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## Models for Applying Scholarship to Practice

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*Models for applying scholarship to practice provide guidance to administrators who are informed by research to address very complex problems.*

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# Models for Applying Scholarship to Practice

***Maureen E. Wilson, Amy S. Hirschy***

A goal of the scholarship of practice is to improve professional practice by using empirical research as the groundwork for developing practice and policy (Braxton, 2014). Research should contribute to an understanding of the challenges practitioners face. The purpose of this chapter is to review process models for translating scholarship into practice and offer suggestions for choosing among those models. Administrators can apply these theories and models across disciplines. We conclude with suggestions for interpreting and acting on research and detail implications for administrative practice.

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## Model of Theory-to-Practice Translation

Reason and Kimball (2012, 2013) reviewed and critiqued theory-to-practice models and then presented a new model for integrating scholarship, context, and reflection. As pictured in Figure 3.1, the model incorporates formal theory, institutional context, informal theory, and practice as well as feedback loops from practice to informal theory, institutional context, and formal theory. These feedback loops are a key contribution of Reason and Kimball's (2013) model compared to existing models and guiding principles (e.g., Bensimon, 2007; Rodgers & Widick, 1980; Stage & Dannells, 2000). Although Reason and Kimball grounded their analysis in student affairs, the model can apply more broadly to higher education administration as well.

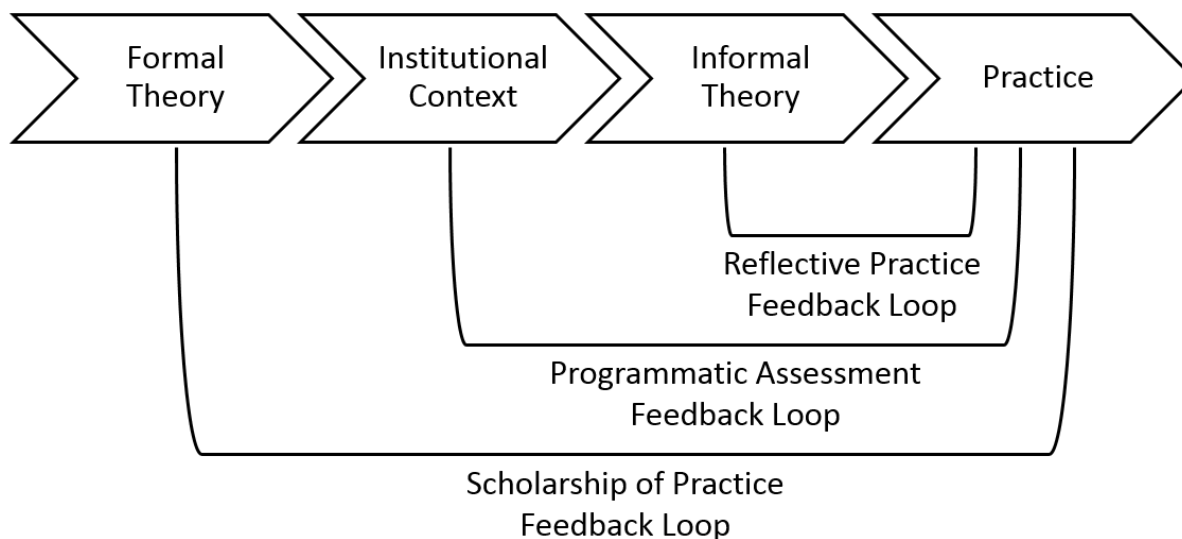


Figure 3.1. Theory-to-practice translation model (Reason & Kimball, 2013).

## **Formal Theory**

Reason and Kimball (2012) argued persuasively that practitioners “must have a broad-based, advanced education in [formal] theories that allows for an informed, eclectic approach to theory selection at all administrative levels” (p. 368). Formal theories offer shared language and understanding among professionals. At the formal theory stage of the model, practitioners should identify which theories are known by staff members, what new perspectives have been offered via publications and conference presentations, the outcomes proposed in the theories, and the populations included in and excluded from the research that led to the theories (Reason & Kimball, 2012).

## **Institutional Context**

Examining institutional context or culture happens at the second stage of the model. Reason and Kimball (2012) credited the case-study approach of Stage (1994) and Stage and Dannells (2000) as possibly being the only theory-to-practice models in student affairs that explicitly integrated institutional culture into the process. More than just institutional type, size, and selectivity, culture, or context includes the community members’ values, beliefs, and perceptions. In Reason and Kimball’s (2013) model, institutional context is intended to capture

the ways in which the environment affects institutionally supported goals and how best to accomplish them. Implicitly and explicitly, practitioners' knowledge and use of their informal theories are influenced by the institutional context. Adapting Reason and Kimball's (2012) recommended questions for student affairs practitioners in this stage of the model, we suggest the following questions for other higher education professionals:

1. What are the sociodemographic characteristics of students and faculty and staff members at the institution?
2. Who influences the goals for the institution and how do the culture of the institution and the composition of the administration, faculty, staff, and students influence those goals?
3. What educational values and beliefs do faculty and staff members hold?
4. How do these values and beliefs shape interactions between and among community members?

Considering these questions about a particular institution may help higher education administrators tailor their approaches to addressing specific community issues.

## **Informal Theory**

The third stage of Reason and Kimball's (2013) model focuses on informal theory which is "common knowledge that allows us to make implicit connections among the events and persons in our environment and upon which we act in everyday life" (Parker, 1977, p. 421). Reason and Kimball (2012) contended that informal theories are based upon the convergence of formal theories, institutional context, and the positionality of individual professionals. Positionality reflects an understanding and acknowledgment of the influences of one's experiences and social identities on one's assumptions and beliefs (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). In other words, professionals' positionality shapes their informal theories. Key to Reason and Kimball's (2012) contention is that formal theories explicitly shape informal theories and this connection is critical to professional practice. They noted Parker's (1977) suggestion that practitioners may not be aware of their informal theories and that Bensimon (2007) did not clearly address the link between formal and implicit or informal theories. Reason and Kimball (2012) argued that "informal theory implies a desirable level of critical consciousness and reflection that implicit theory does not" (p. 360). Furthermore, we add that the majority of college and university administrators are trained in their academic discipline instead of administration, and thus many are likely unfamiliar with existing theoretical models in higher education administration. Additionally, their experience may span multiple institutions, and some may fail to uncover and appreciate institutional context as a critical factor in decision-making, assuming

that what worked in a prior setting is easily transferable to the current institution. They may rely on informal theories not well anchored to formal theories or even institutional context.

At the informal theory stage of the model, Reason and Kimball (2012) encouraged professionals to consider questions pertaining to their beliefs about how learning and development occur, how their informal theories are influenced by their educational experiences and institutional context, and how their understanding of formal theory affects their understanding of learning and development. We also advise that administrators consider the influences of their positionality on their informal theories. Again, student affairs professionals may frame these questions in terms of student learning and development. Depending on the task or focus, other campus professionals may also focus on student learning and development, perhaps having never studied formal theories related to those processes. However, their focus may also involve other aspects and populations of the campus community. For example, how can institutional leaders build and strengthen the pipeline for campus leadership roles (e.g., academic department chairs, college deans, administrative directors)? In that context, they may think about what draws faculty and staff to seek or accept leadership roles on campus. Their own journeys to leadership roles, observations of others who ascended to those positions, and their views of institutional efforts to recruit campus leaders may shape their informal theories. They may also draw upon formal theories of andragogy, administration, and leadership.

## **Practice**

In the next stage of the model, practice is the application of informal theory—informed by institutional context and formal theory—to professionals' work (Reason & Kimball, 2012). For student affairs professionals, this may be work with individual students and student groups. For the provost, this may be work with individual colleges and all academic administrators (e.g., deans and department chairs). Again adapting Reason and Kimball's guiding questions, professionals might ask themselves what work experiences have been effective or ineffective in producing intended outcomes.

## **Reflective Practice Feedback Loop**

The first feedback loop in the model is from practice to informal theory. Reason and Kimball (2012) promoted reflective practice in which each interaction is an occasion to learn and better understand the informal theories that inform practice. They stated that "Practitioners' reactions, informal and formal assessments, and student feedback reinforce or change practitioners'

understanding of the informal theories with which they work” (p. 370). Practice transforms based on changes in one’s informal theories. Questions at this stage encourage professionals to consider which interventions they commonly utilize, the connections between those interventions and their informal theories, and evidence on the effectiveness of those interventions.

## **Programmatic Assessment Feedback Loop**

The second feedback loop from practice to institutional context is critical to good assessment activities. Here the focus is on whether programs and interventions are meeting their stated goals and are still appropriate to the institutional context. Therefore, administrators should seek evidence on program effectiveness and examine how that evidence supports or refutes shared values, beliefs, and perceptions about important goals (Reason & Kimball, 2012).

## **Scholarship of Practice Feedback Loop**

The third feedback loop from practice to formal theory enhances the process of integrating practice with scholarship and scholarship with practice. This loop helps to make practitioners visible in the development and revision of formal theory and should aid scholars in strengthening the implications of their work for practice. Similar to important questions in the reflective practice loop, professionals should consider the linkages between their interventions and formal theories and examine the evidence regarding the effectiveness of those programs, services, and policies.

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# **Action Inquiry Model**

As Reason and Kimball (2012) noted, not all practice models explicitly address the role of theory in practice. St. John, McKinney, and Tuttle’s (2006) Action Inquiry Model is one such framework. Although it does not explicitly address the role of theory, it does draw on scholarship to improve practice. St. John et al. discussed various approaches to change in higher education and argued that omitting evaluation from the change process hampers learning and adaptation. There are many persistent problems in postsecondary education, and their roots are not obvious. Therefore, instead of forging ahead uncritically with strategies that are ill suited for the problem, professionals must first develop a clear and complex understanding of myriad contributors to the problem under consideration. This is especially important in higher education, they contended, because most research focuses on traditional institutions and traditional-aged students but vexing

challenges often pertain to nontraditional students, settings, and institutions. St. John et al. presented the Action Inquiry Model that consists of five complex steps.

1. **Build an understanding of the challenge.** Before proceeding to solutions, administrators must know why the challenge exists, the efficacy of past attempts to address it, and aspects of the challenge that have been inadequately addressed and those that require additional study. To understand the challenge, [AUTHOR NOTE: The heading and prior text refers to a single challenge.] administrators generate potential explanations for the challenge [AUTHOR NOTE: should be singular] they face and determine whether the data support the explanations. Again, they may utilize theory to help generate testable hypotheses. We propose that both formal and informal theories can help administrators build an understanding of the challenge.
2. **Look internally and externally for solutions.** Internally, administrators should have discussions on campus to understand how professionals have addressed related problems. Externally, “best practices” related to the challenge should be considered to determine whether they can be adapted to fit specific campus needs. By visiting other campuses with similar challenges, administrators can learn what approaches have been tried elsewhere and consider their suitability to the current context.
3. **Assess possible solutions.** Based on the understanding of the problem, professionals should generate options and determine whether they will address the challenge. They must identify the potential for pilot testing, benchmarks for success, and data required to determine their effectiveness.
4. **Develop action plans.** Professionals should develop action plans to implement solutions and pilot test them. It is often best to begin with plans that can be implemented with current staff and resources because seeking additional funding can impede the change process.
5. **Implement pilot test and evaluate.** Finally, the chosen solution should be pilot tested and evaluated. Administrators should use the results of the evaluation to improve the strategy and seek support for additional resources if necessary.

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## Selecting Theoretically Derived

# Models

The Model of Theory-to-Practice Translation (Reason & Kimball, 2012) and the Action Inquiry Model (St. John et al., 2006) are just two of myriad models available to guide the application of scholarship to practice. Hirschy (2015) described many deterrents administrators face in using theoretically derived models in practice including questionable relevance, insufficient detail, uneven quality, and lack of time and training. However, use of empirically based models can aid administrators in identifying how institutional levers (e.g., resources, policies, programs) can be effectively used to achieve stated goals. She offered recommendations for selecting theoretically derived models to improve outcomes based on four criteria.

1. **Professional judgment.** Theory, practice, research and scholarship, collegial discussions, and professional engagement collectively inform professional judgment to enhance administrative practice (Blimling, 2011). Thus, administrators should use professional judgment to assess the fit of models and theories to design effective practice. Through this process, they should note which models (in whole or part) resonate with the institutional context (e.g., student characteristics, community values) and offer the greatest potential to shape strategic actions (Hirschy, 2015).
2. **Level and context of model.** Robert Merton (1968) referred to a theory as “a set of logically interrelated assumptions from which empirically testable hypotheses are derived” (p. 66). Scholars classify theories to differentiate among their characteristics, such as scope. For example, grand theories provide the broadest explanation of phenomenon, applicable in all contexts. Grand theories explain large-scale topics applicable to all types of organizations (e.g., Astin’s 1984 theory of student involvement). Middle-range theories are less expansive than grand theories (e.g., Bean and Metzner’s 1985 conceptual model for nontraditional students) but are applicable to multiple settings and similar groups (e.g., residential colleges or low-income students). Low-level theories explain behaviors in specific settings (e.g., Comeaux and Harrison’s 2011 model for Division I student athlete success). Middle-range and low-level theories are most relevant to practitioners as they are most sensitive to contexts (Hirschy, 2015). In selecting theories, Hirschy (2015) urged practitioners to know the institution and its characteristics well in order to assess effectively the applicability of theoretical models. To do so, professionals must maintain relationships with institutional research staff to access necessary data. Administrators should carefully weigh the strengths and weaknesses of grand, middle-



range, and low-level models based on the problems they are addressing. Finally, they should consider the models most relevant to the available data. For example, leaders in strategic enrollment management should employ models that examine key enrollment indicators (i.e., student and institutional attributes).

3. **Theoretical lens and empirical support.** To determine the usefulness of a theory or model, administrators must understand the details of its development. For example, from what population was it developed? Is it generalizable to the current context? Is there empirical support for it? To make these determinations, they must read widely and choose carefully, examining the institutional challenges faced through multiple theoretical lenses.
4. **Flexibility in applying a model or models to practice.** Based on the specific challenges administrators are facing, they should weigh the advantages and disadvantages of using a single model versus drawing upon several models to best shape their practice, while considering institutional goals and characteristics. “Drawing on multiple disciplinary lenses may offer a more complex analysis and help create innovative interventions for improved practice” (Hirschy, 2015, p. 280). Patton, Renn, Guido, and Quaye (2016) concurred with this approach, arguing that examining situations through multiple theoretical lenses offers a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand and helps generate a variety of strategies to address them.

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## Interpreting and Acting on Research to Improve Administrative Practice

At the beginning of the chapter, we noted that a goal of the scholarship of practice is to improve professional practice by using empirical research as the groundwork for developing practice and policy. In addition to collecting and analyzing data generated from one’s own campus to understand and address identified problems, published scholarship can aid administrators in developing a broader and more complex understanding of the issues they face.

Mayhew et al. (2016) also offered two pieces of sage guidance on interpreting and acting upon research to inform administrative practice. First, although empirical research may reveal statistically significant findings, those differences may not be practically significant. Therefore, administrators must critically examine research results to determine their relevance to local problems. We add that if they lack the expertise to understand and interpret the findings, they

must bring to the table those with the strongest skill sets to help them develop a sophisticated understanding of the literature.

Second, in making a decision to act upon results, the expense of implementing change is one important consideration. For example, changes to teaching strategies or assignment to learning communities may yield positive student outcomes, cost little or nothing, and therefore garner wide support. In contrast, before deciding to initiate a brand new academic advising structure complete with building renovations and extensive hiring, administrators must have compelling evidence that outcomes of the project will justify the investment of human and financial resources. Administrators can help build that confidence by understanding the design and rigor of the studies providing supporting evidence, again relying on those with the strongest expertise to build that understanding.

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## **Implications for Administrative Practice**

Administrators face many vexing problems without simple or obvious solutions such as student retention declines, low faculty morale, a hostile campus climate, or a weak leadership pipeline. We offer several recommendations to aid administrators in using scholarship to improve professional practice.

### **Clearly Identify and Define the Problem**

Some problems are readily identifiable such as a decline in applications or student retention. The cause of those problems and solutions for them are complex but the problems can be easy to spot by those tracking data. Other complex problems may hover under the surface, unnoticed or unattended to by many until they boil over into the spotlight. For example, student concerns over the campus racial climate may go unaddressed for a long time before a critical incident or organized protest lights the momentum for change, sometimes resulting in considerable unrest and the ouster of top officials. Campus leaders must expect administrators throughout the organizational hierarchy to identify and report problems and reward them for doing so. Once a problem is identified, a diverse group of campus stakeholders must work together to define it.

## **Gather Good Data**

In building an understanding of campus problems and contributors to them—part of the first step of the Action Inquiry Model (St. John et al., 2006)—administrators must identify and agree upon specific data sources and data collection procedures and justify those decisions. For example, a decision to consider only first-time, full-time, fall-semester admits in retention models will exclude critical data and obscure the true retention picture. Although it may be more challenging to develop a different student tracking system, doing so will provide a more accurate assessment of retention. Similarly, plenty of evidence supports the role of student involvement and engagement in cocurricular activities in student success but without reliable methods of tracking student participation, administrators and scholars cannot assess its effects. Other ill-structured problems such as campus climate or faculty morale are difficult to assess and those with particular scholarly expertise on those topics must be included in doing so.

## **Use Theory and Scholarship to Guide Solutions**

Administrators can seek guidance from scholarly literature to solve problems. We have shared models for doing so in this chapter. Using scholarship can help inform administrators by deepening their understanding of complex problems. It can provide new evidence-based strategies for tackling issues. Administrators can use the literature to build a compelling argument and persuade stakeholders on a course of action.

## **Listen to Skeptics and Critics**

It can be tempting for administrators to surround themselves by like-minded people, but doing so can short-circuit successful implementation of initiatives. Efforts to address one problem may lead to a new problem without careful planning and buy-in. For instance, many on a campus may agree that the funding model for graduate students is unsustainable but disagree in how to best to change it. By gathering a group of bright and committed leaders from various disciplinary backgrounds—including those on the front lines of graduate recruitment and admission—to work together to implement the Action Inquiry Model and devise a funding scheme, the campus is more likely to foster buy-in, maintain and grow enrollment targets, and protect program quality.

Bensimon (2007) posed important questions that reinforce the need to have a wide range of voices at the table as important decisions are made, in this case pertaining to student success:

When practitioners have been socialized to view student success from the perspective of the dominant paradigm, what do they notice? What might they fail to notice? What do they expect to see and what happens when their expectations are not met? Might the know-how derived from the dominant paradigm be inimical to the needs of minority students? Might it lead to misconceptions? (p. 451)

The failure to include skeptics and critics can contribute to failed strategies and harm to community members.

## **Learn From Others**

On any given day, administrators can read about serious problems facing postsecondary institutions. Many are typical such as admissions yield rates or student readiness for college. Others may be common but difficult for some to spot, such as issues arising from difficult campus climates or cultures. The report commissioned by Texas A&M University in the wake of the 1999 bonfire collapse that killed 12 and injured 27 offers powerful lessons to campus leaders. In addition to the analysis of the structural failures that led to the collapse, the commission concluded that “a cultural bias impeding risk identification, and the lack of a proactive risk management approach” (Special Commission, 2000, p. 4) contributed to the tragedy. A large body of scholarship exists to aid administrators in understanding campus culture and risk management. It should not take a tragedy or massive protest to invest in developing complex understanding of institutional culture and its influence on the campus community. News reports and in-depth stories from publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education* ought to prompt administrations to question the relevance of those situations to their own campus and consider opportunities for improvement, identification of risks, and effective response to problems.

## **Prioritize Professional Development**

With so many pressing issues to manage, it can be difficult to prioritize professional development. Theory provides a common language to foster understanding, offers new ways to solve problems, and draws on others’ professional wisdom. However, administrators’ academic and professional backgrounds vary, so many will need assistance in gaining exposure to and understanding of relevant theories. Utilizing campus experts, bringing scholars and practitioners to campus to teach others, and sending staff to professional meetings are three professional development strategies. Additionally, a common scholarly reading for campus leaders, faculty, and staff will foster discussion and

draw upon different academic and professional backgrounds to help solve problems.

## **Contribute to Scholarship**

Finally, administrators should be encouraged to contribute to the literature and supported in doing so. In her discussion of selecting theoretically derived models, Hirschy (2015) urged professionals to consider models embedded in theory and research and then to evaluate results and share information on the effectiveness of their application. With feedback from practitioners, scholars can improve the creation, evaluation, and revision of theories and models.

By presenting on and publishing their findings, administrators can contribute to the iterative cycle of theory development and grow the body of knowledge. They become part of a feedback loop that is essential to improving both scholarship and practice. “Only by applying the formalized scholarly techniques to a local context and by sharing these results broadly can we normalize reflexive practice” (Reason & Kimball, 2012, p. 372).

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## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we reviewed models for apply scholarship to practice and shared recommendations for selecting theoretically derived models. These models and recommendations provide guidance to administrators who seek to be informed by scholarship as they address very complex problems. We also urge those administrators to contribute to the body of knowledge, assisting both scholars and practitioners and muddying the distinction between the two groups.

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