



Minn-LInK Brief Issue No. 42 - Fall 2020

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Minnesota-Linking Information for Kids

## Leveraging a Researcher-Practitioner Partnership to End Student Homelessness

A special issue brief describing how a local researcher-practitioner partnership is examining and working towards ending student homelessness. This brief serves as a primer to the Homework Starts with Home Minn-LInK research brief series.



Homework  
Starts with Home  
Research Partnership

Center for Advanced Studies  
in **Child Welfare**



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

## Summary

Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships have the potential to improve both the quality of scholarship and public policies. Despite this promise, they tend to be difficult to create and even harder to sustain. This brief discusses how the Homework Starts with Home Research Partnership is bridging these challenges to deliver meaningful impact, with the support of Minnesota Linking Information for Kids (Minn-LInK), and striving for sustainability to continue that work.

## Background

In 2017, partners from the University of Minnesota and Minnesota state agencies formed the Homework Starts with Home Research Partnership, funded by a Grand Challenges Research Initiative grant from the University of Minnesota, to evaluate a State initiative addressing the impact of homelessness on students in Minnesota. The state initiative, "Homework Starts with Home" (HSHW), began in 2014 as a collaborative effort of representatives from the Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota Housing, the Minnesota Office to Prevent and End Homelessness, and the Minnesota Funders Collaborative. HSHW aimed to improve student achievement through an innovative rental assistance program to agencies serving families of school-aged students with unstable housing. To test whether the state program was having the desired impact, the research partnership began an ambitious plan to integrate education, housing, child welfare, and public assistance data across state agencies, in order to evaluate the success of the State's HSHW program and to create a sustainable partnership – a research-

practitioner partnership (RPP) – for ongoing research, training, and collaboration.

Research-practitioner partnerships are long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners that leverage research to address persistent problems of practice (Henrick et al., 2017). RPPs like the HSHW Research Partnership offer the allure of combining the particular skills and perspectives of each partner to improve both practice and research. When done well, RPPs advance the quality of both solutions and evidence addressing pressing social problems. Despite the appeal, however, RPPs are difficult. Public value is typically realized only after significant upfront investment, especially for projects involving integrated data.

This brief reviews challenges of RPPs, how the HSHW research partnership has worked through these challenges to date, lessons learned in the process, and goals for sustaining the partnership into the future.

## Common Partnership Challenges

RPPs often form in a wave of enthusiasm, but hit predictable problems. Bartunek and Rynes (2014) outlined five common challenges:

- 1) **Differing logics in tackling problems** – Practitioners and researchers each have their own language to tackle problems. These definitions become the logic for intervening, set the culture of the organization, and shape the information the organization creates. To partner, these dialects must be bridged.
- 2) **Time pressures and horizons** – Academics have longer project timelines than practitioners. Peer-reviewed works regularly take 2-4 years to complete. Public sector practitioners often must arrive at conclusions in the matter of months. In

"The joint work of partnerships requires participants to engage in boundary crossing, and that joint work is accomplished through boundary practices, which are routines that only partially resemble the professional practices of researchers and practitioners."

*(Penuel, et al., 2015)*

RPPs, creating understanding and intermediary deliverables can smooth the path.

- 3) **Communication** – Both parties want to communicate variation in outcomes. The conventions used, however, differ. Practitioners tend to use practical, but inexact language (e.g. “reasonably certain”). Academics tend to use exact, but impractical language (e.g., 0.2 standardized effect, 95% confidence interval). This is not mere translation, but instead, a marker of divergent cultures that must be bridged.
- 4) **Interests and incentives** – Researchers have strong incentives to publish and to use established data

sources, which is more efficient than engaging with practitioners and real-world data. Practitioners care about their programs—often having invested tremendous effort and capital into them. Rigorous research, therefore, is personally and professionally risky.

- 5) **Rigor and relevance tradeoffs** – Practitioners cannot pass on decisions because the data are underdeveloped. What constitutes evidence in a real-world decision might be desk rejected by a journal. Nonetheless, rigor and relevance can be a generative product of the RPP with each side growing in “understanding and use” (Stokes, 1997, 64).

## Managing Challenges and Delivering Value

The HSWH Research Partnership team invested substantial effort to develop a committee-based structure that could address anticipated challenges of creating its RPP. Areas of focus for the HSWH Research Partnership included:

### 1) Authentic communication

To bridge the RPP gap, meaningful engagement and communication are essential and it is important to avoid quick but superficial solutions in order to achieve authentic communication. Research suggests that partners need to allow for working through tensions when their values conflict or are challenged (Hillier 2003). These sessions create understanding of the circumstances of each partner and empathy around their pressures.

In the HWSW Research Partnership, the team invested significant time in collaborate work and planning, creating task-oriented committees to work on common goals. Between these sessions, both researchers and practitioners dove into the data to learn how it was collected and stored. Small teams of university and agency partners worked together on problems and plans related to data integration and analysis, which had the added benefit of building relationships and intergroup understanding. Such efforts facilitate translation across organizational silos (Ansell, 2011, Chapter 1). Tangibly, the HWSH Research Partnership carefully examined and validated the data they were integrating, creating and refining data dictionaries while intangibly, they created a narrative of the team being in “this data mess together.” This process also generated mutual respect among team members of the expertise each partner brought to the endeavor.

### 2) Use of brokers

Implicit in the above discussion is the presence of a broker than can “hold the space.” These brokers must create conditions for common problems, goals, and language to evolve. They also keep projects on-time, participants engaged, and staying in their respective lanes. Without good brokers, RPPs fail. As noted by Booker et al., (2019):

“Good brokers don’t just break down boundaries, they maintain the boundaries that are core components of each partner’s organizational identity...Brokers communicate and ad-vocate for these boundaries, so the partnership itself can endure.”

In RPPs utilizing integrated data, combining previously unconnected public administrative data system

### The Role of Brokers

Minn-LInK is housed at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota. It was developed in recognition that some of the most vulnerable children and families were likely served in multiple systems, yet there was no method to form broader pictures of multi-system involvement.

For the HWSH research partnership and a range of other projects, Minn-LInK is the connective tissue that allows academics to connect with practitioners and data.



adds another order of magnitude of difficulty. For data integration projects, brokers are needed to tap into their networks and skills in an effort to build agreement with all parties. For the HWSH Research Partnership, Minn-LInK serves as both the relational and data broker, facilitating data sharing, storage, matching, and analysis. Doing this work effectively is critical and takes resources to pay for staff time and technological overhead. The brokering role of Minn-LInK was supported and facilitated by the collaborative leadership of an executive committee that included the Co-Directors of the project (State and University partners) as well as the lead analysts and key Minn-LInK leadership.

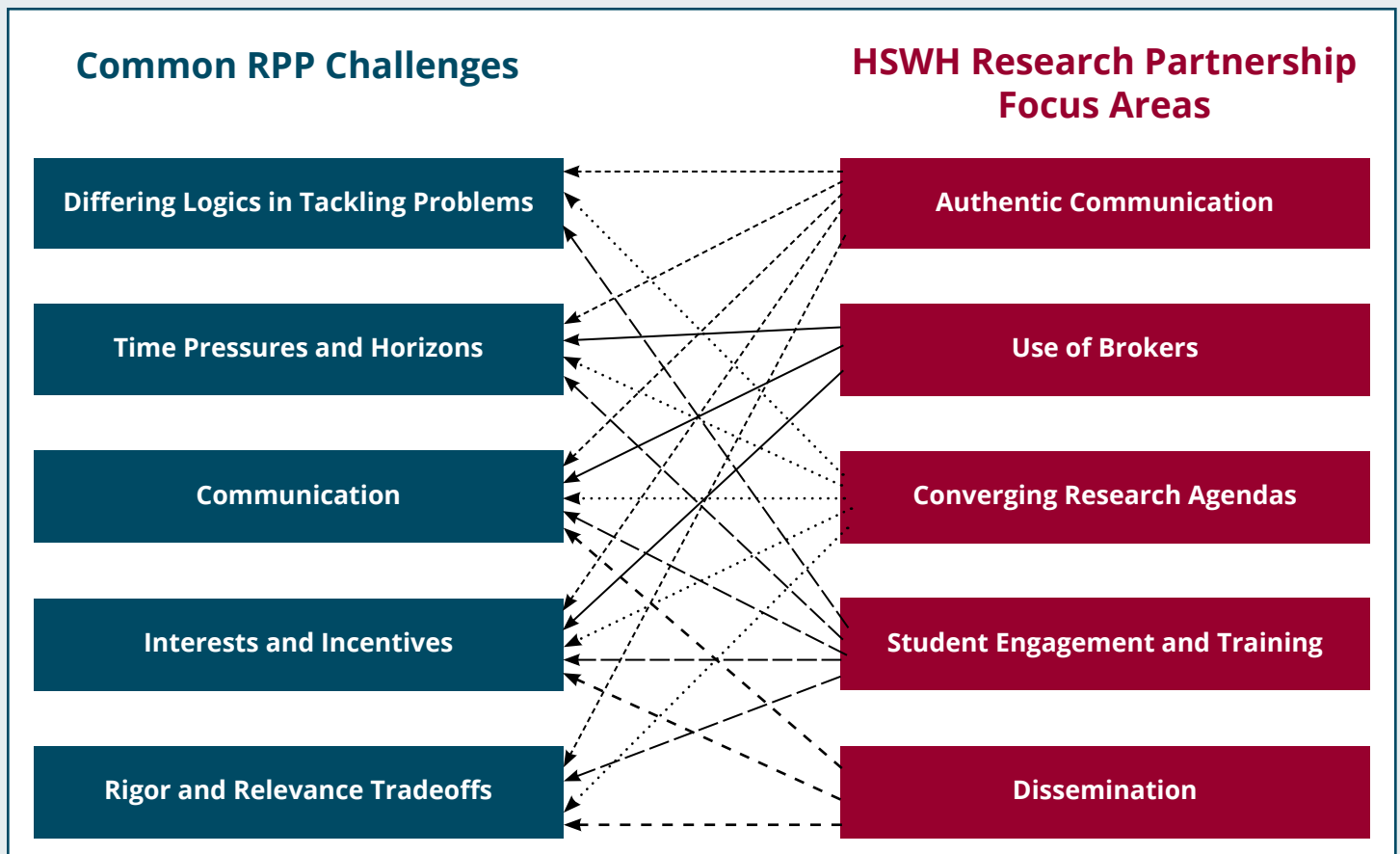
Data integration was a momentous challenge for the HWSH research partnership due to the scope of the data involved. The team connected and translated across four large and complex datasets. This process required trusting relationships, strong communication, data sharing agreements, IRB approvals, iterative and complicated data matching processes, as well as developing detailed analytic plans and procedures. There were bumps along the way, including delays related to merging and cleaning data, discovering missing data that needed to be recovered from original sources, limits on computing capacity, and the steep learning curve required for trainees to work efficiently with complex data and processes. Despite

these challenges, HWSH proceeded apace. The initial integrated data set for the first wave of evaluation has been integrated and scrutinized, and analyses have proceeded by both the lead project analyst and student analysts at the graduate and postdoctoral level.

### 3) Converging research agendas

Within effective partnerships, all partners use their relative strengths to advance the project. Practitioners use their knowledge to position projects, interrogate assumptions, mobilize stakeholders, and advance policy. For instance, in HWSH, practitioners deftly maneuvered through the policy realm—identifying new partners and securing ongoing program funding.

Researchers made similarly vital contributions. In addition to forthcoming evaluation results, they used their analytical skill to create valuable intermediary products, such as descriptive data. These simple descriptives often were the first time agency staff had seen information about client outcomes across program silos. The researchers also found previously unknown gaps in the data. For instance, they identified data missing for residents of a major Metropolitan-area shelter, creating a systematic undercount of that population. Once identified, the team worked together to patch this missing data, which will benefit all future users of these administrative data.





As the team builds understanding, agendas align. They start anticipating future needs, like requesting additional data elements from new cohorts. This improves the potential for future high-quality evaluation. In that way, all partners benefit from the generative results of each partner's acumen across time and projects.

"I've been struck on a number of occasions by how challenging it is to create shared meaning, and confirm understanding, and by the benefit of investing the time and energy to reach those goals."

— HWSH steering team member

#### 4) Student Engagement and Training

Another vital aspect of the HSWH Research Partnership that served a multifaceted role in consolidating the RPP was a core commitment to engaging and training students. Five graduate level students and a postdoctoral student were trained to utilize Minn-LInK to define and carry out their own study as part of the larger evaluation. A structured training seminar series engaged not only the trainees but also the agency and faculty partners in

presentations and supervision. Fellows were recruited from four different departments of the University and they worked together in the seminar and then as part of an analysts group on their projects, with supervision from the lead analyst, Minn-LInK staff, faculty, and partners from State agencies.

Presentations by the Fellows were highlighted at annual advisory group meetings and will be showcased at a forthcoming conference as well. The training mission also served to consolidate relationships and a collaborative spirit among the RPP members.

#### 5) Dissemination

Team members have also collaborated on presentations about student homelessness, the goals of our RPP, and our preliminary findings to diverse audiences, including the HSWH Advisory Board, University classes, local and State conferences, and national meetings on homelessness. Sharing our plans and progress with stakeholders and researchers has informed our research while also serving to promote relationships, communication, and understanding across sectors.

## Advancing the Agenda

RPPs are difficult. Connections must be formed, understanding created, and committed resources secured. The benefits—and concomitant costs—are multiplied in the case of integrated data. The multi-disciplinary teams that form around integrated projects require translation across systems. Doing so, however, creates a more complete picture of wicked societal problems such as homelessness. The initial phase of development—where translation happens—is the most difficult. Once the team has created shared understanding, real value is created. Often, however, these projects end just as understanding takes hold and common pool resources are established. This is a tremendous waste of initial outlays and future productivity.

Continuing these generative relationships means identifying sustainable sources to pay for staff time and technological overhead. But, in doing so, “the

work required to meet these demands means that the research we produce through our RPPs stand the greatest chance of changing our agencies’ policies and practices” (Booker et. al., 2019) and improve outcomes for Minnesotans.

The HSWH Research Partnership is in the process of planning a conference to share findings from the current evaluation project and making plans to extend the partnership through additional grants and contracts. Plans are underway to respond to new requests for evaluation of programs in Minnesota that are designed to mitigate the risks of homelessness for students. Additionally, the RPP will pursue funding to extend the capacity of Minn-LInK and the HSWH Research Partnership to continue brokering research that can guide policy and programs focused on solving the challenges posed by homelessness to the education and future success of students.

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