

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

From Research to Practice, a column dedicated to recognizing successful "bridges" between researchers and practitioners, reports on research with practical implications for youth civic engagement. Additionally, it presents concrete examples of how practitioners have applied this research to encourage the participation of young people in civic and political life.

HOW TO READ AND USE RESEARCH TO MAKE YOUR JOB EASIER

A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS AND PRACTITIONERS WHO MAY BE NEW TO RESEARCH

Research has many purposes, but one of its most important is to help inform practice. However, translating research findings into actionable program strategies can be a difficult task. This article provides a quick guide on how to read and use research to improve program outcomes. Included is a summary of the most common types of research found in the field of youth civic engagement, advice on how to choose the right type of research for your particular program needs, and finally reflection questions designed to help integrate the research findings into daily program activities and future planning.

TYPES OF RESEARCH

Below are five types of research, none of which are mutually exclusive. There are many more types of research, but these are the most common in the field of youth civic engagement. The type of research matters so that a reader can judge the significance of the research findings. For example, findings from an evaluation of one small youth organizing program may or may not be helpful to a given practitioner, but an experimental project with five youth organizing groups across the country is more likely to provide information that can be generalized.

- **"Quantitative:** Measures that strive for precision by focusing on things that can be counted."*
- **"Qualitative:** Measures that provide descriptive information about situations, events, and/or behavior of individuals."*
- **Longitudinal:** Information gathered from participants over a period or multiple periods of time, generally a year or longer.
- **"Experimental:** Potential program participants are randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control group."* This method can be especially helpful in determining program effects because it can reduce the likelihood that the measured outcomes of a program are due to a participant's predisposition to choose the program.
- **"Evaluation:** The systematic collection of information about activities, characteristics, and outcomes of a program in order to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming."*

* **Source:** *Excerpts from the James Irvine Foundation "Evaluation Terminology"*

QUESTION TO ASK ABOUT RESEARCH

Following are questions you can ask about a given research project that will tell you how applicable the research is to your work.

- **Is the topic of the research relevant to my work?**
Various youth engagement strategies (service-learning, youth organizing, volunteering) can provide opportunities for research on many types of outcomes (knowledge,

THE LANGUAGE OF RESEARCH

This is a brief glossary of terms that will help you de-code what's going on and may help you talk to those who speak this language, like faculty.

Control/Comparison Group: A technique that allows you to compare two similar groups: one that receives an intervention (such as a service-learning course) and the other that receives no treatment. Results are analyzed to see if the intervention results in changes in the comparison group, but not in the control group.

Correlation: A relationship between two or more variables. For example, there may be a correlation between newspaper readership and civic outcomes such as increased voting. However, a correlation simply suggests a relationship. It does not suggest causality. In this example, if there is a correlation between newspaper readership and voting it does not mean that newspaper readership causes increased voting.

Generalizability: Extrapolating results from a sample of the population to the larger population. In order to generalize to the larger population, the sample should have demographic characteristics that are similar to the larger population.

Outcome: A change in behavior, attitude, knowledge or skill level that results from an intervention. This is used often in program evaluations. For example, an increase in civic behavior could be an outcome of a civic education course.

Causality: An outcome that is the result of a particular program. Pinpointing the cause of a particular outcome can be difficult to measure since there are many outside factors that can cause changes. Randomized experiments are the "gold standard" for determining causality.

Efficacy: One's belief that s/he can make a difference. This term is often used in civic engagement research since efficacy is highly correlated with desired civic behaviors such as volunteering.

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behavior, habits, values, skills) that may or may not interest you. If you are interested in learning about the complex values and opinions of a specific group, qualitative research will provide richer information. Quantitative research is best for providing trends, comparisons, or information about the impact of programs.

- **When was the research done?** It is important to consider when the research was conducted. What may have changed since the research was completed? For example, a 1990 study on youth internet use will provide much different usage estimates than research conducted in 2007.
- **What is the sample size?** A larger sample size is generally better for making generalizations (surveys are best that have a minimum sample of 120 respondents).
- **What are the demographics of participants in the research?** Young people of different ages, who live in different places, or who have different educational experiences sometimes engage in civic and political life in different ways. Are the findings from a particular study too specific to a group of youth to help you? For example, a study about the political attitudes of high school immigrant youth may provide information that is relevant only to this specific population.
- **What methods did the researcher use for collecting data?** Was it systematic or does it rely on anecdotal evidence? Does the research method match the question being asked? For example, research that was done through an online survey that seeks to find out information on youth who do not regularly use the internet will not result in reliable answers to the research question.
- If the research is claiming that a program has caused a particular impact or outcome, **does the research use a design that will adequately prove causality?** Often there are outside effects that can significantly impact research findings. Researchers interested in proving causality will be careful to control for these variables. A randomized experiment is particularly useful for establishing causality. If a project is not a randomized experiment, participant self-selection may complicate the interpretation, though there are many ways to account for this.

REFLECTING ON IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUR PRACTICE

Integrating research into practice requires reflection. The following questions are meant to provide a framework for reflecting on the many ways research can help inform and improve practice.

- Could this research tell you anything new about the young people you work with?
- Do these findings mirror your experiences (e.g., with a particular strategy)? If not, why do you think that might be the case?
- What effective/best practice(s) were identified in the research? Is this a strategy similar to one you use or could use? Are there specific components of this best practice that you could build into your work?
- Would it be beneficial for me to communicate these findings with any of my colleagues?

INFORMING RESEARCH

At CIRCLE, we believe it is crucial to have a two-way conversation between research and practice. We encourage comments and questions. Consider the following questions when thinking about research and your work:

- What more do you want to know?
- What would be helpful for you in your work?
- What do people ask you about that you don't have an answer for? *

WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT RESEARCH?

- Provides a Grounding in Your Field
- Learn about Newly-Established Best Practices to Strengthen Your Work
- Affect a Research Agenda to Help You More in the Future