

## **From My Data to Our Data: Government-Academic Research Pairings**

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At an academic conference a couple of years ago I was thrilled to see in attendance a colleague from the US Department of the Interior where I have been conducting research for several years. At an evening reception we were chatting and catching up when a friend on the Cornell faculty approached us, introduced himself, and then proceeded to ask my colleague from the Interior Department which university he was affiliated with—assuming he was an academic. Before he could answer, I immediately interjected and joked, “No he’s not an academic, he’s my data.” Everyone laughed and my colleague from Interior quickly embraced his new label and followed up with a couple more jokes—one, if I remember correctly, was about academics always being a few years behind of what is happening on the ground. Even though this all was in good fun, reflecting back I find that offering that joke was a way for me to address the slight awkwardness of the feeling I had experienced over the past several years: the feeling of working closely with public administrators to conduct research when at the end of the day—due to the structure and design of these particular research projects—I was the researcher and he was the data.

Such a relationship between researcher and ‘researched’ is nothing new and is the standard in the organizational sciences. Separate and clearly delineated roles of researchers and the practitioners who ‘are’ (or provide) data fit well within most research designs common in the organizational social sciences. At the same time, a small but steady drumbeat of support for thinking creatively about academic-practitioner relationships throughout the private and public management disciplines may be found over the past several decades. For example, from the industrial relations and organizational behavior fields comes a tradition of organizational “action research” in which organizational members take an active role with academic researchers in the design and research process for generalizable knowledge production as well as organizational change (Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy 1993).

Even though the relevance and applicability of research is a perennial topic in the private sector management field, action research and other related participatory research practices addressing not only the consumption of management research but also its production have arguably remained on the margins in the management sciences (Whyte 1987; Rynes, Bartunek, and Daft 2001). Public administration seems to have had a more regular and steady conversation in its mainstream discourse. In many senses this conversation has been ‘baked in’ to the field as its founders, such as Luther Gulick and Leonard White, considered themselves scholars as well as practitioners and floated easily between those identities—the original “pracademics” (Ospina and Dodge 2005; Perry 2015). The ongoing discussion of a more “engaged” public administration ties into the larger public and community engagement discourse increasingly found throughout the academy and was a component of the Minnowbrook III conversation in 2008 (Bushouse et al. 2011; Checkoway 2013). In recent years, the term “co-production” is stimulating not only a conversation regarding the practices, “that captur[e] a wide variety of activities that can occur in any phase of the public service cycle and in which state actors and lay

actors work together to produce benefits,” but also is serving as a new frame for the practice of academic-practitioner collaborative research (Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017, 769).

In a 2012 *PAR* article, Kevin Orr (an academic) and Mike Bennett (a practitioner) engage with the concept of coproduction in public administration research and thoroughly document the opportunities present through a full partnering on a research endeavor—from project conceptualization all the way through presentation and dissemination of findings. Orr and Bennett argue a coproduction approach to research has the potential to strengthen not only the research itself, but also the ability for that research to more easily affect the world of practice. They also identify challenges for fully partnering across academic and practitioner identities through a case study of their own coproduced research project. These include a discussion of differing incentives for them personally and their respective organizations as well as the ethics and practicalities of a practitioner researcher’s unique “insider/outsider” status when he conducts research in his own organization (2012). In a 2016 article, Buick et al. extend Orr and Bennett’s work to develop a typology of academic-practitioner coproduction and present an in-depth case study of a partnership between the Australian Public Service Commission and three Australian universities, offering five helpful categories of lessons for future research coproduction endeavors (2016).

In both the Orr and Bennett and Buick et al. articles, the authors emphasize the research projects themselves as the key units of analysis and reflection, while also acknowledging the underlying academic-practitioner partnerships are critical. Before embarking on coproduced or collaborative research, academics and practitioners interested in this type of work likely find each other through previous relationships and/or through networks related to their subject of potential inquiry. In this case, similar research interests and openness to doing this type of work are likely driving the connections. This method can and should continue. What I’m suggesting here is that if PA as a field is interested in exploring new ways further academic-practitioner relationships and research it may be helpful discuss ways we can provide more institutional support for the precursor to successfully-completed coproduced research projects as discussed in the above papers. This would create the potential for a wider number of academics and practitioners to connect and possibly embark on such projects. And it could allow research to germinate in a fully collaborative form versus after a ‘need’ has previously been identified for particular research and then further defined and pursued collaboratively. What are the possibilities if instead of the project prompting the pairing—the pairing has more of an opportunity to prompt the project?

One idea I’d like to offer is an *academic-practitioner pairings initiative* that could create potential and opportunity for coproduced research, but also could simply build and strengthen connections between scholars and public administrators that could result in additional spillover effects benefits beyond research. This is not a radical disruption by any means. Instead, my aim is to brainstorm additional ways to chip away at the barriers that have made academic-practitioner coproduction partnerships a recurring challenge.

The nice thing about a short concept paper is that all of the details can continue to be discussed and deliberated! I am still getting up to speed on PA institutions, but I’m thinking a natural home for such a program might be the National Academy of Public Administration as an initiative such as this aligns with the Academy’s fellows program and could complement

ongoing project-based collaboration through its panels and advisory groups. Universities and agencies at all levels of government could sign up to participate in the pairings initiative and then make the opportunity available to certain faculty and staff. Duration of the partnerships, funding mechanisms, and other important logistics I postpone discussion of here, but thoughtful matching of practitioners and academics would be essential for the initiative to succeed, as would the guiding coproduction principle that subject matter interests drive the pairing rather than a predefined research agenda or predetermined need. I propose ensuring pairs would have sufficient time to get to know each other and down the road aim to coproduce a research project. In this sense, the pairings could also be considered co-mentorship opportunities and would complement current models of faculty mentorship in PA and in public agencies that don't necessarily focus on cross-sector mentoring (Bozeman and Feeney 2009; Fountain and Newcomer 2016).

The details and actual mechanics of the pairings would need to be flexible enough for the individual parties. That being said, I think it would be helpful for the program to further identify and continually refine a 'menu' of components so pairs don't have to reinvent the wheel and can be informed of best practices. The "Lessons for Developing an Effective Coproduction Partnership" offered by Buick et al. offer a helpful model in this regard. In particular, a critical role for the initiative would be to create as much of the "supporting architecture" for this research as possible (2016, 45). This could mean, for example, on the University-side—streamlined protocols for any necessary Institutional Review Board approvals and easily accessible visiting scholar or other applicable university research appointments for agency participants. On the agency-side, this could mean streamlined suitability and security clearances, and easy access to government systems and physical locations for the academics during the pairing. Templates guiding institutional relationships (at least in a basic model form) and options for data ownership and usage (beyond the two individuals in the pair) could be approved in advance by participating agencies and universities.

The pairing could have scholar-in-residence/practitioner-in-residence components where academics and practitioners would be able to travel and work together in both university and agency environments. Much more would need to be worked through on the logistics front, but there are likely already legal and organizational frameworks that could be adapted for such a program, such as the Intergovernmental Personnel Act of 1970 at the federal level (Bushouse et al. 2011, i108). It would be critical in my view that both members of a partnership be given the support from their respective home institutions to make sure participation in this program would not be an 'add-on' to an already full schedule, but rather embarked upon when both partners have sufficient time to make a coproduced research project work.

In many senses my idea brings the focus on academic-practitioner collaboration to its most elemental form: the relationship between a single public administrator and a single public administration academic. And it definitely is with a sense of good humor and irony that I acknowledge that this idea and paper was not coproduced through such a relationship! That important fact acknowledged, I take solace in the fact that colleagues in academic PA and practitioners like Dustin Brown (OMB) also are engaged in directly-related thinking about new models for these types of academic-practitioner collaborative endeavors, which will make continuing the conversation at Minnowbrook and beyond all the more fruitful.

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