

The Delaware Early Literacy Research-Practice Partnership: Catalyzing Educational Equality

University of Delaware and the Delaware State Department of Education (DDOE)

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Amount: \$650,000 (2024-2027, co-funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, the Bezos Family Foundation, and the Spencer Foundation)

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are an increasingly used strategy for strengthening use of research to guide improvement (National Research Council, 2003), building more equitable relationships between research and practice (Doucet, 2019; Tseng et al., 2017), and addressing inequality (Farrell et al., 2021; Ishimaru et al., 2022). This proposal seeks to deepen the relationship between the University of Delaware (UD) and the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) through the Delaware Early Literacy Research Practice Partnership (DEL RPP), which will identify and address inequities in early literacy opportunities and outcomes. The grant will also support capacity building and institutional change efforts that will enhance capacity for both production of policy-relevant research and use of research evidence in policy.

The DEL RPP has jointly developed a set of research and policy questions aimed at reducing inequalities in early literacy outcomes. The DEL RPP benefits from long-standing, previously established relationships between DDOE and UD, a recently initiated data sharing alliance, and two years of meetings to develop and strengthen our partnership. These meetings and institutional partnerships have increased trust and allowed us to recognize mutual goals. However, additional funding is needed to enact the DEL RPP's research agenda and capacity-building activities to leverage the current policy environment and further understand and address early literacy inequities in Delaware's education system.

[...]

Changing Institutional Policies and Practices

As part of this grant, the UD teams will design and implement a plan to increase formal, institutional support for RPPs such as the DEL RPP through improving supporting conditions for engaged scholarship (ES). We conceptualize ES as a transdisciplinary approach that occurs at the intersection of faculty scholarship, community engagement, and community need (Howard, 2007), which generates knowledge that is rigorous, relevant, and impactful. Core principles entail elevating community needs, jointly developed research questions and methods, collaboration throughout the research process, co-creation of knowledge from the research, and generation of products valued by all partners - all features of RPPs. Presently, ES is called for nationally, as it contributes value beyond that of conventional research, and, through its transdisciplinarity, has potential for theoretical and methodological innovations (Holland et al, 2010). However, disciplinary silos and hierarchies of knowledge create institutional barriers, leading to limited research faculty participation in ES and marginalization of ES in IHEs. Thus, IHEs must be strategic and intentional about ES efforts. Solutions to these challenges are investment in a culture of

Selection committee members lauded the proposal's strong section on institutional change during the review. Note that the section begins with how they define engaged research.

engagement (Ademak et al., 2004), participation in networks committed to ES (Abrams et al., 2006), and investment in faculty and student capacity to lead ES (Sandmann, 2006). Below, we elaborate on existing UD's institutional strengths, challenges, and our proposed work for supporting and enhancing ES across the University.

Existing institutional supports

UD is a Land Grant, Sea Grant, Space Grant, Urban Grant, and Carnegie Doctoral/Research Extensive University with the research and administrative infrastructure to support community partnership and community-engaged research. Through UD's Carnegie classification as a community engagement institution and membership in Campus Compact and TRUCEN, UD is represented in networks with commitments to ES. The Community Engagement Initiative (CEI) was established in 2016 to strengthen the University's identity and contributions as an engaged research university. The CEI is guided by the UD's Civic Action Plan which features five goals: 1) to enhance capacity to support community engagement; 2) to increase support for engaged scholarship; 3) to expand opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students; 4) to launch new knowledge-based partnerships addressing critical society challenges; and 5) to increase recognition for UD as an engaged research university. The Partnership for Public Education (PPE), established as the first knowledge-based partnership under CEI, serves as a key source of support for partnership work and ES specifically for faculty whose work focuses on education. Evidenced in these activities, UD has made significant progress towards institutionalizing its commitments as an engaged university and cultivating a culture of engagement.

At the time of application, the University of Delaware was already defined by a strong commitment to engaged research, as demonstrated by its Carnegie classification, membership in Campus Connect and TRUCEN, and Community Engagement Initiative. This section clearly illustrated to the Selection Committee what barriers remained and how the grant would support change strategies to address them.

While the University as a whole is committed to increasing and supporting community engagement and partnership, the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) in particular has invested in partnerships and engaged work, prioritizing the quality and impact, not quantity, of its partnerships. CEHD comprises not only two academic departments but ten research and public service centers that provide research expertise and educational services to the community and the university as well. In addition to its support and engagement with PPE, the College recently initiated CDDA in 2021. Noted earlier, CDDA's vision is to work with state and community practitioners to identify priority areas, integrate state administrative data, and utilize this knowledge to inform data-based decision making. Additionally, CEHD's continuing track faculty are particularly invested in, and have been recognized for their recognition of linking engaged scholarship to teaching and outreach. Finally, CEHD is committed to training undergraduate students who gain experience in community engagement and partnership through strategic internships and field placements.

Challenges to doing engaged scholarship

While UD has made significant investments in these solutions, partnership work is not without challenges. Like other universities, one of the most significant challenges is the lack of explicit recognition of ES (including RPPs) in the current promotion and tenure materials (P&T). RPPs, as well as other forms of ES, pose multiple challenges in traditional promotion and tenure contexts. These include extended timelines for building relationships and meaningful engagement, mismatch between what counts as a publication and the nature of partnership products, the opportunity to publish partnership work in peer-reviewed journals, lack of disciplinary recognition of engaged approaches to inquiry, and emphasis on evaluating individual rather than collective contributions (Gelmon et al., 2013). These challenges disincentivize engagement in ES and RPPs, particularly for pre-tenure and early career scholars.

This section identifies promotion and tenure criteria as a persistent barrier to engaged research at UD. Addressing these criteria is one approach to institutional change but is not required. While some of our ICG grantees tackle this significant challenge, not all universities or divisions are well-positioned to do so.

Specific changes have already been called for in UD's Commission on Tenure Track report, including expansion of the term scholarship, adaptations made to P&T requirements, and P&T analytics. Additionally, CEI has actively pursued tenure reform to more explicitly address ES in UD policies. Progress in this area includes community engagement being counted as a categorical type of work in annual review and planning forms, allowing for UD to begin to gather data on the scope of scholarly community engagement; faculty senate proposals to adjust the faculty handbook to increase the prominence of ES in faculty efforts; and partnering with Delaware State University (HBCU) on shared scholarly community engagement efforts.

The proposal makes the case for how the team is poised to tackle the complex process of advancing change to P&T criteria, especially given the PI's experiences.

However, change in higher education is a complex, bureaucratic and political process. Changing P&T policy requires that policies be developed and approved by faculty at the departmental level and approved by upper administration levels, requiring both bottom-up initiative and top-down support. The work proposed in this grant is well-positioned to accomplish both. First, with the arrival of a new Provost with expressed support for the

engagement missions of the University, along with strong foundational work from the Commission on Tenure Track and CEI, there is a window of opportunity to push for change at the institutional level. Second, CEHD is highly likely to be a successful site for faculty-driven change because of its strong history of ES and community engagement; the Dean's (also the PI) extensive history of successful and productive RPP work and ES; and its size (it is home to only two academic units) - conditions which makes it highly likely to achieve agreement on revised college-level policies. Successful P&T reforms in CEHD can then become a model for faculty in other departments across campus.

Proposed changes to institutional policies and practices

We propose to address institutional challenges through both formal, policy-level changes to departmental and college-level P&T as well as practical support to facilitate partnership work.

Formal policy changes

The PI, Dean Gary Henry, will establish an ad hoc committee at the start of the grant, which will include Dr. Farley-Ripple, research fellows Drs. Whitaker and Amendum, and additional faculty from CEHD's two academic units. The committee will build from the work of the Commission on Tenure Track, CEI, and other related UD initiatives as well as consider non-UD exemplars and solicit the input of faculty across both units and across career stages. The scope of the committee's charge in Year 1 will include recommending policy changes that:

- Define ES and its meaning in the context of research and teaching workloads.
- Recognize and reward relationship- and partnership-building as part of research workload in merit and promotion evaluations
- Explicitly include RPP and other forms of ES as valued scholarly activities and products in departmental and CEHD promotion and tenure guidelines
- Develop guidance about documenting (for faculty and staff) and evaluating (for reviewers) evidence of ES as part of faculty evaluation, promotion and tenure

The proposal details concrete examples of how the team will achieve their goal of changing P&T policies over the three years of the grant period.

In Year 2, the committee will work with the PI and department chairs to advance proposed changes for faculty approval at the departmental and then college levels, ultimately submitting revised policies to the Provost for approval and official posting. The committee will document its processes, resources, and outcomes to provide guidance to other units on campus. In Year 3 and in collaboration with CEI and others, the committee will advocate for University-wide policy change (e.g., references to ES in the

faculty handbook). The committee will also share resources, recommended language, and standards for documenting and evaluating ES at the annual Provost's Symposium on Engaged Scholarship showcasing UD's community engagement efforts.

Practical supports

Formal changes to P&T policies will have long term impacts on how scholars at UD think about their work in relation to the larger communities UD serves. This opens doors to increased RPP work but does not solve all the challenges of engaging in that work. To support the practical dimensions of ES, CEHD will:

- 1) Recognize and encourage ES activities in sabbatical proposals and will include that guidance in communication with faculty's planning for sabbatical.
- 2) Offer summer funding for graduate students to help faculty initiate ES projects
- 3) Include ES as an approved expenditure for faculty startup funds that are provided to both tenure track and continuing track faculty and work with HR to add language approved for new faculty offer letters.

The proposal identifies other supports to put in place to incentivize faculty to participate in engaged research.

These practical supports will be initiated in Year 1 by the Dean of CEHD and fully implemented by Year 2 of the grant.

Proposed changes for institutional capacity are supported by both college and university leadership, as indicated by letters from both the Dean of CEHD and the Provost of the University (Appendix D). Furthermore, the award of this prestigious grant will help to elevate the visibility and urgency for reform and increase the likelihood of broad institutional support for change.

Applications should include strong letters of support from your institution's leaders that demonstrate an awareness of and commitment to proposed change strategies.

References

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