Education research: For whom and to what end?
An analysis of knowledge mobilization strategies developed by schools of education

Executive Summary

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Background & Research Purpose

Questions related to the relevance and accessibility of educational research have long catalyzed concern and criticism. Increasingly, individual researchers and some colleges of education develop strategies to enhance the usability of educational research that we characterize as knowledge mobilization for scholarship in education (KMSE). This brief text shares findings from our Spencer Foundation-funded study of KMSE entitled To whom and to what end? The study examines the KMSE strategies of three schools of education at public research-intensive universities as well as the reception of those strategies by practitioners from K-12 schools and policymakers in neighboring areas. Through these efforts, the study characterizes KMSE, first, in terms of the flow of knowledge and experiences between educational researchers and potential users of educational research in terms of both its digital and local, non-digital manifestations and, second, in terms of how these flows of knowledge were organized, and were influenced by KMSE practices and strategies.

Research Questions

1. What are the specific strategies of knowledge mobilization scholarship in education (KMSE) developed by the three participating colleges of education at research-intensive universities?
2. To what extent have KMSE-related metrics of scholarly impact been incorporated by these colleges of education?
3. What are the specific practices of KMSE employed by faculty within these colleges of education?
4. Has the implementation of KMSE produced significant changes in local teachers/policymakers uses of educational research?
5. Has the implementation of KMSE led to changes in the interactions between local teachers/policymakers and educational researchers?

Data Sources

The data for this study can be categorized into two types:

a) Data collected at colleges of education, including survey responses by 66 tenure- and contract-based education faculty (30% response rate) and semi-structured interviews with a subset of 28 tenure- and contract-based education faculty; and

b) Data collected at schools and local communities, including survey responses by 60 educators and semi-structured interviews with a subset of 10 K-12 educators and three policymakers.
Findings

Reflecting wider trends among research universities, each of three participating colleges of education implement strategies to enhance knowledge mobilization for scholarship in education (KMSE). While these strategies vary widely, all target general ideas like impact, engagement, and reduction of the theory to practice gap. Notwithstanding the long-term potential of these strategies, our study corroborates the persistence of long-standing challenges related to the accessibility and relevance of educational research to any number of potential users, including scholars, educators, policymakers, media, and citizens in general. These challenges often relate to the usability of educational research. Usability is not an indication of how practical or applied educational research is, but the extent it is accessible, relevant and ultimately utilized by other researchers as well as other potential users.

In order to characterize KMSE strategies, we identified practices among faculty at each institution. For example, the use of social media represents a KMSE practice for making educational research more accessible. 54% of faculty survey respondents use social media to circulate aspects of their research. At the same time, most of the faculty we interviewed expressed ambivalence about social media use due to negative perceptions about and ill-defined uptake of their social media contributions. Other common KMSE practices include publishing in journals with open access models and producing materials specifically designed for policymakers and professional educators. While the wider range of KMSE practices vary, 94% of faculty survey respondents indicated strongly agree that educational researchers should try as much as possible to generate research-based knowledge that is usable by practitioners. All of the faculty that we interviewed elaborated on this statement by, for example, underscoring, for example, the relevance of having “face-to-face interactions with local educators,” an imperative that “researchers be more open-minded,” or the benefits of “engaged” or “collaborative” research models. The diverse but seemingly disjointed KMSE practices among faculty at each institution combined with the general ideas guiding college strategies suggest that rhetorical commitments to KMSE may outreach the execution of KMSE strategies and practices alike. We further qualify these findings with a series of brief summary points from the study.

- At an organizational level, the three colleges of education are experimenting with alternative formats for making their knowledge production more accessible and usable. Each is also exploring complementary ways of assessing faculty’s scholarship. One college is formally recognizing and assessing “artistic and creative activities” as well as “knowledge mobilization” in their tenure and promotion processes. At this college only 18% of the faculty interviewed and surveyed claimed to take advantage of those opportunities.
- Each colleges of education is also exploring alternative metrics and indicators of scholarly relevance. This may reflect that fact that faculty remain divided in their evaluation of institutional assessments of faculty knowledge production. Slightly over half (56%) reported that their institution assessed their production very well/well and 44% indicated that the assessment was not well done/poorly.
- More than 65% of the faculty reported that the “gold-standard for research impact” continues to be individually-authored articles published in journals with high journal impact factors and “top-tier” journals in the field. This perception was especially salient among untenured faculty. These perceptions highlight an enduring tension between KMSE and the
robustness of research to practice or “top down enlightened” models of dissemination of scholarship in education.

- Faculty recognized the limitations of traditional metrics for assessing educational research. Key criticisms of traditional metrics include a) limited assessment of the scholarly significance of educational research (e.g., journal impact factor); b) limited recognition and assessment of the pedagogical, technological, social, and cultural dimensions of educational research; and c) limited recognition and assessment of research use among teachers, principals, journalists, policy-makers, and other educational practitioners.

- The existing research incentives and rewards for tenure and promotion as well as general career advancement were another area of contention identified by most faculty. Most articulated a belief that current incentive structures constrain the possibilities for enhancing access, use, and relevance of their research by local educators and policymakers. Only 40% of faculty survey respondents reported that the college recognizes their efforts to appropriate KMSE practices.

- While college- and faculty-reported efforts to explore and experiment with KMSE are noteworthy, these efforts did not appear to alleviate familiar tensions among neighboring K-12 schools. The educators that we interviewed recognized the relevance of using rigorous educational research and in most cases appreciated the efforts of colleges of education to make their research production available, especially through open access materials. Most educators, however, pointed to the existence of significant barriers, such as the time available to conduct research, the lack of incentives at their own institutions, and the lack of preparation and ability to understand academic language. In a few cases, educators expressed questions about the validity of the research.

- Among non-university stakeholders (e.g., educational practitioners and policymakers) that reported using educational research, the key factors included recommendations by and personal relationships with trusted colleagues and, to a lesser extent, their own searches for relevant research. However, the increase in the use of KMSE practices by neighboring colleges was recognized as a contribution that could build trust among scholars and policymakers, school professionals, and community-based actors.

- Several faculty and administrators indicated that an important consideration for engaging in KMSE was to fulfill the “public” mission of the respective colleges. For example, 64% of faculty surveyed agreed that community outreach was either “relevant” or “crucial”. In addition to the ethical justifications for making educational research more usable (e.g., educational research is mostly supported by public funds, and the “public” should benefit from the research findings), scholars that practiced engaged forms of research indicated that epistemological dimensions should be considered, such as: a) when educational research is more “usable”, the greater its potential to generate more robust, generalizable and theory-building relevant educational research; and b) the development of trusting relationships among researchers and other stakeholders can usher the production of more usable research with substantial contributions to address urgent pedagogical, social, and theoretical issues.
**General Conclusions**

Our study of knowledge mobilization for scholarship in education (KMSE) identified or affirmed several trends. Foremost, KMSE appears to be neither officially recognized nor formally incentivized in organizational terms, and, moreover, it remains minimally, and often unsystematically, monitored and therefore inadequately understood. This conclusion, however, must be considered with respect to five other findings from the study. First, there is significant and still growing awareness among faculty and local educators of the potential of KMSE. Second, faculty across colleges affirm the importance of expanding the relevance, usability, and accessibility of educational scholarship. Third, organizational and individual dispositions suggest persistent efforts to contribute to more dialogical models of KMSE independent of formal recognition or incentives; Fourth, innovative KMSE practices surface as “tensions” between experimenting with new forms within old structures. Thus, while the KMSE strategies and practices identified in the study operate in limited and conservative ways, noteworthy awareness and application underscore that KMSE will continue influence the ways that colleges of education understand themselves and their relationships with other education stakeholders.

Looking forward, KMSE practices appear to be promising for colleges of education at research intensive universities but current implementation strategies will not suffice unless clear and sustainable institutional procedures for recognizing, assessing, and rewarding what counts as “relevant” for the careers of educational researchers are set in place. The organizational tensions between incorporating new KMSE strategies and practices into well-established structures of tenure and promotion especially constrain early-career or tenure-seeking faculty. These tensions are often expressed as a sense of fear that generates risk-avoidance strategies with regard to collaborative and engaged forms of educational research and discourages KMSE practices based on the perception that those activities are a) time-consuming efforts not directed at the production of impactful research and b) are either ideologically motivated or simply not rigorous.

While in highly polarized and politicized contexts, developing more effective educational research does not require more or better data. The field is already doing this. To develop more effective research, colleges and faculty must overcome the lack of trust among potential allies, intervene in the political arena, and confront those who manipulate research for political gains. The scenario is complex. Although our study of KMSE shows a less than stellar record, we remain cautiously optimistic, because we also identified significant movements resisting, denouncing and asking for respect and changes in the processes used by educational researchers to make their research more accessible and usable.
Recommendations

Develop comprehensive KMSE strategies. Based on our analysis, we propose that comprehensive strategies of Knowledge Mobilization for Scholarship in Education (KMSE) should be multi-dimensional, interactive, and inclusive processes that increase the accessibility and usability of educational research. KMSE strategies should involve deliberate and systematic coordination of products, events, and networks in order to reach and bring together a wide range of education stakeholders in an interest area, including scholars, professionals, practitioners, policymakers, journalists, and community members. Enabling diverse pathways to and from educational research and practice can develop meaningful educational impact and enduring educational partnerships.

Incentivize accessibility and usability of educational research. We advocate for the implementation and assessment of systematic changes favoring access and usability of educational scholarship in the structure of incentives used at research-intensive colleges of education. Improving research usability (by other scholars, by professionals in the field, and other relevant stakeholders) will require accepting the existence of socio-cultural processes that are constructed in complex ecologies of relationships with competing incentives and conflicting ideological interests that operate along distinct timeframes. Initiatives to increase the accessibility and usability of educational research should be institutionally supported and should not rely exclusively on individual efforts.

Identify Barriers. Without understanding that colleges of education need better incentive structures to allocate appropriate time and resources to develop trustworthy relationships, addressing the demands for increasing usability and relevance of the field’s knowledge production will remain a desired, but unfulfilled, goal. The landscape of knowledge mobilization illustrates how multiple stakeholders attempt to balance the many demands of their professions while rarely contributing dialogically to address common challenges or take advantage of the opportunities in the educational ecologies they share.

Promote dialogue and exchanges. The findings of this project highlight organizational and structural constraints that challenge the accessibility and usability of scholarly knowledge as well as organizational incentives that hinder potential dialogues among and across the different stakeholders, including university-based researchers, educators, administrators, journalists and policymakers on the issues that matter most for their communities. Effectively addressing these structural constraints also requires substantial reconceptualization of the gaps between research, practice, and policy by recognizing the contributions of diverse stakeholders to the production of robust educational scholarship and by expanding opportunities for exchange and collaboration between researchers and end-users of education research.