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Guest Editors' Introduction: Strengthening Financial Aid Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships

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Strengthening Financial Aid Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships

Research on college student financial aid is central to many of our most important educational and societal questions, including questions about college affordability, access, persistence, student well-being, loan indebtedness, inequality, and the value of a college degree. Consider that more than 6,000 postsecondary institutions participate in the Title IV federal student aid programs, and, during the 2014-15 academic year, 11.9 million postsecondary students received $128.7 billion in total federal student aid in addition to funds from the many state and institutional aid programs that support students (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2015, 2017). Scholarly inquiry into financial aid has grown rapidly in both scope and depth, as has the prominence of financial aid in national and state conversations. Despite the increased attention by researchers and policymakers, there is concern that disconnects between the researchers who study financial aid and the financial aid administrators who administer programs lead to misunderstanding, miscommunication, and lack of collaboration, which all serve as a barrier to aligning practice, research, and policy (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators [NASFAA] & Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], 2016).

Financial aid administrators and researchers should come together more intentionally and more often to study financial aid, engage each other in dialogue, and apply their knowledge to policy and practice. Financial aid professionals have key insights into how financial aid programs are administered and the interpretation and implementation of rules and regulations. As practitioners, they are well-positioned to explore flaws in current processes and programs, and discover interventions that promote student success. Aid administrators can also often provide access to institutional data and settings for experimentation and testing. However, many financial aid administrators have minimal experience with and exposure to research from which they can draw on theory and build on empirical evidence.

Conversely, many researchers are experts in research design and can develop and implement studies that allow rigorous evaluation of aid programs and initiatives. Researchers typically also have experience and familiarity with publishing research articles and communicating research findings. However, many researchers have limited knowledge about practical considerations that would allow them to better understand the context of the applied financial aid landscape. Clearly, financial aid administrators and researchers have much to contribute to each other.

Yet, there are many barriers to successful partnerships. Researchers and practitioners often share the common goal of understanding the role of financial aid in college decisions and outcomes, and the stock of applied researchers who pay proper attention to both abstract theory and practical context is growing. However, each party typically has different career objectives and job responsibilities. Financial aid administrators must ensure they are good stewards of public funding. Researchers, especially if they are faculty members, must satisfy publishing and tenure requirements, where contributions to insular scholarship are often valued more than practical application. Writing styles and views on important questions can also diverge. NASFAA and ASHE (2016) underscored common frustrations and challenges with applied financial aid research, including concerns that research findings are not easily digestible and often do not reach practitioners with limited time to review research, making these findings less likely to encourage more effective and realistic policy. Though the visibility and importance of applied research with the potential to improve practice has increased, vast potential for these research collaborations in the financial aid context remains untapped.

The great promise of researcher-practitioner collaborations to improve student, institutional, and societal outcomes, coupled with prominent barriers for their implementation, motivated this special issue of the *Journal of Student Financial Aid* (JSFA) on financial aid researcher-practitioner partnerships. We distilled our goals for this issue into two main themes. First, we want to catalyze research collaborations among researchers and practitioners. To that end, we invited teams of researchers to submit research papers that highlight ongoing collaborative projects or that come from a partnership that was initiated because of the call for papers. In this context, we considered researcher-practitioner partnerships to be collaborative efforts if they included a reasonable investment by both parties in designing, developing, and implementing a research approach to a problem. This is distinct from a practitioner simply providing a dataset to a researcher or a researcher simply performing an evaluation and assessment independent from the practitioner. We believe that collaborations that take advantage of the strengths of all parties have great potential to improve research and practice.

Our second aim is to be transparent about potential challenges, risks, and competing motivations that can inhibit collaborative projects. As we describe in more detail below, we solicited opinions from experts on some of these challenges. We also invited reflections from each research team from both the researcher and administrator "side" of the partnership. We encouraged the contributing authors to provide thoughts on questions such as *What worked well? What didn't work well? What challenges did you face? What unexpected benefits did you experience? What do you wish you knew at the beginning of this partnership?* Author commentaries appear at the end of each article. We summarize some of these suggestions, combined with our own observations, in the concluding article to this special issue.

This issue's four research articles result from collaborations among researchers and practitioners, and assess a diversity of important financial aid questions and postsecondary research contexts. Each research team offers a compelling research project and a nexus section connecting research to practice, and also reflects on their researcher-practitioner partnership. Benjamin Castleman, Katharine Meyer, Zachary Sullivan, William D. Hartog, and Scott Miller analyze the impacts of nudging students to file financial aid forms. They find that students are responsive to outreach from colleges even before matriculation and are comfortable engaging with college administrators virtually, even when discussing sensitive questions about finances. Jafeth E. Sanchez and Jeannette Smith examine differences between financial aid-eligible students and ineligible students who are non-U.S. citizens. These authors link persistence with financial aid eligibility, total amount of financial aid, and increases in grade point average. Brent J. Evans, Tuan D. Nguyen, Brent Tener, and Chanell Thomas use national and institutional data to explore the phenomenon of nonreceipt of Federal Pell Grants among eligible students. Their paper provides explanations for why nonreceipt occurs and discusses for whom and how verification affects Pell Grant eligibility. Finally, Brenda Eichelberger, Heather Mattioli, and Rachel Foxhoven uncover a variety of barriers that deter underrepresented students from accessing and subsequently applying financial knowledge and concepts. These authors discuss important obstacles, including students' lack of trust in services and resources available, lack of financial literacy, and lack of reliable online information.

In addition, this special issue includes four essays relevant to the risks associated with researcher-practitioner partnerships, including data security and privacy concerns, research productivity pressures, insight into what grant funders and public policy experts seek in supporting projects, and state aid policy implications. One of the barriers in collaboration between researchers and practitioners is the discomfort and perceived risk that financial aid practitioners bear regarding data sharing with researchers. These fears are addressed in recent guidance by the U.S. Department of Education Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) as well as a 2016 report by NASFAA that outlines what is permissible and the steps by which to maintain compliance within existing laws (U.S. Department of Education [PTAC], 2017; NASFAA & Cooley Higher Education, 2016). Lindsey Tonsanger and Caleb Skeath further explore the legal implications of financial aid data sharing and researcher-practitioner partnerships in this issue. In the second essay, Donald Heller draws on his experience as a researcher to provide insight into the rewards of scholarly activity that is academically rigorous, relevant, and influential to policy and practice. Then, Zakiya Smith presents guidance on approaches to funders with goals of developing connections that will stimulate research influential to policy and practice. Finally, Sarah Pingel and Dustin Weeden examine the relationships among the state-level actors that influence financial aid programs and offer areas of opportunity for future research and partnership.

Throughout this process, we tried to embody the spirit of the researcher-practitioner partnership at every stage. We, as guest editors, are a professor and a financial aid administrator. Our working relationship started through collaborative applied research conversations. The call for papers prioritized teams of authors that shared co-authorship and reflected research that benefited from both researcher and practitioner input. Two reviewers provided feedback on each article: a financial aid professional and a researcher. To carry on this spirit, we hope that you, as a reader, will be motivated to reach out to your favorite researcher or practitioner to initiate and execute a collaborative project, and that the articles and essays in this issue will make it a little bit easier to do so.

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