The Case for the Practice Brief in Community College Studies:

Writing to Bridge Research and Practice

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Authors Note

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Abstract

Among higher education scholars and observers, there is a perennial call for greater efforts to bridge research and practice. Yet the chasm between them is a similarly enduring characteristic of the field of education studies. In this paper, we advocate for the use of the *practice brief* as an overlooked and grossly underutilized genre of scholarly writing in the field of higher education—in particular the field of community college studies—as one way to more intentionally address the research-practice gap. Crafted, as it so happens, as a practice brief, this paper posits a working definition, provides an overview of the genre in relation to other types of scholarly papers and other fields of study, and enumerates key characteristics of practice briefs to guide authors and peer reviewers. We discuss how practice briefs can be situated within a largely missing form of educational praxis and scholarship such as evidence-based practice (EBP). Lastly, we call on the higher education research community to include this genre in very specific terms within calls for journal submissions, in graduate programs, and in collaboration with practitioner partners.

Keywords: practice brief, community colleges, evidence based practice, academic publishing, research practice gap

The Case for the Practice Brief in Community College Studies:

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A perennial call to action among higher education scholars and observers is the need for greater efforts to bridge research and practice (Kezar, 2000). Yet the chasm between them is a similarly enduring characteristic of the field of education studies. The community college sector is no exception (Cohen, 2005) despite intentional efforts to address the research and practice gaps structurally. In recent decades, for instance, there have been efforts such as those backed by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Amey, 2006) and the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (Perry, 2013, 2015) to transform how community college leaders and scholar-practitioners are trained. Achieving the Dream, launched by the Lumina Foundation in 2004, has engaged scores of colleges and engaged hundreds of scholars and practitioners in fostering a “culture of evidence” to support student success (Rutschow et al., 2011). University-based research and service initiatives such as the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE; McCormick, Kinzie, Gonyea, & Paulsen, 2013), the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRCFYS, 2019) and the Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL, 2019) have conducted and fostered influential, transformative research that has changed the rhetorical and policy landscapes of community colleges nationwide.

Many scholars, for their part, push for great public visibility and engagement in the national discourse and widespread policy and practices (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). Yet researchers’ ability to inform practice based on empirical evidence and transformative perspectives remains hobbled by structural trappings of the ivory tower of academe. Among barriers for tenure-track researchers who study community colleges are the persistent incentives to seek grants and produce peer-reviewed scholarship often at the expense of engagement with

policymakers and professionals. Despite personal commitments to making an impact in the lives of individuals and communities, and making their research matter in the real world (Lindholm, 2004), scholars face disincentives due to the kinds of scholarly production valued in the academy—the peer-reviewed journal article.

For their part, community college practitioners who would otherwise draw from and contribute to the research literature typically find little translatable value in contributing to and reading the type of empirical studies that predominate in higher education research journals (Bers & Calhoun, 2002). For those aspiring community college leaders who pursue higher education graduate programs to advance their careers, the evidence is clear that they regularly desire a different emphasis on skills and areas of expertise in tackling contemporary issues than what is common in academe today (Brown, Martinez, & Daniel, 2002). The convergence of interests between researchers and practitioners requires an innovative collaboration in approaching and conducting community college research.

To address the gap between research and practice on the front of academic publishing, we call on the community college research field to begin integrating the *practice brief* as a key genre of scholarly publications in research journals as one way to more intentionally bridge research and practice. In this paper—crafted, as it so happens, as a practice brief—we posit a working definition, provide an overview of the genre in relation to other types of scholarly papers and other fields of study, and enumerate some key characteristics of practice briefs to guide authors and peer reviewers, and we call on the higher education research community to include this genre in very specific terms within calls for journal submissions, in graduate programs, and in collaboration with practitioner partners. Our paper is couched specifically in the community college sector due to our own professional interests and due to the inherent values and

proposition of these institutions as explicitly grounded in their communities. Nonetheless, as we trust is apparent, our arguments are applicable to all of the higher education.

What is a Practice Brief? A Working Definition

A practice brief is an article that provides empirically based, conceptually coherent recommendations and guidance using the best and most current research to tackle a specific, urgent challenge in everyday language that practitioners can use in immediate, real-world scenarios they face every day. The notion of a practice brief is certainly not a technical one. In the common meaning of the term, it indicates simply “a short document designed to support educators with research-based information as they improve their practice” (Bell & Rhinehart, 2016, p. 1). However, as published in scholarly journals in applied fields, practice briefs also exhibit rigorous scholarship. The *Journal of Children and Poverty* (JCP), for instance, instructs authors to develop a “substantiated coherent argument,” but without using standard research article structures. Rather than an abbreviated research paper, briefs are designed to go “beyond the scope of a formal research article” (JCP, 2016, para. 3-4). Whereas JCP relies on editorial discretion alone for the publication process, other organizations, including *Association of Nurses in AIDS Care* (ANAC) and the *American Counseling Association* (ACA) for instance, pursue the same rigorous double blind peer review process as other articles in their respective publications. To fully realize the mutual interests of researchers and practitioners, we argue that peer review is essential coupled with open access publishing practices wherever possible for the sake of practitioner access.

For practical purposes of both crafting and reviewing a practice brief, it is instructive to establish how it differs and compares with other genres of scholarly and academic writing. Further below in our paper we expand on these ideas to elaborate several key characteristics.

- *A practice brief is not a short-form empirical research study.* Rather, it underscores and synthesizes implications of empirical studies. In some journals, a practice brief might in fact respond to a call for papers for a shorter-length “exchange” article or “research in brief.” However, in practice in today’s higher education journals such entries are usually empirical pieces of larger studies, such as a content validation (e.g., Hatch, Mardock-Uman, Nelson, 2018; Wood, Reid, Harris, Xiong, 2016) or methodological notes (e.g. Campbell, 2017), to name two examples. Below we call on editors to make specific calls for practice briefs to differentiate them from these already established genres.
- *A practice brief is not a policy brief.* However, it may address issues related to policy decisions, in as much as those decisions are made by practitioners—as opposed to primarily policymakers and governing agents—in the course of administering and leading the operations of educational activities. In essence, the difference is plainly contained in the nomenclature: a practice brief is to practitioners what a policy brief is to policymakers.
- *A practice brief is not a scholarly or theoretical essay.* However, it does develop a central argument that may, in the course of enumerating practical recommendations, derive evidence of conceptual shortcomings in the research literature, which in turn provides a warrant for a needed research agenda to address practitioners’ actual work.
- *A practice brief is not a systematic literature view.* Indeed, in the brief space allowed, and given the main purpose to make recommendations, a literature review section at all is in most cases inappropriate. Instead, from the beginning to the end of the paper, the focus is on how to do so something about a challenge. Defining the scope and nature of the challenge needs to be accomplished in a brief introduction. Then, recommendations

throughout should be backed with cited evidence.

A practice brief is, by definition, a short-form manuscript—usually 5 to 12 pages in length if formatted to APA guidelines and current practice in higher education journals that accept brief articles. Among the primary higher education journals (Bray & Major, 2011; Wells, Kolek, Williams, & Saunders, 2015), the only one with a specific call for a practice brief that we are aware of is the *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College* (JARCC), which provides several briefs published in recent years that can serve as exemplars or at least reference points (e.g., Barhoum, 2017; Dibelka, 2018; Tuliao, Hatch, & Torracco, 2017).

Practice Briefs as a Missing Form of Educational Praxis and Scholarship

The notion of a practice brief can be seen as an important part of intentional practice/praxis in educational research (Kemmis, 2010) including that envisioned by evidence-based practice (EBP) that is used in various professional and scholarly contexts. Originating from healthcare professions, EBP is defined as “the process of combining the best available research evidence with knowledge and skill to make collaborative, patient- or population-centered decisions within the context of a given healthcare situation” (Howlett, 2014, p. 9). Over the years, EBP has been adopted and applied to other fields, such as management (Stonebraker & Howard, 2018), social work (Mullen, Bledsoe, & Bellamy, 2008; Smith, 2013), and education (Tennille, Solomon, Brusilovskiy, & Mandell, 2016; Volpe & Briesch, 2018). Given its reliance on the partnership among evidence, practitioner expertise, and individuals’ needs and choices, EBP aims to bridge the gap between research and practice (McKibbin, 1998). Specifically, Rahman and Applebaum (2010) noted that researchers may not understand practitioners’ resistance of using the findings, while practitioners can perceive the research focus as being largely irrelevant to their practices and programs and “being out of touch with the real world” (p.

10). Certainly, this divide between research and practice is prevalent in the community college sector that the research topics valued by community college practitioners can be distinct from research topics centered on contemporary issues (Bers & Calhoun, 2002).

It is important to note the limitation of adapting EBP to other fields. For example, in a critical analysis of EBP in education, Biesta (2007) underscored that, different from the medical contexts, “being a student is not an illness, just as teaching is not a cure” (p. 8). And so, in order to more fully acknowledge and center teaching and learning as a morally-committed, co-created social phenomenon, some have argued that EBP is best paired with its complementary inverse of practice-based evidence (PBE) wherein researchers and practitioners collaborate to determine how research-derived recommendations translate to practice (McKeon & McKeon, 2015; Parrish, 2018).

These partnerships allow for critical appraisal of the best available research, evaluation of applicability in the context of student values and culture, and collaborative decision making of crafting and delivering good educational practice for everyday challenges. To answer the call for connecting community college research and practice (Cohen, 2005), we argue that what the practice brief embodies is a mechanism or venue to foster such partnerships in ways currently mostly absent in the higher education research field.

Characteristics of Practice Briefs for Authors and Reviewers

We posit four characteristics that authors and peer reviewers can refer to when evaluating manuscripts proposed as practice briefs. These characteristics have been developed based on principles of EBP/PBE discussed above and several years of experience of the first author using the practice brief as a means of scholar-practitioner development and knowledge dissemination in a doctoral-level course on community college leadership at the University of Nebraska–

Lincoln. Our hope is that scholar-practitioner teams will expand, develop, and normalize these guidelines and make practice briefs a widely used means in the broader enterprise of scholarship in practice.

Characteristic #1: Practice Briefs Provide How-To Guidance Above All

Above all else, a practice brief is a guide to “how to” to do something regarding a practical problem faced by practitioners, based on a body of evidence. This means that implications for practice are not secondary to a scholarly argument nor are they placed subsequent to one. Rather, once a practice brief establishes the topic at hand and provides a rationale for the paper, it is filled from top to bottom with recommendations for actions grounded not in anecdotal best practices, but in empirical evidence drawing on a relatively broad literature base. A practice brief is a “translational” genre of writing rather than an empirical report. Therefore, practice briefs do not have methods sections, nor a findings section. They do not have a separate discussion or recommendation section since the whole paper is an argument for action based on evidence and reasoning.

In some cases, the recommendations in a practice brief might be illustrated by or illuminated in light of a particular research study (or series of research studies) conducted by the authors. Nonetheless, the foundation of the recommendations should ideally arise from a relatively broad or diverse body of knowledge. In contrast to scholarly essays and reviews, the primary purpose is not how to understand a problem or phenomenon, although it may be necessary to briefly establish a conceptual definition for the purposes of the paper. Practice briefs do not have space for separate literature reviews or theory development.

An author may wish or be compelled to use an organizing conceptual framework to understand the issues and organize the manuscript. If so, it is vital that the author make a case to

readers, who are practitioners and other working stakeholders, why the perspective is warranted and useful to them in understanding and implementing the recommendations. Conceptual definitions must be as brief as possible, limited to only what is essential to understand the action called for. Not all practice briefs need an overall conceptual framework. Instead, it is common to provide various conceptual perspectives embedded within the discussion of the various empirical bases of different recommendations.

For authors looking to craft a practice brief based largely on their own novel study (or series of research studies), it is important to consider whether the scope of that research is broad enough to truly provide a comprehensive set of recommendations. If an author characterizes the paper as a “research brief,” “study,” or something else that reflects traditional standards of reporting empirical studies, this may be evidence that it is not a true practice brief. On the other hand, there may be countervailing evidence, despite the traditional key phrases and progression, that a paper could be a practice brief if reformulated.

Characteristic #2: Practice Briefs Are Empirically-Based

A practice brief delivers actionable guidance based on the best and most promising emerging scholarly research, as opposed to primarily anecdotal, localized, or popular knowledge.

Although a practice brief should rely on empirical research for its recommendations, it is wholly inappropriate to frame a practice brief around the traditional headings of an empirical study with a methods section, findings, discussion, implications, and so on. If a paper takes this form, it is categorically not a practice brief, even if the authors’ main intent is to inform practice. Even without a traditional empirical study organization, if the recommendations in a practice brief can only be elaborated after presenting the facts of one’s own study methods and findings, this may be evidence the manuscript is not a true practice brief, for the same reasons detailed in

the section above. On the other hand, though, one's own empirical study, even if not fitting for a practice brief alone, typically presents issues that could be leveraged nonetheless to develop a separate practice brief that could be a complementary companion piece to an empirical study report.

Of special consideration is that practice briefs, precisely due to their tackling emerging challenges for which there is little precedent, sometimes have scant empirical research bases to draw on regarding *how* to implement action regarding the issue. If this is the case, the author must draw on analogous or complementary bodies of literature from other fields or contexts to triangulate and extrapolate to the issue and setting at hand. For instance, a novel educational intervention may be based on some theory of action, yet in its implementation subject to organizational logics never before explored. Prior implementation studies of analogous programs or organizational studies alone may provide insight lacking in the novel topic. The lack of evidence for action is by itself insufficient rationale for not citing evidence for recommendations. Indeed, these are opportunities to call for needed research and to call out academics for (perhaps not yet) paying attention to pressing issues that practitioners face or that arise from the field, thus speaking to the potential of the practice brief as a feedback loop to keep research grounded and relevant.

Characteristic #3: Practice Briefs Tackle Pressing Issues that Are Sufficiently Tailored in Scope

A practice brief is by definition short. There is room for only the most pressing issues, and only their most compelling facets for which practitioners have control or responsibility. For a practice brief to make a valuable contribution, it must be narrowly tailored within a topic area. Superficial synthesis across domains and large bodies of literature are generally not helpful.

Books and literature reviews are more amenable for authoritative summaries. For instance, the questions of how to make guided pathways or reform developmental education—to name just two prominent current examples of challenges receiving attention in the community college sector—entail coverage far outside the scope of single practice briefs. A handful of pages on either topic would suffice only to give a broad definition and mostly unserviceable platitudes for recommendations due to space limitations of complex issues. Smaller aspects of these larger issues, for certain groups or contexts, for example, may be appropriate for a practice brief.

An author and reviewer should consider, independent of the intellectual novelty of a paper's argument, to what extent is the topic/issue a pressing issue that practitioners face or should be paying attention to? Does the author make a compelling case for the issue at hand? In other words, does the paper promise to make a meaningful contribution to the literature and popular rhetoric around the work of community college practitioners, advocates, and stakeholders? If so, is the topic/issue sufficiently narrow to allow a 5–12 page paper to truly make a substantive contribution?

Characteristic #4: Practice Briefs Are Aware of Their Audience

Lastly, we argue that a practice brief must have a clear indication regarding its audience. In scholarly essays and empirical studies it is perfectly acceptable and common for the purpose of the paper to pursue disembodied or un-contextualized “knowledge” or “understanding” or efforts to “approach” a phenomenon or construct. Greater knowledge and understanding are important in practice briefs too, but only as means to taking action and doing. This requires a clarity of audience, even if across many groups or types of agents whether college faculty, staff, administrators, governance officials, policymakers, community activists, workforce partners, or others. An author and reader of a practice brief should be able to immediately see who exactly

could do what right now in light of the information presented.

Conclusion: A Call to Journal Editors, Faculty, and Researchers

Practice briefs are a genre of scholarly literature largely unknown and extensively underutilized in the field of higher education. Given their potential as a mechanism to bridge research and practice in a structurally sustainable way, as argued above, we call on stakeholders to adopt and pursue the practice brief in their work so that it may become an accepted and common type of paper throughout the higher education research landscape.

In particular, we primarily call on journal editors and editorial board members to carve out in their calls for manuscripts a specific description of practice briefs among options for papers accepted. It is not enough to allow for the possibility of a practice brief under a generalized brief format. Rather, the intentionality of bridging research and practice through practice briefs needs to be apparent and specific to be more than rhetoric.

Secondly, we invite higher education faculty members to assign their students in graduate programs to write practice briefs for course assignments, with the goal of disseminating them through scholarly and professional trade publications. The format is ideal for working professionals, who make up the majority of higher education graduate students, to leverage their expertise while learning to articulate scholarly arguments and synthesize high quality empirical evidence toward problems of practice. Naturally, this type of exercise to bridge research and practice fits well with CPED and other EdD programs in particular. But it does not exempt PhD programs where new students can benefit too from learning scholarly reasoning and writing in this accessible way. As a practical recommendation, the first author of this paper has found success in requiring students to submit their term papers for publication or dissemination, whether in peer-reviewed or other venues, in order to receive full credit. Bridging the classroom

and the field is just one other instance of what practice briefs can contribute to.

Lastly, for those faculty, students, and practitioners conducting highly technical or theoretical higher education research, the practical and policy implications are always urgent regardless of the scholarly abstraction. Yet implications tend to get buried in the closing paragraphs of research papers that generally are not read by practitioners. Therefore, we call on scholars to consider crafting—for each and every paper they write—a complementary but stand-alone practice brief for dissemination in venues likely to reach practitioners. These companion practice briefs ideally would be written in collaboration with practitioners, if not involved in the original research, to ensure their relevancy and potential as translational scholarship.

It is clear that higher education research must be reimagined (Renn & Gonzales, 2019) including what motivates research and what we do with it (Tachine, Lopez, Dache, & Phelps-Ward, 2019). Insofar as there is agreement that research should be grounded in, responsive to, and conducted in collaboration with and for the benefit of educators and their communities, we call on the higher education research community to adopt and promote the practice brief as a key mechanism toward this end.

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