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RESEARCH & EVALUATION AGENDA

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NIRN | **NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH NETWORK**

FRANK PORTER GRAHAM CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Why a NIRN Research & Evaluation Agenda?

The mission of the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) is to contribute to the best practices and science of implementation, organizational change, and system reinvention to improve outcomes across the spectrum of human services. As such, it has been involved in advancing implementation practice through numerous initiatives over the past 17 years. Although recognized as an implementation practice leader, NIRN has not been as consistent with its implementation research and evaluation agenda (REA). Yet, it is uniquely positioned to advance implementation research and evaluation based on the wealth of data generated through its projects. By contributing innovative practice-based research insights, demonstrating the value of implementation practice, improving the rigor of the evidence generated through practice-based research, and increasing its scholarship and policy outputs, NIRN is primed to further establish itself as a national player in implementation science.

Contributing Innovative Insights

An opportunity to advance implementation science through practice-based research and a focus on practical implementation

NIRN is well positioned to expand the focus of current implementation science agendas by contributing its wealth of knowledge on implementation practice and capitalizing on the practice-based data generated through its projects. There have been recent calls from the implementation science community for an increased focus on practice-based and community-defined evidence (Brownson et al., 2022). NIRN already aims to engage stakeholders in a meaningful way; optimizes insights from lived experiences; develops practical implementation solutions; recognizes the importance of promoting equity; understands the challenges of implementing complex interventions in complex systems; and makes use of pragmatic methods. All of these strategies are essential to generating practice-based research. The REA will facilitate a more systematic approach for NIRN to compiling and disseminating practice-based findings to advance implementation science.

Demonstrating the Value of Implementation Practice

An opportunity to demonstrate return-on-investment (ROI) and the value of implementation practice

The importance of implementation practice (i.e., use of strategies or interventions to support implementation) has been traditionally undervalued compared to implementation research. Consistently translating knowledge into practical implementation systems that include processes, tools, and roadmaps, for use in real-world contexts has been the focus of few groups (e.g., NIRN, Wandersman team, the Center for Implementation). Yet, while research informs practice, without practice, there is no research. As an implementation practice leader, NIRN has an opportunity to demonstrate the value and cost-effectiveness of implementation practice by exploring and testing optimal implementation approaches within specific settings. Demonstrating ROI will increase stakeholder buy-in and maximize opportunities to infuse implementation practice into initiatives that could benefit from this approach.

Improving the Rigor of Practice-Based Evidence in Implementation Science

An opportunity to contribute to knowledge expansion through application of alternative designs

The need to broaden and customize research approaches (study designs, methods, outcomes) designed to produce rigorous yet actionable evidence has been recognized by the implementation science community (Brownson et al., 2022). Rigorous designs, such as Randomized Control Trials (RCTs), the gold standard for many research endeavors, tend to focus on internal validity and control of confounding factors, rather than embracing context, variability, and practicality. By definition, implementation work is far from mechanistic, occurring in dynamic, complex, real-world environments, that often require flexible and agile research paradigms with use of mixed data. At the same time, implementation science needs to move past exploratory designs to strengthen the quality of the evidence produced. Examples of alternative designs combining real-world utility with rigor include pragmatic trials, adaptive designs, and effectiveness-implementation hybrid designs. The scope and focus of the NIRN projects allow for application of these alternative designs, thereby providing an opportunity to generate knowledge based on actionable yet rigorous evidence.

Expanding NIRN's Footprint as a Leader in Implementation Science

An opportunity to increase breadth, visibility, and impact through use of data, scholarship, and increased reach

Maturing into an expanded implementation science leadership role requires a dual focus on implementation practice and research. NIRN can enhance its current impact by (1) strengthening its current implementation practice offerings through systematic use and dissemination of data; and (2) expanding its line of business, current partnerships, and target audience to more explicitly include the scientific community and policy stakeholders. Producing and packaging practice-based implementation scholarship that is of interest to scientists and policymakers (in addition to practice-based organizations) will further the impact and visibility of NIRN.

What is the NIRN Research & Evaluation Agenda?

Mission & Vision

Aligned with NIRN and The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute's missions, the Research and Evaluation Agenda aims to advance the field of implementation science by contributing actionable yet rigorous evidence to expand knowledge of implementation best practices within complex real-world environments, with the ultimate goal to improve outcomes across the spectrum of human services. Through this agenda, NIRN will not only continue to be recognized as a leader in implementation practice and workforce development, but will also strengthen its role as a national player in implementation research for education, early childhood, child welfare, public health, healthcare, and other human services fields.

Desired Goals and Key Performance Indicators

| **Goal 1** | *NIRN will develop a vision and infrastructure in support of Implementation Science research and evaluation (year 1)* |

- Clearly articulated and defined scope of NIRN research and evaluation space within IS
- Written REA
- Research and evaluation infrastructure in place

| **Goal 2** | *NIRN will strengthen its internal knowledge and capacity in Implementation Science research and evaluation (years 1-3)* |

- Capacity building action plan
- Clear expectations and roles of NIRN staff related to research and evaluation
- Defined career path for research staff within FPG

| **Goal 3** | *NIRN will grow its Implementation Science research and evaluation portfolio (years 1-3)* |

- Strategic expansion of key partnerships
- Pipeline and proposal response processes in place
- Expanded NIRN portfolio (beyond current focus)

| **Goal 4** | *NIRN will contribute to advancing Implementation Science research and practice through scholarship and expanded collaborations (within FPG, within UNC, and outside of UNC)* |

- At least one product per NIRN project that furthers understanding and/or translates insights and data into usable deliverables (e.g., for policy, decision making)
- At least one implementation-focused publication per larger project per year
- At least one presentation/poster per larger project per year
- Scholarship dissemination plan in place for each NIRN project (e.g., publications, conferences, presentations)
- Scholarship writing infrastructure and process in place for each NIRN project
- At least one new collaboration per year

| **Goal 5** | *NIRN will contribute to the internal culture shift necessary to support applied research and evaluation, and demonstrate the value of implementation practice (years 1-3)* |

- 80% of NIRN meeting agendas include research and evaluation topics
- Regular engagement with FPG on research collaborations

Scope, Approach, Principles, and Methodologies

The research and evaluation conducted at NIRN will be **mission-focused, applied, practice-informed, and grounded in both theory and data.** It will first and foremost align with the NIRN mission, and be conducted as part of existing and future projects, within a team-based servant leadership paradigm. The servant leadership style and philosophy is based on the idea that leaders strive to serve others and prioritize the greater good. It will aim to develop practical solutions to address real world challenges, while generating new knowledge. It will optimize insights from diverse lived experiences, while using rigorous yet pragmatic methodologies. And it will be grounded in theory (top down), as much as driven by data (bottom up).
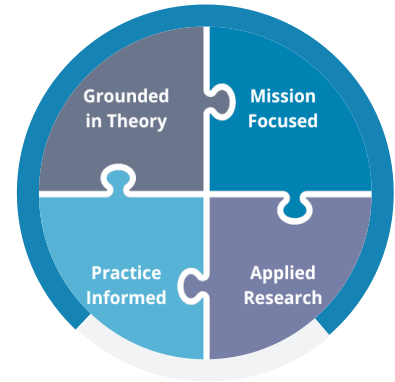
The focus of the REA will be on exploring and testing implementation of evidence-informed innovations in complex human services sector systems in an effort to drive outcomes. All research and evaluation efforts should incorporate the following **principles:**

- **a commitment to engaging critical perspectives in relevant aspects of the research (e.g., those affected by the intervention, users of data);**

- **a focus on using research and evaluation data to refine and improve practices for participating communities and populations;**

- **use of rigorous yet pragmatic evaluation and/or research methodologies that minimize biases and maximize equity;**

- **a commitment to flexibility in approach; and**

- **integration of multidisciplinary expertise.**

Although specifics should be determined based on project scope, requirements, timeline, staffing capacity, and data feasibility, potential **topics** of interest for exploration are as follows based on results from the NIRN listening sessions:

effectiveness of implementation support strategies within complex environments
understanding the causal pathways between system capacity, implementation outcomes (including fidelity), and intervention outcomes (e.g., student outcomes)
compiling evidence supporting the NIRN frameworks and tools
exploring the role of specific implementation strategies, such as implementation teams, readiness, and community engagement
exploring specific implementation processes, such as adaptation and sustainability

Likewise, depending on the questions of interest, the types of **approaches and methodologies** could include program evaluations, research studies, and quality improvement studies. Although designs and methodologies within each are numerous, of particular relevance to the NIRN REA are participatory and utilization-focused evaluation designs, as well as research designs used in implementation science (e.g., stepped wedge, SMART, implementation-effectiveness hybrid, and non-experimental (before and after observational designs).

Key audiences for the data that will be generated through research and evaluation include:

- academic colleagues and researchers
- participating state and local government and community agencies
- funders
- policy stakeholders
- evidence-based practices implementers and recipients
- NIRN partners and collaborators
- NIRN

How will NIRN execute on the Research and Evaluation Agenda?

Execution of the REA will require: (1) implementation of several research and evaluation strategies (activities, processes, infrastructure building); (2) support and buy-in from the REA Committee, NIRN staff including the implementation specialists, and FPG; (3) alignment of available professional growth and recognition opportunities with the objectives of the REA; and (4) dedicated staff, time, and resources to execute on the agenda (including active participation of the Implementation Specialists in the data collection and other relevant evaluation activities).

Research and Evaluation Strategies

Support and Buy-in

Successful REA Execution

Alignment of Career Opportunities

Dedicated Staff, Time, and Resources

Research and Evaluation Strategies

GOAL 1	
NIRN will develop a vision and infrastructure in support of Implementation Science evaluation and research	Achieve consensus on NIRN research space within implementation science Create a research and evaluation agenda Build research and evaluation infrastructure (e.g., develop process to keep current of trends in implementation science, integrate implementation research into current and future projects)
GOAL 2	
NIRN will strengthen its internal knowledge and capacity in Implementation Science research and evaluation	Assess current research and evaluation capacity for scholarship Develop capacity building action plan that could include: developing a library of resources, provision of training, mentorship/layered learning system, implementation research journal club, etc. Clarify expectations and roles of NIRN staff related to scholarship Define career path for NIRN staff interested in research and evaluation
Goal 3	
NIRN will grow its Implementation Science research and evaluation portfolio	Maintain and expand key partnerships Create pipeline and develop proposal response Expand number of projects with implementation research and evaluation component (within and beyond current focus areas)
Goal 4	
NIRN will contribute to advancing Implementation Science research and practice through scholarship and expanded collaborations (within FPG, within UNC, and outside of UNC)	Assess current NIRN data that could be used for publications and presentations Prepare publications/presentation dissemination plan Develop process and infrastructure for facilitating manuscript writing and conference presentations Execute on scholarship dissemination plan Translate research and evaluation findings into usable products and tools Expand collaborations to one new partner annually

Support and Buy-in from the REA Committee, NIRN Staff and FPG

Support and buy-in will be achieved as follows based on the targeted audience. Members of the REA Committee will support the development of the NIRN REA as indicated in the NIRN REA Terms of Reference, namely by: providing feedback on the outlined approach, key stakeholders, and other deliverables; contributing knowledge to facilitate information gathering; facilitating execution of the agenda development process; and problem-solving any potential challenges and ensuring feasibility. NIRN staff, including the implementation specialists, provided initial thoughts on the content of the REA through listening sessions. In addition, they were invited to offer feedback on the REA during NIRN staff meetings as well as during the draft review process. Finally, they were engaged in brainstorming their roles and responsibilities in research and evaluation. FPG leadership was invited to be part of the REA committee, and will be asked for their input on the REA draft. The REA will also be shared with the FPG research division and DMAC to increase awareness of potential collaborative opportunities.

Alignment of Available Professional Growth and Recognition Opportunities with the Objectives of the REA

Success of the REA hinges on a solid research infrastructure that (1) relies on a research team including senior researchers, research associates, and research assistants; and (2) offers opportunities for growth and career advancement for all research staff. NIRN in collaboration with FPG needs to explore the identification of a research job classification that includes research associate (master's level individuals) as an official position for use. The NIRN director will discuss with FPG leadership. In addition, a clear career trajectory including advancement tracks needs to be articulated for research assistants and research associates to attract, retain, and motivate valuable staff.

Dedicated Staff, Time, and Resources to Excute on the Agenda

Executing on the research agenda will require resources, time, and effort outside of project work. NIRN staff is currently 100% soft funded to execute on projects. Additional funding needs to be identified to facilitate the leadership, managerial, strategic, and administrative tasks associated with the execution of the REA. Funding options include financial support from FPG and foundation grants for start ups. The NIRN Director will discuss with FPG leadership. The REA team will identify potential grants to facilitate the work.

Reference

Brownson RC, Shelton RC, Geng EH, Glasgow RE. Revisiting concepts of evidence in implementation science. Implement Sci. 2022 Apr 12;17(1):26. doi: 10.1186/s13012-022-01201-y. PMID: 35413917; PMCID: PMC9004065.

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