicate issues related to student identities and learning mindsets and students' perceptions of teacher expectations. These findings will be used to create and rigorously test the effectiveness of professional development materials that aim to help teachers develop attitudes and practices that support student learning and achievement. A second strand of research will respond to district administrators' requests for evidence about how to better support students during the transition from middle school to high school.

Leadership at the School of Education and Social Policy has already created infrastructure to support partnership work and will use the Institutional Challenge Grant to institutionalize additional incentives. The School's Dean, a PI on this project, will expand an existing Fellows program that offers opportunities for researchers at Northwestern to partner with the Evanston schools to include distinguished, mid-career visiting fellows from other universities, and a practice fellow who will assist in building the capacity of community organizations to use research. The award will also enable the Dean to engage a team of scholars with strong research records, thereby raising the visibility and respect of research-practice partnerships as a way to conduct high-quality, relevant research.

This project is jointly supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the William T. Grant Foundation.

Understanding and Intervening in Inequities in Chronic Absenteeism and its Consequences Among High School Students

Emily Ozer, School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley; Susan Stone, Dept. of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley; Norma Ming, San Francisco Unified School District

The University of California, Berkeley, and the San Francisco Unified School District will strengthen their existing partnership and aim to reduce inequalities in chronic absenteeism. Students missing at least ten percent or more of the school year—chronic absenteeism—is an indicator of academic difficulties and school dropout, and the district’s rates of chronic absenteeism are 2–3 times higher for African American students, students with unstable housing, students in foster care, and students receiving special education services, than for other students. The partnership will analyze administrative records and conduct in-depth interviews with youth to deepen understanding of the barriers to and facilitators of attendance and perceptions about the district’s current interventions. The team will also use youth-led participatory action research with three peer resource sites to leverage youth perspectives about school climate and inform the partners’ development, implementation, and coordination of interventions.

In addition to enabling the partners to solidify and extend their working relationship, the award will allow the team at Berkeley to advance a plan with the potential for significant institutional change. Convenings with the campus Academic Senate leadership, brokered by the Vice Chancellors for Research, have confirmed support for community-engaged scholarship as part of the promotion, tenure, and merit advancement process. Deans from the schools of Education, Public Health, and Social Work are also committed to activities that would elevate research done in partnership, including developing prompts and criteria to assess and contextualize partnership research, raising funds for a partnership hub, and hiring personnel to direct research–practice partnerships and community engagement.

This project is jointly supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the William T. Grant Foundation.



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