Professors of educational administration and leadership annually present dozens, if not hundreds, of research-based papers at conferences and meetings. Likewise, doctoral candidates produce dissertations comprising “a small but not insignificant proportion of published research” (Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004, p. 30). Unfortunately, these manuscripts are not regularly converted into articles for refereed academic and professional journals; nor are they translated into other practice and policy-friendly formats. Our failure as a discipline to disseminate our research broadly not only inhibits the expansion our knowledge base, but also hinders our advocacy through collective action. Moreover, despite our best intentions to inform peers, practitioners, and policymakers about our research, our efforts are rarely impactful—perhaps due to our lack of understanding about how research utilization works.

This Brief summarizes key elements of an article by Young and Rorrer (2012) titled “Promoting the Utilization of Educational Leadership Research in Preparation, Practice, and Policy.” The authors assert, “it is rare for research to be consumed by audiences in ways that promote its immediate application or research-based action” (p. 196), and then “explore the disconnect between research production, dissemination, and utilization, particularly within the field of educational leadership in the United States” (p. 196). Like their article, this Brief presents the current context of educational research, means to support research utilization, and a call to action.

**Context of Educational Research**

Twenty-five years ago, McDonnell (1988) posited “we have no guarantee that research knowledge will prevail in a political environment, but the price of not speaking may be to accept solutions from those least familiar with schools” (p. 96). A review of current state and federal education agendas evidences that reality, particularly with regard to higher education, state policymakers are setting new metrics for institutional performance (e.g., interdisciplinary collaboration, outreach, diversity- and inclusion-related activities, evidence of impact and student success, innovation, etc.). At the federal level, President Obama’s blueprint for higher education promotes a Race to the Top competition to “incentivize governors and state legislatures around the nation to act on spurring [his] innovation reform” (White House, 2012, para. 16). He asserts that “a college education is no longer just a privilege for some, but rather a prerequisite for all” (para. 1) and that college costs must be controlled. Although these agendas focus on undergraduate education, they will impact graduate education. As Young and Rorrer (2011) noted, The omission of analytics that emphasize the value of graduate school and research programs may subsequently and inadvertently have significant implications for the prominence and vitality of educational leadership and research. . . . Evaluations [of graduate education] that focus on the contributions made by research and those that are aligned with quality program attributes and outcomes, however, would be more appropriate. (p. 198)

Support for educational research has also been impacted by recent cuts in federal funding for education, further diminishing a historically underfunded area of research. Quoting an educational research and policy conference participant, Viadero (2007) wrote: “For every $100 spent on research, less than $2.25 goes to the social sciences and less than 41 cents goes to education research” (p. 14).

Because education research encompasses the entire P-20 enterprise, “41 cents is negligible. Despite private investments by groups like the Wallace Foundation, relatively little research funding has been invested in educational leadership” and thus “the field lacks adequate resources to develop a robust research base” (Young & Rorrer, 2011, p. 199). The reputation of education
research further complicates research utilization, most particularly because schooling is experienced universally in the US. Decisions about education policy is thus more often informed by personal experiences than by research—despite the incredible changes in education over recent decades and related research. Without resources to fund large-scale, longitudinal studies or research programs about educational leadership, our field “draws primarily from a set of disconnected, small-scale, and contextually and methodologically diverse research projects” (Young & Rorrer, p. 201). Our research covers diverse aspects of educational leadership, as it should because context matters (e.g., urban vs. rural, teacher leadership vs. district administration, P-12 schools vs. higher education). As a field, however, we have not imparted “guidance aimed at providing solutions to real-time issues” (p. 201) that practitioners and policymakers can utilize.

Support for Educational Research
Interest in research utilization is growing. According to Cooper, Levin, and Campbell (2009), “We are witnessing increasing efforts to have public policy and practice guided by evidence derived from research” (p. 160). The challenge is converting our research into forms that are readily assessable and relevant to practitioners and policymakers as noted by Weiss (1979).

There has been much glib rhetoric about the vast benefits that social science can offer if only policy makers paid attention. Perhaps it is time for social scientists to pay attention to the imperatives of policymaking systems and to consider soberly what they can do, not necessarily increase the use of research, but to improve the contribution that research makes to the wisdom of social policy. (p. 431)

Call to Action
In this era of high-stakes accountability for learning and professional practice, it is imperative that practitioners, policymakers, and concerned citizens have access to “useful and actionable research . . . and the capacity to make productive use of research” (Young & Rorrer, 2011, p. 210). To achieve that goal, we need to “develop a more intimate understanding of what types of research are (and are not) used, how they are used, how they are acquired, and what conditions support and obstruct their use” (p. 201). This requires we commit to providing educational leaders with appropriate preparation in the utilization of research, and we mentor new entrants to our professional community in the design and delivery of actionable research. To achieve greater research utilization, we as a professional community must actively engage in thoughtful, critical reviews of conference presentations, manuscripts, and dissertations. We must also use diverse venues to and formats for disseminating our research.

To support this effort, UCEA began publishing its Research Utilization Briefs in March 2009 (http://ucea.org/research-utilization-briefs/). The published Briefs thus far focused primarily on leadership preparation. As the Briefs editor, I want to expand the focus, and I invite you to send recommendations for themes and suggested research articles for publication in future Briefs.

References


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This brief, developed by Tricia Browne-Ferrigno, is part of a Research Utilization Brief series supported by a grant from The Wallace Foundation. The intent of the series is to highlight and share recent empirical research regarding effective leadership preparation and development, particularly research commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, with faculty, staff, and leaders at the program, institutional, and state levels, as these individuals are in positions to use this research to make positive changes.

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