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Regional Educational Laboratory researcher-practitioner partnerships: Documenting the research alliance experience

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Summary

The primary goal of the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) 2012–17 Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) contract cycle was to “help states and districts systematically use data and analysis to answer important issues of policy and practice with the goal of improving student outcomes.” The most notable change from previous REL contract cycles was the requirement that RELs focus at least 85 percent of their resources on technical assistance and research-related projects associated with REL research alliances.

This report provides a snapshot of the variations and experiences across the 10 RELs during the 2012–17 cycle’s effort to establish and support research alliances—an effort larger than any other prior research-practice partnership effort to date. It is not a formal evaluation of the REL research alliance program, nor is it a “how to guide.” Rather, this report adds to the growing literature base on research-practitioner partnerships by sharing how the RELs reported creating, engaging, and maintaining multiple partnerships, with the purpose of informing future collaborative efforts for researchers and practitioners and for those who wish to support research-practice partnerships.

Highlights of the REL 2012–17 research alliance experience

Coburn, Penuel, and Geil (2013, p. 2) define research-practice partnerships within and across school districts as “long-term, mutualistic partnerships between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving district outcomes.” REL research alliances contained several important attributes present in traditional research-practice partnerships, including defined roles between researchers and practitioners; collaboration on the research agenda setting and refinement; and designing, developing, testing, or refining educational improvement approaches in real-world contexts.

Seventy-nine REL research alliances operated by year 4 of the contract cycle, between 6 and 10 research alliances per REL. These research alliances varied in origin, geographical spread, topic area, and diversity in membership.

Most REL research alliances were newly formed. By the start of year 4, 70 of the 79 year 4 REL research alliances (89 percent) were newly created. That is, the alliance did not exist as a formal group before the REL helped to create it with regional partners.

REL research alliances predominantly included multiple school districts within or across states. At the start of year 4, 35 of the 79 alliances (44 percent) included members across multiple states, 36 alliances (46 percent) operated statewide or across multiple districts within a state, and 8 alliances (10 percent) included members from one school district or a small subset of districts within a state.

REL research alliances covered a wide range of education topics. REL research alliances addressed the following topics: increasing high school completion and college readiness, access, and completion (25 alliances); identifying and retaining effective teachers and principals (21 alliances); improving low-

achieving schools (21 alliances); adopting and implementing rigorous academic standards and assessments (6 alliances); and early childhood education (6 alliances).

Membership composition varied across research alliances within RELs. Member participation across alliances ranged from 4 to more than 250 individuals (median = 25) per REL research alliance. Average “active” membership ranged from 4 to 100 members, with the majority (56 percent) having 15 or fewer active members. Only 10 percent had more than 50 active members. Most members were district- or state-level staff, and the composition of membership varied by topic area of the alliances.

RELs faced a variety of challenges and developed strategies to support research alliances

RELs reported facing a wide range of challenges typically experienced by other research-practice partnerships. RELs implemented numerous strategies to address these challenges:

- **Building trust, engagement, and a sense of partnership.** REL research alliances took advantage, when possible, of previously existing relationships. They also utilized REL staff who had background in navigating the research-practice divide, encouraged alliance members to take on leadership roles, and worked hard to foster a core team of engaged alliance members.
- **Fostering communication.** RELs reported using creative and flexible methods to facilitate early and ongoing in-person and virtual meetings, and supplemented formal communication with as-needed discussions. REL research alliances also communicated regularly with nonalliance members and key stakeholders, for example, through hosting dissemination events to broader communities. Specifically chosen staff facilitated the exchange of information, which was communicated in a variety of ways such as presentations, archived videos, and infographics.
- **Managing time constraints.** REL research alliances factored in time constraints when determining who would take on key leadership roles and continually recruited new members to replace those who had insufficient time. RELs found creative ways to support members when there were time lags in dissemination of findings, for example, by disseminating existing evidence-based resources or providing targeted technical assistance on emerging knowledge on specific topics. They developed and, when necessary, revised timelines to be realistic and responsive to the needs of stakeholders.
- **Working with research alliance members who have different priorities, interests, and expectations.** REL research alliances worked continually to find common ground. They engaged in regular reflective work, sometimes by regularly recommitting to the research agenda. RELs developed strategies to identify and foster positive group dynamics. They acknowledged the need to be flexible in response to changes in state and local leadership priorities. In some cases, when needs were too disparate, they reconfigured alliances to cover smaller geographic regions and developed cross-state opportunities to facilitate the sharing of resources of common interest. In other cases, RELs developed smaller workgroups within an alliance to focus on issues that were of particular interest to some communities or members.
- **Building capacity.** RELs often worked with research alliance members and their respective organizations or agencies to develop toolkits and targeted technical assistance activities that

supported specific needs within the larger goals of the alliance and to increase research capacity among practitioner agencies and organizations. At times, they used locally based staff to help build capacity.

REL research alliances were further supported through cross-REL communication and collaboration throughout the 2012–17 REL contract cycle, including a working group specifically focused on research alliances. This working group met quarterly to discuss shared experiences and challenges and enabled RELs to learn from each other’s experiences to better serve the membership of their own alliances.

The REL 2012–17 contract cycle was responsible for the implementation of the largest research-practice partnership effort in preK–12 education to date. This effort spanned all regions under jurisdiction of the U.S. and territories and included more than 70 distinct research alliances at any point during the 5-year contract cycle. While the RELs reported facing numerous challenges, they developed strategies to meet these challenges and support growth, which may be instructive for newly formed as well as existing research-practice partnerships. As research-practice partnerships continue to grow in popularity, it will be important to document their experiences, explore commonalities and differences, and share lessons learned.

Chapter 1. Documenting the 2012–17 REL research alliance experience

Demand is high for evidence-informed decisionmaking in education policy and practice. To provide evidence for informed decisions, education research should be relevant to policies and responsive to the needs of educators and policymakers.¹ Researchers who understand their educational environment can better frame and carry out relevant and responsive studies. Collaborations—or partnerships—between researchers and practitioners can inform such studies and help bridge the gap between research and practice.² Federal and state policymakers often have high regard for research findings from partnerships because of their local relevancy (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn et al., 2013). Similarly, school district-level decisionmakers often consider local information and findings to be the most useful research evidence (Honig and Coburn, 2008; Nelson, Leffler, & Hansen, 2009). In turn, researchers who engage in work with practitioners help build the broader knowledge base, while also ensuring that their work is practically relevant.

Partnerships can have many forms, vary in duration, and require participants to play a variety of roles. In its most basic form, a partnership could consist of practitioners, such as school district personnel, who work with a research consultant or local university professor to answer a practice-relevant research question. In contrast, another partnership might have a long-term, evolving research agenda that requires a group of researchers and practitioners to make a sustained commitment that could last for more than a decade. Coburn et al. (2013, pp. 2–4) define research-practice partnerships within and across school districts as “long-term, mutualistic partnerships between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving district outcomes. . . . Research-practice partnerships go beyond the focus of many current organizations on making data accessible to district leaders.”³ The partnerships instead produce original analyses of data to answer research questions posed by the district.” Although variation exists, Coburn et al. (2013) discuss how the different types of education-related research-practice partnerships share six common characteristics: they (1) are place-based, (2) are long-term, (3) focus on problems of practice, (4) use intentional strategies to foster partnership, (5) produce original analyses, and (6) are committed to “mutualism,” which the authors describe as “sustained interaction that benefits both researchers and practitioners.”

Because of the growing interest in finding ways to bridge the gap between research and practice and to make research more relevant to practitioners, the education community is documenting how different

¹ Throughout this report, the terms “educator(s)” and “practitioner(s)” are used synonymously. Also, the term “decisionmaker(s)” is used interchangeably with “policymaker(s).”

² In the literature, these relationships are sometimes called research-practice partnerships and sometimes called researcher-practitioner collaborations. These relationships can take on a variety of forms and mean different things to different people. For the purposes of this report, “partnerships” and “collaborations” are used interchangeably. Further, the term “research alliances,” or “alliances” for short, is the term used during the 2012–17 REL contract cycle to refer to “partnerships” or “collaborations” led by the 10 RELs.

³ Coburn et al. (2013, p. 2) define long-term as “open-ended commitments [involving] more than a single consulting agreement or grant. The work can span a few years, or, as is true for some partnerships, more than a decade, shifting focus as the work develops over time.”

research-practice partnerships operate, the challenges that they face, and the strategies that they use most effectively. This report adds to that literature (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010; Coburn et al., 2013) by documenting the experiences of the research alliances that were formed during the 2012–17 contract cycle of the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) program. This report is intended for those who are interested in engaging in similar research-practice partnerships.

The REL program and the formation of research alliances

The REL program, originally established as part of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, aims to bridge the gap between research and practice. The REL program has updated its priorities and evolved over the past 50 years, but it has not wavered in its aim to make research responsive to the needs of practitioners. The current iteration of the REL program, as authorized by the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, includes 10 Regional Educational Laboratories⁴ (“regional labs” or RELs) that serve the needs of their respective geographic regions across the United States and its territories.⁵ Consistent with the “central mission and primary function” of the REL program, each REL must “support applied research, development, wide dissemination, and technical assistance activities,” including “providing training . . . and technical assistance to state educational agencies, local educational agencies, school boards, schools funded by the Bureau as appropriate, and state boards of education”⁶ The U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) contracts with organizations to operate each REL through a competitive bidding process, with each REL contract cycle running for a 5-year period. The primary goal of the 2012–17 REL contract cycle was to “help states and districts systematically use data and analysis to answer important issues of policy and practice with the goal of improving student outcomes.”⁷ The most notable change from previous cycles was the use of the research alliance structure in framing each REL’s technical assistance and research agenda.

IES defines a REL research alliance as “a group of stakeholders who share a specific education concern and agree to work together to learn more about the concern so that they can make sound decisions to improve education outcomes.”⁸ As a new feature of the 2012–17 contract cycle, IES required that RELs focus at least 85 percent of their resources on technical assistance and research-related projects associated with REL research alliances.⁹ Each REL was tasked with helping to “maintain and refine research

⁴ See <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edLabs/regions/>.

⁵ The Regional Educational Laboratories program is authorized under the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, Part D, Section 174, (20 U.S.C. 9564) and administered by the Institute of Education Sciences’ National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. See <http://www.ed.gov/policy/rschstat/leg/PL107-279.pdf>. For additional information about the legislation and regulations, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/regionallabs/legislation.html>.

⁶ Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (H.R. 3801) Part D, Section 174, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Sec. 174, (20 U.S.C. 9564) (f). Regional educational laboratories for research, development, dissemination, and technical assistance. Central Mission and Primary Function. See <http://www.ed.gov/policy/rschstat/leg/PL107-279.pdf>. The term “Bureau” in the quoted passage from page 28 of H.R. 3801 refers to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

⁷ See the “Performance Work Statement for Regional Educational Laboratories (2012–2017),” page 3; available at <https://www.fbo.gov/utills/view?id=50688bfda3cc31d77469838a79649491>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

alliances” by organizing meetings of and communications among members and by documenting and assessing, on an ongoing basis, the development of alliances. Together with REL research staff, alliance members identify local or regional issues, carry out relevant research, disseminate findings and products, and build their capacity to understand and use research and data.

As of January 2015, the beginning of year 4 of the REL contract cycle, when the research alliances were in a mature state, the 10 RELs supported 79 research alliances.¹⁰ Appendix

The 10 RELs supported 79 research alliances in 2015.

A provides a list of the research alliances discussed in this report. Throughout the 2012–17 contract cycle, IES offered flexibility for RELs to tailor the optimal number of alliances as well as the structure, size, and focus of each alliance to the needs of their particular regions. IES encouraged RELs to form regional, cross-state, statewide, cross-district, or single-district research alliances where appropriate; the alliances could include state-level members, district-level members, or both.¹¹ Some research alliances also included university faculty, staff from nonprofits or governmental agencies, or other interested stakeholders within the region. A REL research alliance could be newly created, or the REL could form an alliance by joining an existing group or partnership of practitioners.

The goal of this report

This report describes the variations and experiences among the 10 RELs in their creation, maintenance, and support of research alliances. The 2012–17 REL program’s *effort to establish and support research alliances* was larger than any other prior research-practice partnership effort.¹² The goal of this report is to provide a snapshot of that 2012–17 effort. The report synthesizes information collected from the RELs by IES to document the REL research alliance experience. *This report is not intended as an evaluation of the REL research alliance effort*, nor is it a substitute for the ongoing reflective efforts that RELs have undertaken to document and analyze their respective experiences.¹³ By taking a broad view of all REL-supported research alliances, this report:

- Adds to the growing literature base on research-practitioner partnerships;

¹⁰ By year 4, it was unlikely that new alliances would develop or that existing alliances would change significantly. If the authors of this report had waited until the final year (year 5) to assess the REL research alliance evolution, then the report would have lost alliances that ended when their research agenda was complete. Thus, year 4 provided a useful time to describe how the alliances evolved and what the mature REL research alliances for the 2012–17 contract cycle looked like. The REL Southwest contract started in November 2012, 11 months after the REL contract cycle for all other RELs, so the information as of January 2015 is reflective of its research alliances in year 3.

¹¹ In addition to the 50 U.S. states, the RELs also serve Washington, DC; the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Guam; and the Freely Associated States of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

¹² As is discussed in succeeding text, most large-scale research-practice partnership networks in education focus on specific regions (for example, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research) or are coordinated by one organization (for example, the Strategic Education Research Partnership). The 2012–17 REL program introduced a multifaceted network of research-practice partnerships operated by 10 different organizations across the United States.

¹³ Individual REL and cross-REL collaborative webinars and papers that document and reflect on the REL research alliance experience can be found at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/>.

- Provides information about how the RELs were able to create, engage, and maintain multiple partnerships; and
- Informs future collaborative efforts for researchers and practitioners and for those who wish to support research-practice partnerships.

IES and the RELs documented this new endeavor in a variety of ways. The authors of this report relied on:

- Information that RELs provided to IES in fulfillment of contractual requirements;
- Publicly available material accessed from each REL’s website; and
- Information compiled through (a) cross-REL participatory activities, such as biannual REL directors meetings and REL working group meetings, and (b) direct communication with REL staff.

For a more detailed description of each source of information, see table 1.

Table 1. Sources of information used in this report

Source of information	Source description
REL annual plans	Annual reporting of progress assessments of the work, goals, challenges, lessons learned, and membership changes for each REL alliance was mandatory.
Research alliance annual updates	Annual reporting of research priorities and background information for each alliance and of changes to alliance names or operating status was mandatory.
Individual REL websites	A section of each REL’s website described the research alliances.
Semi-annual meetings of REL directors	REL directors, deputy directors, and, in some cases, research alliance task leaders attended biannual REL directors meetings that included discussion of common research alliance experiences across the 10 RELs. The authors of this report participated in nearly all meetings and, in some cases, led discussions regarding research alliances.
Minutes and documents from meetings of cross-REL working groups	Cross-REL working groups provided an opportunity for REL staff working on similar issues to collaborate to ensure strategic deployment of resources across high-priority areas. This report incorporates information from meeting notes and summary documents from cross-REL working groups.
Feedback and examples provided by REL staff	This report was reviewed by REL staff, who provided feedback, suggestions, details on the membership of their alliances, and the examples and vignettes discussed throughout this report.

Chapter 2, “REL research alliances in the broader context of research-practice partnerships,” focuses on how the REL research alliances are similar to and different from other existing collaborative models. Chapter 3, “Characteristics of REL research alliances,” describes the evolution of REL research alliances over the course of the 2012–17 contract cycle, presents a snapshot depiction of REL research alliances as of 2015, and discusses who participated in alliances. Chapter 4, “Challenges and solutions in forming and developing REL research alliances,” summarizes RELs’ reports about their experiences in forming and developing alliances, including the challenges that REL research alliances faced and the strategies that

REL staff and alliance members used to build effective and productive teams, develop and refine research agendas, and carry out REL research and technical assistance projects. The conclusion discusses the implications of these experiences for future research-practice partnership efforts.

Chapter 2. REL research alliances in the broader context of research-practice partnerships

Research-practice partnerships have been in existence for decades (Denis & Lomas, 2003). The healthcare industry pioneered the development and use of these partnerships and has subsequently produced the most reflective work on them. Researchers have studied extensively the experiences of participants in research-practice partnerships in fields such as healthcare, mental health, and social services (Carr & Buchanan, 2011; Grella, Hser, Teruya, & Evans, 2005; Ovretveit et al., 2014; Pinto, Wall, & Spector, 2014; Rawson & Branch, 2002; Riemer, Douglas Kelley, Casey, & Taylor Haynes, 2012). The lessons learned from this work have served as a foundation for the initiation of research-practice partnerships in other industries, including the educational sector. As the number of education-related research-practice partnerships has increased in recent years, so too has interest in understanding how they operate.¹⁴

Categorizing traditional conceptions of research-practice partnerships in education

The literature on research-practice partnerships in education largely focuses on those that occur at the school or district level or within a specific location (such as a county or city). Because REL research alliances vary in geographic spread, often covering multiple communities within and across states in each REL's jurisdiction, the research-practice partnership literature does not directly address the unique features of REL research alliances and the challenges that they face. However, this literature is instructive because it documents how research-practice partnerships, even those focused on a narrow geographic area, can take different forms but often face common challenges. For example, Coburn et al. (2013) identified *three broad types of educational research-practice partnerships*, which differ in important ways structurally and operationally but face common strengths and challenges relevant to understanding the REL research alliance experience: research alliances in districts, design-based research partnerships, and networked improvement communities.

- **Research alliances in districts** include partnerships between a district and an independent research organization, in which researchers and practitioners have distinct roles. Alliance members, consisting of researchers and practitioners, negotiate relevant research questions. Researchers from one or more institutions conduct the research in collaboration with practitioner stakeholders who provide feedback and review aspects of the research design and instrumentation. Practitioner stakeholders may come from one or more school districts or across sectors, such as education, youth development, and health and human services, as in the following examples: Research Alliance for New York City Schools,¹⁵ University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School

¹⁴ Notably, between 2012 and 2014, the William T. Grant Foundation collaborated with the Forum for Youth Investment to assemble a learning community for improving research-practice partnerships in education. This effort brought together researchers and practitioners who were involved in partnerships to discuss lessons learned and to create a resource for educators and researchers who are interested in either embarking on collaborative efforts or strengthening their current efforts. As part of this project, the William T. Grant Foundation supported the development of white papers, briefs, and case studies; compiled lists of key resources; and created a comprehensive online summary on this topic (see <http://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org/>).

¹⁵ See http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/.

Research (Roderick, Easton, & Bender Sebring, 2009),¹⁶ and the Baltimore Education Research Consortium.¹⁷

- **Design-based research partnerships** are based on an engineering model in which researchers and practitioners work together to design, develop, and test new instructional or curricular approaches in real-world contexts. One example is the Strategic Education Research Partnership,¹⁸ an organization that works with multiple school districts across the country and with university researchers to collaboratively address critical problems of practice. Another example is the Vanderbilt MIST Project,¹⁹ which worked with school districts to test, revise, and elaborate a theory of action for district-wide instructional improvement in mathematics.
- **Networked improvement communities (NICs)** bring together educators and researchers in multiple settings (for example, multiple districts, schools, or universities) to foster continuous refinement and improvement. Similar to design-based partnerships, these networks collaborate around shared problems of practice, and they develop, test, and refine initiatives. As opposed to design-based research partnerships, which tailor research efforts to particular settings, NICs involve similar research efforts across multiple settings—for example, a variety of school districts serving varied populations—and thus they can examine not only whether something works, but also for whom and under what conditions. For example, the Building a Teaching Effectiveness Network²⁰—a partnership of the American Federation of Teachers, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching—works with individual school districts around the issue of improving the effectiveness of new teachers in diverse urban school settings. In this case, schools and districts within the NIC engage in multiple rapid-cycle, smaller-scale studies, similar to design-based research described above, and then continuously share results within the network and make refinements based on what they, as well as their partners, are learning.

These three types of research-practice partnerships share several common elements. The next section will compare the common elements of these traditional research-practice partnerships with the experiences of REL research alliances.

How REL research alliances compare to traditionally defined research-practice partnerships

REL research alliances share many characteristics of traditional education-focused research-practice partnerships. In collaboration with REL researchers, alliance members identify policy and practice concerns that can be addressed by research, develop plans to collect or access data related to those issues, and analyze data to develop and test strategies for educational improvement. RELs use this process to work in partnership with alliance members to carry out and disseminate rigorous research studies and

¹⁶ See <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/>.

¹⁷ See <http://baltimore-berc.org/>.

¹⁸ See <http://serpinstitute.org/>.

¹⁹ See http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/departments/tl/teaching_and_learning_research/mist/.

²⁰ See <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/in-action/bten/>.

technical assistance projects that address the needs of the members. While REL research alliances vary in membership and structure, they all include preK through secondary education stakeholders and can also include people from colleges and universities, professional associations, advocacy groups, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and other entities that are interested in the focus of the alliance. As previously discussed, Coburn et al. (2013) provided six common characteristics of education-related research-practice partnerships. While REL research alliances incorporate aspects of these common characteristics, they also differ in important ways (see table 2).

Table 2. REL research alliances share many characteristics with other education-related research-practice partnerships but differ in key ways

Common characteristics of education-related research-practice partnerships (Coburn et al., 2013)	How REL research alliances are	
	Similar	Different
Are place-based (often within a specific school district or community)	Eight alliances (10 percent of the 79 alliances) focused on individual districts within a state.	Seventy-one alliances (90 percent of the 79 alliances) spanned multiple districts within a state (35 alliances) or across states (36 alliances).
Make long-term, sometimes open-ended commitments	REL research alliance members were committed to a multiyear process.	The REL contract covered a finite, 5-year time span. This structure had implications for the kind of work that could be conducted during each contract year, as alliances experienced a start-up phase at the beginning and a wind-down phase at the end of the five years.
Focus on problems of practice	REL research alliances focused on practice-related issues. The RELs conducted ongoing needs assessments and worked with REL alliance members to ensure that work was responsive to the practical needs of stakeholders.	In addition to conducting research, technical assistance, and dissemination projects to address members' needs, REL research alliances also developed activities to support capacity-building for members to use data and research-based practices to address other emerging needs.
Use intentional strategies to foster partnership	REL staff intentionally created opportunities for alliance members to meet on a regular basis to support the co-creation of a shared agenda, plan and implement research studies, and review and interpret study findings. Alliance members were encouraged to take on leadership roles.	REL research alliances that spanned broad geographical areas faced unique constraints on being able to hold in-person meetings and therefore often relied on virtual meeting formats.
Produce original analyses	REL research staff developed and implemented original research studies prioritized by and in partnership with the research alliance.	In addition to conducting original analyses, REL research alliances also placed a strong emphasis on capacity building, which includes developing and providing technical assistance and producing tools for alliance members that aim to increase practitioners' understanding of research and data.
Are committed to mutualism	REL researchers and alliance members worked together to set priorities and to develop and refine a research agenda.	While REL researchers and alliance members worked together to set priorities, develop research plans, and carry out projects, all research plans and dissemination materials also required approval by the funder (IES).

Note: Coburn et al. (2013, p. 3) define mutualism as "sustained interaction that benefits both researchers and practitioners."

Place-based. Notably, most traditional research-practice partnerships in education are place-based in that they bring together diverse stakeholders within a particular location, usually a school district or a set of school districts within a specific geographic region (Coburn et al., 2013). Only 8 of the 79 REL research alliances operating as of January 2015 were place-based; in other words, the alliances operated in a single district, specific districts, or regions within a state. For example, the Silicon Valley Research Alliance included 11 school districts in Silicon Valley, California.

Long-term. The 5-year nature of the REL contracts offers opportunities for research alliances to maintain support for multiple years, like other research-practice partnership efforts. Typical research-practice partnerships are long-term, open-ended relationships, but their specific projects may have a prescribed timeframe and funding opportunities that evolve over time. Unlike many traditional research-practice partnerships, REL research alliances were developed with a finite, 5-year time span. In some cases, REL research alliances—particularly those that already existed in another form prior to joining the alliance—may continue after the end of the REL contract cycle. However, the finite time span of the REL contract had implications for the kind of work that could be conducted during each contract year, as alliances experienced a start-up phase at the beginning and a wind-down phase at the end of the five years.

Focus on problems of practice. Like traditional research-practice partnerships, REL research alliances were designed to focus on practice-related issues; they were also designed to help practitioners understand and use data to inform decisionmaking. RELs were required to conduct ongoing needs-sensing to ensure that their work responded to the needs of key stakeholders in their regions. Therefore, RELs were charged with:

- Working in partnership with research alliance members to develop an agenda of complementary research, technical assistance, and dissemination projects;
- Building capacity among alliance members (as well as other practitioners in the regions that they serve) to use data and research to inform decisionmaking; and
- Placing a strong emphasis on supporting capacity-building for alliance members to use data and research-based practices to address emerging needs, which is not universally a focus of traditional research-practice partnership efforts.

Use intentional strategies to foster partnership. RELs, like other research-practice partnerships, engaged in a variety of strategies to create an infrastructure to support a co-created agenda. Strategies included setting up mechanisms for REL staff and alliance members to engage in regular and ongoing agenda development, intentional encouragement of alliance members taking on leadership roles, and bringing together stakeholders to review and interpret research results. To support these efforts, RELs held regular meetings and took part in outreach efforts to maintain participant engagement and ownership in the decisionmaking process (which is discussed in more detail in chapter 4). Unlike more traditional place-based partnerships, REL research alliances, particularly those spanning broad geographical areas, faced constraints (for example, resource limitations and federal restrictions on RELs paying for alliance members' travel) on the methods that they used to hold in-person meetings for alliance members. For this

reason, RELs often used communication strategies—such as virtual meetings and webinar formats—to facilitate long-distance communication and collaboration.

Produce original analyses. Traditional research-practice partnerships focus on implementing research studies that address questions that the members want answered. RELs, too, engaged in this work by developing and implementing original research studies in partnership with the research alliance. For example, RELs conducted original research, such as randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental design studies that were deemed high priority by the research alliances. Then, RELs disseminated rigorous education research results and research-based practices through in-person events, webinars, newsletters, social media, and videos.

Committed to mutualism. As with traditional research-practice partnerships, a main focus of REL research alliances was to foster a collaborative spirit in which alliance members work together and with REL researchers to develop, refine, take action on, and stay engaged with a mutually agreed-upon research agenda. As the REL and alliance members collaborated to develop this agenda, they also needed to be mindful that all research plans and dissemination materials required approval by the funder (IES). In some cases, when initially proposed plans were not approved, the REL and alliance members would collaborate to refine their plans with a continued focus of making sure that any revisions or new ideas continued to be mutually agreed upon.

This chapter has shown how REL research alliances share many similar characteristics to prior research-practice partnerships in education but differ in important ways. Notably, REL research alliances expand beyond traditionally place-based efforts, often covering broad geographic areas. The 2017–17 REL contract cycle placed a strong emphasis not only on producing original analyses, but also on developing tools and providing technical assistance opportunities to support state and local agencies' capacities to use data and conduct their own analyses. While REL research alliances operated as multiyear endeavors, similar to traditional research-practice partnerships, they were constrained by the 5-year contract period and were subject to additional challenges not typically experienced by other partnerships, for example, constraints on the opportunities to meet in person. Importantly, given the scale of the program, REL research alliances operating during the 2012–17 REL contract cycle took on a variety of forms. Chapter 3, “Characteristics of REL research alliances,” discusses the evolution of the alliances and provides a general snapshot of them, which helps to set the stage for later discussions of the challenges that RELs faced and the lessons that they learned in implementing the alliances.

Chapter 3. Characteristics of REL research alliances

At the beginning of the 2012–17 REL contract cycle, each REL proposed to work with specific research alliances, most of which were newly formed by the REL and its stakeholders. Each REL had broad discretion in determining the number, structure, size, and topic area focus of each alliance. Once an alliance was established, each REL, often in consultation with alliance members, could decide:

- Which in-person and electronic strategies it would use to engage alliance members;
- Whether it would expand or contract the size of the membership; and
- Whether the alliance would shift focus, merge with another alliance, or conclude because alliance research agendas were completed or needs were evolving in the region.

The REL research alliance experience provides a unique opportunity to explore issues around the start-up of new partnerships and learn from the processes of development and evolution of REL research alliances over time. This chapter describes the REL alliances as they evolved from year 1 of the REL contract cycle. It also provides a detailed snapshot of research alliances as they were configured in spring 2015 (four years into the REL contract cycle), a good point at which to examine the fully matured REL research alliance experience.

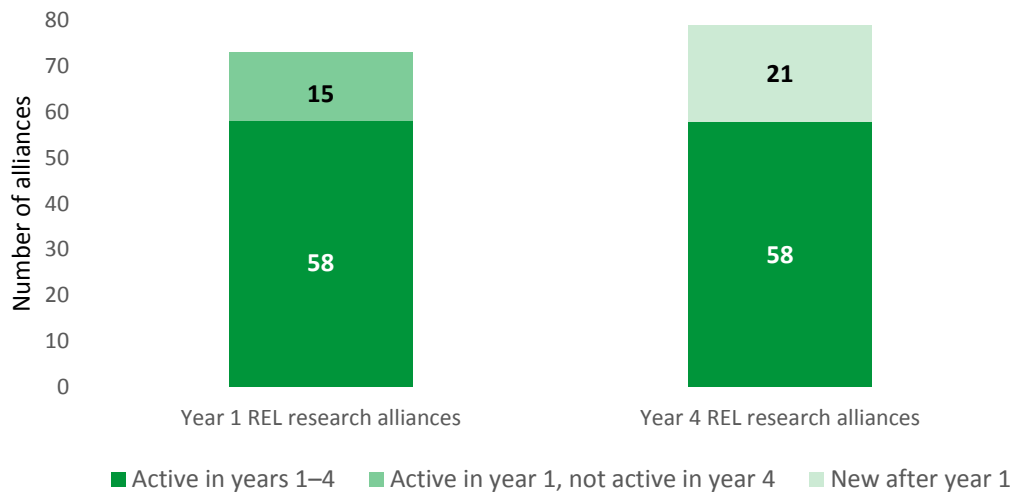
Evolution of REL research alliances from year 1 to year 4 of the 2012–17 REL contract cycle

In year 1 of the 2012–17 REL contract cycle, the 10 RELs proposed to work with 73 alliances—that is, between 4 and 10 alliances per REL. Fifty-five of the alliances were either newly created or were in the “developing” phase, which IES defined as a partnership that is planned and forming but did not have plans to initiate formal activities in year 1. As of January 2015, 79 REL research alliances were in existence, 70 of which (89 percent) were newly created during the REL contract.

Between year 1 and year 4, 15 REL research alliances that were active in year 1 were either no longer in existence or no longer in partnership with the respective REL, and 21 new REL research alliances were established in partnership with a REL.²¹ Eleven of the 15 REL research alliances that were no longer active came from two RELs that had made significant restructuring changes to their alliance configurations (see figure 1). Much of the planned work of these alliances was subsumed into the work of existing or new alliances. Among the remaining 4 inactive research alliances across three other RELs, the partnerships ended because state-level priorities changed or were too disparate to form a coherent agenda, because they accomplished the work from their research agenda, or because the work of the alliance could easily be subsumed within a different alliance or other REL support.

²¹ To be counted as “no longer in existence,” an alliance must have ended and not transformed into another alliance (in whole or part) through changing focus, splitting, or merging. To be counted as “newly established,” a REL research alliance that became active after year 1 must not have been based in any way on a year 1 research alliance. Some RELs may consider a research alliance that was split into two separate alliances as the closing of one alliance and the creation of two new alliances. However, we use more differentiated definitions for “no longer in existence” and “newly established” to achieve a more nuanced depiction of the evolution of research alliances over the REL 2012–17 contract cycle.

Figure 1. The number of REL research alliances evolved from 2012 to 2015

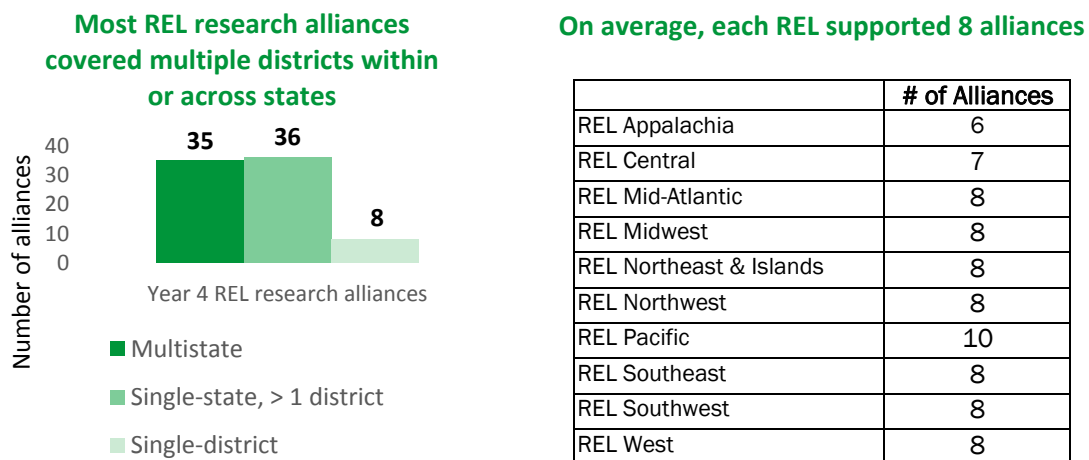


In addition to closures, many REL research alliances were newly created or changed in some way between year 1 and year 4. Appendix B discusses how REL research alliances changed from year 1 to year 4. The remainder of this chapter focuses on a snapshot of REL research alliances as they were operating at the height of the REL 2012-17 contract cycle.

The 2015 research alliances at a glance

As of January 2015, 79 REL research alliances were active across the 10 RELs (see figure 2). Each REL maintained between 6 and 10 research alliances, for an average of 8 research alliances supported by each REL. Thirty-five of the 79 alliances (44 percent) included members across multiple states, 36 alliances (46 percent) operated statewide or across multiple districts within a state, and 8 alliances (10 percent) included members from one school district or a small subset of districts within a state.

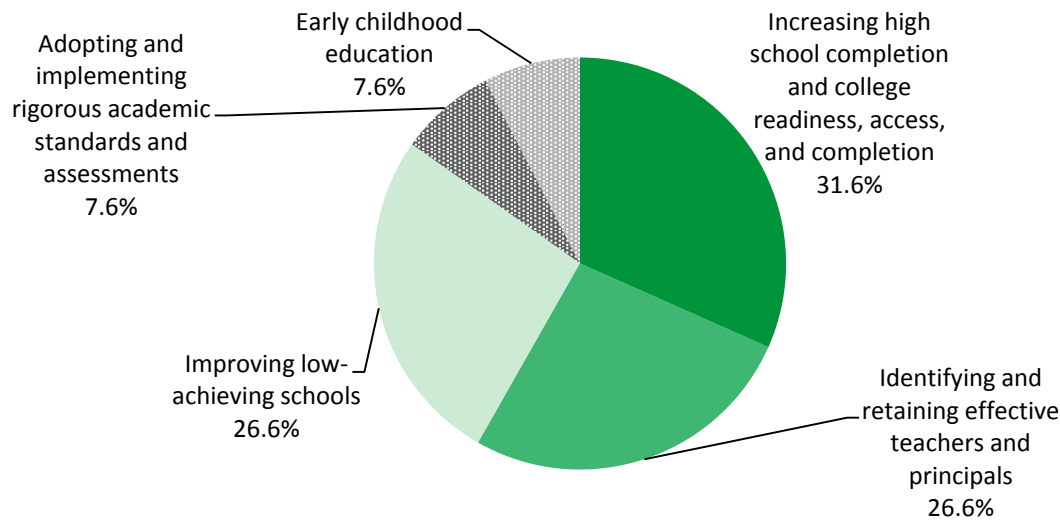
Figure 2. There were 79 REL research alliances in 2015



Note: For a full list of 2015 research alliances, see appendix A.

Each REL research alliance focused, at least in part, on one or more of the topic areas depicted in figure 3 and discussed in the following paragraphs. In the cases of overlap in topic area, the figure categorizes each REL research alliance into the topic area that best defines it.²²

Figure 3. REL research alliances focused on specific topic areas



Increasing high school completion and college readiness, access, and completion (25 alliances). About one-third of all REL research alliances focused on issues related to increasing high school completion and college readiness, access, and completion. Nearly all (8 out of 10) RELs had a research alliance in this topic area. Four of the 25 alliances in this topic area focused primarily on postsecondary education, while the others focused primarily on college readiness for school-age youths. In particular, 10 alliances in this topic area targeted issues related to dropout prevention or to developing and using early warning systems to identify students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. In most cases, these alliances explicitly talked about increasing college readiness, preparing for transition to postsecondary, and dual enrollment. Because pressing issues and research priorities cross geographic boundaries, it is notable that 10 alliances (40 percent) in this topic area included members from multiple states.

Identifying and retaining effective teachers and principals (21 alliances). Each of the RELs maintained at least one alliance in the topic area of identifying and retaining effective teachers and principals. The 21 REL research alliances in this topic area spanned a number of subtopics, including professional learning, teacher preparation, disciplinary policies, formative assessment, virtual education, and educational issues related to leadership. More than half (11) of the REL research alliances in this area were created after year 1 of the REL contract cycle. Nine of the 21 alliances (43 percent) included members across multiple states.

²² In many cases, REL research alliances supported work across multiple topic areas. For example, alliances that focused on improving low-achieving schools also may have developed part of their research agenda around teacher effectiveness or special populations. For this discussion, we selected the topic area that best reflects the main focus of each alliance. Where a REL research alliance title did not fit easily into one category, we reviewed the goals and the nature of the work being conducted by the alliance to determine the most suitable topic area.

Improving low-achieving schools (21 alliances). All RELs had a least one partnership focused on improving low-achieving schools. These alliances covered a wide variety of subtopics, including charter schools, school climate, statewide support services, family engagement, and using longitudinal data to identify low- or high-achieving schools. Five (24 percent) were created after year 1 of REL work. Six alliances (29 percent) included members from multiple states.

Adopting and implementing rigorous academic standards and assessments (6 alliances). Six REL research alliances focused on academic standards and assessments and on issues related to literacy, mathematics, and science instruction. Other alliances (such as those that were focused on improving low-achieving schools) also touched on this topic in their research and technical assistance projects. Five out of six alliances in this topic area included alliance members across multiple states.

Early childhood education (6 alliances). Five RELs had research alliances that focused on early childhood education; one of those RELs had two separate state-specific alliances on this topic. Three research alliances had multistate members, and three research alliances included members from one state.

Some RELs specified populations of interest—such as rural residents, American Indian students, or English learner students—to be served by each research alliance. Many REL research alliances covered issues related to these populations—either as part of a broader alliance or as a focus of smaller working groups. Four alliances focused specifically on rural education; two alliances focused on education of American Indian students; and four alliances focused on English learner students.

Who participated in REL research alliances?

In January 2015, alliances had 3,416 members, more than half of whom played an active role in the planning and implementation of one or more REL activities, such as applied research studies, technical assistance–related events, or dissemination of high-quality research.²³ In most cases, REL research alliances included a core set of members who took part in regular planning meetings. Often, RELs expanded membership beyond this core group for dissemination and participation in planned technical assistance activities. RELs characterized these differentiated roles in a variety of ways, but in general, alliance members took on one or more of the following roles:

- Planning team members (“core” members);
- Advisory group members, including stakeholder advisory groups, who share contextual issues and current local needs with the research team;
- Active members (those who engaged in REL projects or research alliance working groups), which also includes core members and advisory group members; and

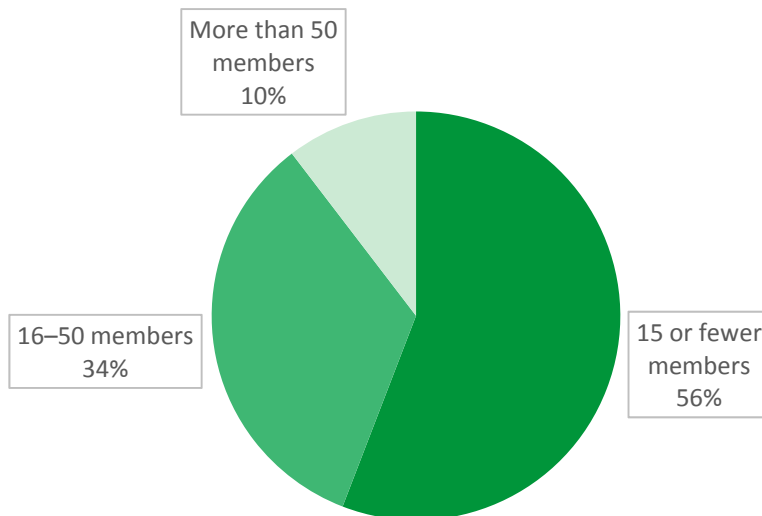
²³ These counts may be slight overestimates because of alliance members who participated in more than one alliance. RELs report total enrollment by REL alliance, so it is not possible to calculate the extent of duplication on the basis of the information available. One REL noted that 58 members took part in all alliances, and this information has been factored into the estimated total membership count.

- Followers, who are on communication and dissemination lists.

Across the 77 REL research alliances that reported membership information,²⁴ individual alliance participation in year 4 of the REL contract cycle ranged from 4 members (in the West Virginia Workforce Readiness Alliance in partnership with REL Appalachia) to more than 250 (in the Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance in partnership with REL Central), with a median of 25 members per REL research alliance. This wide range may be due to different definitions that RELs used for “members” and “followers.”

Average “active” membership of REL research alliances, which is likely more consistently defined across RELs, ranged from 4 to 100 members: 43 alliances (56 percent) had 15 or fewer active members, 26 alliances (34 percent) had 16–50 active members, and 8 alliances (10 percent) had more than 50 active members (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Most research alliances had 15 or fewer "active" members

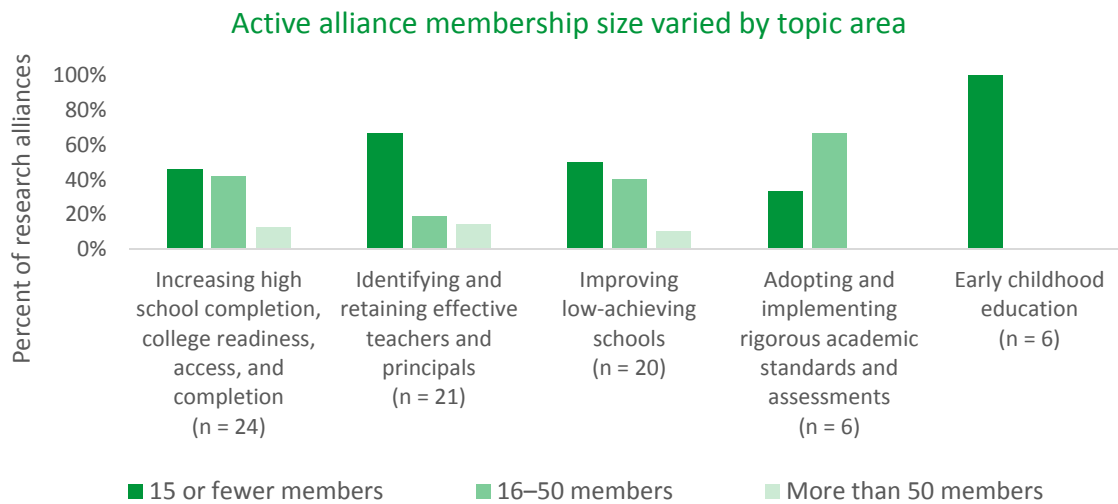


Note: All data are based on 77 alliances. RELs did not provide complete membership information for two research alliances that ended early in 2015.

Total and active membership varied across RELs, but most of the variation in membership counts occurred within RELs, possibly because of the content and focus of the alliances (see figure 5). In all but one topic area (adopting and implementing rigorous academic standards and assessments), alliances were more likely to have 15 or fewer active members as opposed to having 16–50 active members or more than 50 members. For example, two-thirds (67 percent) of alliances focusing on identifying and retaining effective teachers and principals had 15 or fewer active members. Alliances across all topic areas were least likely to have more than 50 active members. None of the alliances that focused on adopting and implementing rigorous academic standards and assessments or early childhood education had more than 50 active members.

²⁴ RELs did not provide complete membership information for two research alliances that ended early in 2015.

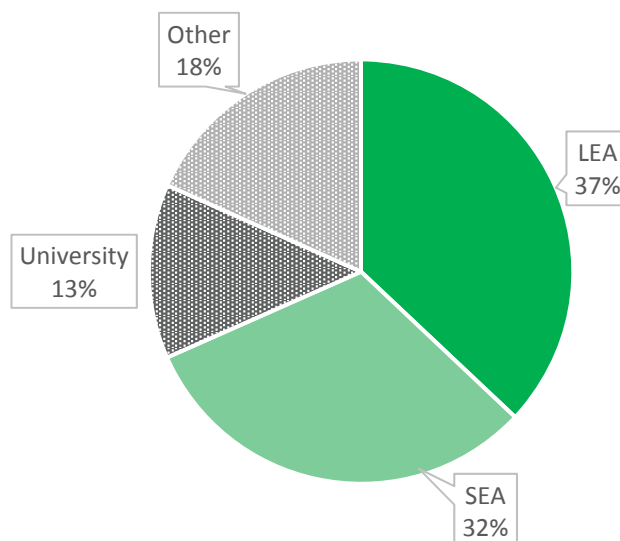
Figure 5. 2015 REL research alliance membership at a glance



Note: All data are based on 77 alliances. RELs did not provide complete membership information for two research alliances that ended early in 2015.

REL research alliance members included state education agency (SEA) staff, local education agency (LEA) staff (including school leaders), and university faculty and researchers. Members characterized as “other” include members of regional cooperatives or services centers, other federally funded technical assistance centers, staff from private or nonprofit organizations, and professional organizations or consultants. On average, 37 percent of members came from LEAs, 32 percent were SEA staff, and the remainder were either university based (13 percent) or “other” (18 percent) (figure 6).

Figure 6. REL research alliance members were predominantly district- and state-level staff members



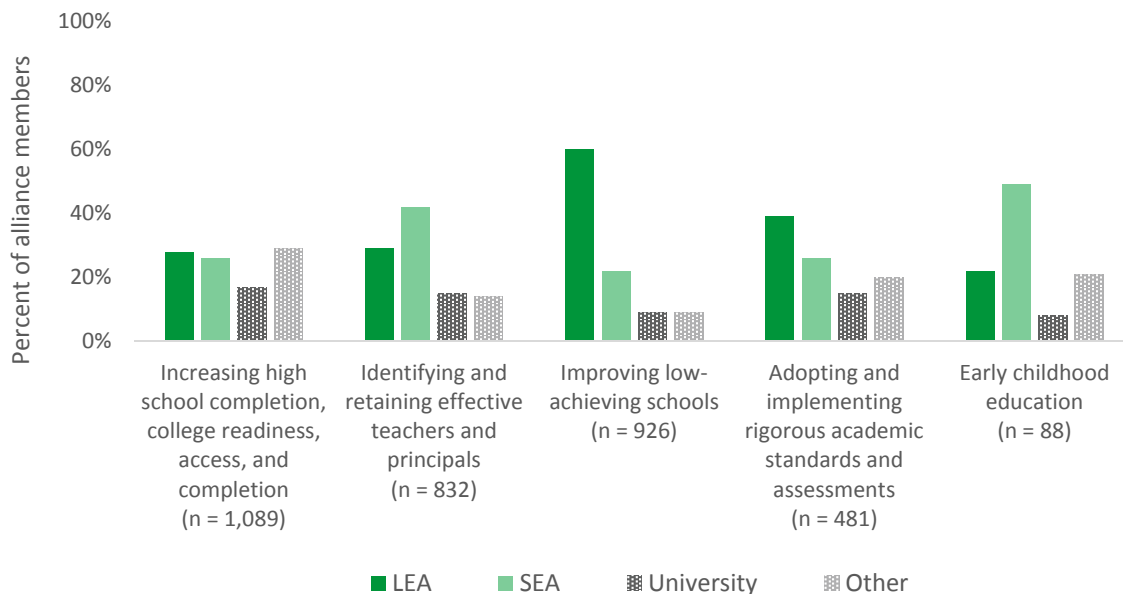
Note: All data are based on 77 alliances. RELs did not provide complete membership information for two research alliances that ended early in 2015.

Membership composition of research alliances varied mostly within RELs, which suggests that every REL supported a variety of stakeholders in different configurations within their research alliances. In particular, membership composition depended largely on an alliance’s focus and goals (topic areas), as demonstrated by figure 7. For example, across all RELs, LEAs made up 60 percent of the membership in alliances that

focused on improving low-achieving schools, compared with 22 percent of the membership in alliances that focused on early childhood education. Approximately half of all alliances (38 out of 77) included at least one member each from an LEA, SEA, and higher education organization. In addition,

- Sixty alliances (78 percent) included at least one LEA member;
- Sixty alliances (78 percent) included at least one SEA member; and
- Fifty-three alliances (69 percent) included at least one representative from higher education.

Figure 7. Membership composition varied by topic area



Note: All data are based on 77 alliances. RELs did not provide complete membership information for two research alliances that ended early in 2015.

This “snapshot” has shown the complexity and diversity of the expansive REL research alliance experience. The 10 RELs worked with a wide array of research alliances, covering multiple topics across a variety of settings and including a wide range of members. Most research alliances were newly created at the beginning of the REL contract cycle or commenced over the course of the first few years. REL research alliances were not rigidly defined or stagnant entities. These characteristics afforded flexibility and evolution as needs emerged or changed, but, as is discussed further in chapter 4, RELs found that this flexibility presented some challenges because the responses to changing needs across different research alliances could not be addressed through one-size-fits-all strategies. Many newly formed and existing research alliances were transformed either in small ways (such as changing their names) or in more substantive ways (such as broadening or contracting geographic coverage or combining or splitting alliances).

The work of forming, sustaining, and supporting multiple research alliances that comprised varied topic areas, geographic areas, and structures was an undertaking in which the 2012–17 RELs were breaking new ground. In this endeavor, REL staff faced and adapted to a variety of challenges during the course of their

work. The remainder of this report delves more deeply into the experiences of the RELs and explores the implications for other research-practice partnerships.

Chapter 4. Challenges and solutions in forming and developing REL research alliances

Over the first four years of the 2012–17 contract cycle, RELs reported that they faced a variety of challenges and used a number of strategies to meet these challenges as they supported the formation of 79 alliance partnerships, engaged in activities to develop and maintain a solid membership base and structure, and worked with research alliance members to develop and refine their research agendas. This chapter examines the broad categories of challenges that RELs faced, discusses strategies that the RELs reported using to address these challenges (summarized in table 3), and cites specific examples from across the REL research alliance effort.

REL research alliances reported facing both common and unique challenges

The REL research alliance experience provides a unique opportunity to explore issues concerning the start-up of new partnerships and the processes of development and evolution over time. Ten different RELs supported the development of research alliances, and, in year 4 of the contract cycle, each of these RELs supported between 6 and 10 alliances that varied in origin, size, geographical spread, topic area, and diversity in membership. The RELs encountered a wide variety of challenges and enacted a number of strategies to meet these challenges. Some of these challenges were similar across alliances, while others were specific to a particular alliance.²⁵

RELs reported commonly facing the following categories of challenges when developing or supporting alliances:

- Building trust, engagement, and a sense of partnership;
- Fostering communication;
- Managing time constraints;
- Working with research alliance members who have different priorities, interests, and expectations; and
- Building capacity.

Table 3 below provides specific issues reported by RELs related to each of these broad challenges, as well as approaches taken by RELs to address each broad challenge. The RELs found that many of these approaches addressed more than one challenge. Further, this chapter captures the basic descriptions of approaches reported by RELs to address the respective challenges but does not provide detailed depictions of how these approaches were implemented.

²⁵All 10 RELs provided IES with yearly written reflections that addressed challenges and lessons learned in the form of updated annual planning documents and annual progress assessments. RELs also provided oral reflections to IES during biannual REL directors meetings. This chapter contains information excerpted directly from REL documents or statements provided by REL directors and other REL leadership team members.

Table 3. REL research alliances reported facing a number of challenges and responding to these challenges in specific ways

Category of challenges	RELs reported facing these specific challenges	REL research alliances responded to these challenges by
Building trust, engagement, and a sense of ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of new relationships among alliance members Development of relationships between alliance members and REL staff Cultivation of active participation of membership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking advantage of previously developed leadership structures when possible Using REL staff and alliance members who could navigate the researcher-practitioner divide Encouraging alliance members to take on leadership roles Fostering a core team of engaged alliance members, often with differentiated roles
Fostering communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competition among schedules Limited resources for holding face-to-face meetings Technology barriers Lack of engagement of staff from alliance member organizations or agencies Reduced involvement of members due to geographic distance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitating early and ongoing in-person and virtual meetings by using creative and flexible methods Combining formal, ongoing communication methods with less formal, as-needed discussions Taking part in regular communication and dissemination events with nonalliance members and key stakeholders Designating specific staff to facilitate the exchange of information
Managing time constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competition of obligations among alliance members and other key stakeholders Choice of projects that would provide timely feedback to inform policy and practice The finite 5-year nature of the REL contract 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Factoring in members' time restrictions and competing obligations when considering membership roles Continuing to recruit and motivate new members to replace those with insufficient time Finding creative ways to support members when there were time lags in dissemination of findings Developing and (when necessary) revising realistic timelines that fall within the contract period and meet the needs of stakeholders
Working with research alliance members who have different priorities, interests, and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Differences in disciplinary training of researchers and practitioners Differences in priorities among practitioners due to their respective positions in their communities Varied local needs, priorities, and interests across different communities within a research alliance Changes in policy contexts over time Ongoing issues related to power dynamics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working to find common ground and developing a core agenda around common interests Participating in ongoing reflective work and regularly recommitting to the evolving research agenda Identifying power dynamics and working to develop a positive group dynamic Being flexible, particularly when there were changes in state and local leadership or legislation Subdividing an alliance on the basis of geographic areas Developing smaller, more cohesive workgroups within an alliance Supporting local or regional needs while maintaining a core research agenda
Building capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variation in capacity of alliance members to understand research methods and frame research agendas Tension between building capacity and advancing the research agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing toolkits to serve a broad base of alliance members and their colleagues Providing targeted technical assistance to meet the individual capacity-building needs of member organizations Using locally based staff to help build capacity

Challenge 1: Building trust, engagement, and a sense of ownership

Trust in research-practice partnerships requires early and ongoing collaboration and a feeling of mutual ownership in decisionmaking (Coburn et al., 2013; Connolly, Plank, & Rone, 2012; Gooden, Graham, & Martin, 2014; Tseng, 2013). As one REL director reported during a cross-REL meeting, “Relationship and trust need to be developed before members can collaborate and do the ‘research work’.”

How did RELs report building trust, engagement, and a sense of ownership as a challenge?

Trust and relationship-building are interconnected with all of the challenges that RELs reported facing. However, the RELs reported three specific challenges with regard to building trust:

- **Establishment of new relationships among alliance members.** In many cases, particularly with newly created REL research alliances, members had never met before the formation of the alliance. Even in cases where members knew each other, they may not have worked together often, particularly in the capacity of developing a shared research agenda.
- **Development of relationships between alliance members and REL staff.** Even in cases where alliance members already knew one another well, particularly for alliances that existed before the REL contract began, RELs reported that alliance members needed to develop and cultivate a new working relationship with REL research and support staff.
- **Cultivation of active participation of membership,** including supporting the development of leadership roles. When members are not engaged and taking on key roles, then they feel less ownership in the process. Regardless of how alliances were formed, RELs reported needing to find ways to support the development of leadership and mutual ownership among alliance members.

How did RELs and REL research alliances report responding to these trust, engagement, and sense of ownership challenges?

Because trust and a sense of ownership act together as a cornerstone to all of the work of the alliance, RELs reported undertaking numerous strategies to respond to this challenge. The following four strategies were identified by the RELs to help build trust and to foster a sense of mutual ownership in decisionmaking:

- **Taking advantage of previously developed leadership structures when possible.** RELs that worked with existing groups indicated that it is often important to rely on an entity’s leadership structure already in place rather than creating a new leadership structure solely for alliance work and planning. Specifically, individuals and organizations that have worked together in the past have likely already established trust and an effective dynamic of working with each other. In this context,

“When you work with existing groups [pre-existing partnerships that the REL did not create], it doesn’t make sense (in most cases) to create an additional REL leadership structure on top of or alongside their existing structure. The governance structure is the existing leadership. The REL works with the existing governance structure. You don’t want separate governance structures.”

—REL director

REL researchers and staff had to work to build trust as outsiders who were new partners with alliance members.

- **Using REL staff and alliance members who could navigate the researcher-practitioner divide.** All RELs designated staff to work as liaisons with REL research alliance members. Although RELs used a variety of staffing arrangements, each REL designated staff members with research, practice, specific content knowledge, or some combination of these areas of expertise as lead contacts for each alliance. These lead contacts helped build the research alliance partnerships and worked to keep alliance members engaged and on the same page. They attempted to navigate the researcher-practitioner divide by establishing one-on-one relationships with members, participating in and coordinating frequent communication, and identifying specific members to serve as champions for the alliance or serve in lead or advisory roles. RELs reported that the most effective research alliance liaisons were those who could easily bridge the worlds of researchers and practitioners and could speak the “dual language” of research and practice.²⁶ One way RELs reported developing this skill was through creating opportunities for liaisons within an individual REL to meet regularly with each other to share best practices in working with practitioners.
- **Encouraging alliance members to take on leadership roles.** REL research alliance members—particularly those who volunteered or were selected by the REL to take on leadership roles—played critical parts in building trust. RELs reported that core alliance members set the tone of meetings and discussions and took actions that fostered joint cooperation and buy-in: they aided in member recruitment, guided the rollout of new projects, and acted as “dissemination ambassadors.” Again, RELs noted that research alliance members who could also speak “languages” of both researchers and practitioners helped to foster communication in ways that reduced distrust and enabled all participants to have a say in the substance of the alliance’s work. Having a say, in turn, supported a stronger sense of ownership in the work of the REL research alliance. In addition to volunteering or being selected by the RELs, people taking on leadership roles also had to be willing to commit the time needed to support implementation of the alliance’s agenda. While the goal was sustained participation in leadership activities by alliance members, RELs acknowledged that this was not always possible. In some cases, for example, when attendance was irregular, RELs would sometimes work with these leaders to explore whether to recruit an alternate representative who could take on a more committed role. In these situations, recruitment of a committed leader took precedence over whether the original alliance member was retained.
- **Fostering a core team of engaged alliance members, often with differentiated roles.** In their discussions, RELs agreed that a big part of building trust included bringing together a strong and productive team of researchers and practitioners to serve as members in REL research alliances. Organizational structures and levels of participation among members varied across REL research alliances. While some RELs supported alliances that used a formal approach to the structure of

²⁶ Ideally, these alliance liaisons should have some experience or expertise in both education research and practice so that they can “speak the language” of both researchers and practitioners, help facilitate their collaboration, and make sure both groups’ needs are being met through the research alliance partnership.

alliance roles, such as two- or three-tiered systems (including, for example, “core” planning team members, “active” members who are engaged in REL projects or working groups, and “followers” who are on communication or dissemination lists), others saw value in less rigid roles for alliance members to play.

Fostering a core team of engaged alliance members: an example from REL Central

REL Central created alliance planning committees to bring together a group of engaged alliance members and foster a sense of ownership. Planning committee members met regularly to help shape and guide each alliance’s evolving research agenda. Each planning committee operated as an advisor to REL Central about the work conducted by the respective alliance and structured itself in its own way. For example, the planning committee of the Rural Education Research Alliance created subcommittees to guide the development of work within each member state; whereas, the Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance brought together a member representative from each state into one main committee.

REL Central reported that this flexibility in alliance planning committees enabled research alliances to operate in ways that best addressed each alliance’s specific needs. In the case of the Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance, which was created in year 2 through the merging of state-specific alliances, the planning committee helped to oversee the work across states and shape alliance-wide priorities. Similarly, the Rural Education Research Alliance planning committee members provided overarching support and fostered engagement among other alliance members through the creation of smaller project teams that could focus their time on work more aligned to their respective interests.

Regardless of the roles that members played, RELs reported that building trust required the establishment of a strong and dedicated membership base and the provision of ample opportunities for relationship-building—both during initial planning and throughout the lifespan of the research alliance. One way to do this was to support opportunities for members to discuss their roles both within and outside of the alliance context. For example, one strategy that REL Appalachia used was to allow time during meetings of the alliance or core planning teams for members to network by sharing examples of other, non-REL work in which they were engaged.

Challenge 2: Fostering communication

Building trust requires regular and effective communication. Communication is perhaps one of the biggest hurdles to overcome in a research-practice partnership, particularly because it relates to members who are geographically spread out and do not have frequent face-to-face contact. Communicating by using various methods and channels and by using content that is relevant helps keep members engaged, invested, and contributing to the overall success and sustainability of the research-practice partnership (Roderick et al., 2009; Smith, Bingman, & Beall, 2006; Vukotich, Cousins, & Stebbins, 2014). Unlike many other education-related research-practice partnerships that focus on a specific location, such as a school district, REL research alliances varied widely in their geographical coverage, making regular face-to-face communication more challenging. By year 4 of the 2012–17 REL contract cycle, more than 40 percent of REL research alliances had memberships that crossed state lines within a REL’s region. Even single-state REL research alliances sometimes covered multiple, diverse school districts and settings.

How did RELs report fostering communication as a challenge?

RELs reported that strong and consistent communication among alliance members generally brings forth a sense of personal responsibility and commitment to alliance work. However, RELs reported facing the following five communication-related challenges:

- **Competition among schedules.** RELs reported that members of research alliances have busy schedules and competing demands across their various roles within and outside of the alliance. This makes it difficult to schedule meetings that include all alliance members.
- **Limited resources for holding face-to-face meetings.** Although REL staff acknowledged that in-person meetings were preferred, particularly during the agenda-setting stage, they stated that such meetings were not always practical or possible, because of restricted travel expenses²⁷ and because of the schedules and travel limitations of alliance members.
- **Technology barriers.** Some members of REL research alliances lived in remote or rural regions with limited technological capability or reliability. RELs reported that not only is it difficult for these members to convene in person because of their geographic constraints, but it can also be difficult to meet via platforms that require Internet access.
- **Lack of engagement of staff from alliance member organizations or agencies.** RELs acknowledged that stakeholders outside of the alliance do not participate in as regular and consistent communication as alliance members and thus face the potential to lose sight of the alliance's progress. RELs noted that communication between research alliance members and nonmember stakeholders (such as state and school district leaders) is essential to gaining support for implementing REL research and technical assistance projects, as well as to bridging the gap between research and practice. These leaders may not be directly involved in developing and engaging in alliance activities, but they are critical in providing support for staff members who are taking part in these activities and in reducing barriers to successful implementation of research and technical assistance projects.
- **Reduced involvement of members due to geographic distance.** RELs reported that member involvement declined because of a lack of close connection and interaction of members of research alliances that covered multiple geographic locations.

How did RELs report responding to communication challenges?

To address these challenges, RELs stated that they needed to be creative and flexible in fostering communication within research alliances. RELs developed a portfolio of in-person, phone, and virtual meetings to keep the lines of communication open. Different RELs reported using different strategies, and

²⁷ As discussed in the 2012–17 Performance Work Statement, “REL funding cannot be used for invitational travel; therefore, the contractor shall not provide federal reimbursement for travel or meal payments to recipients of REL services. Alliance members will need to pay for their participation in meetings.” See the “Performance Work Statement for Regional Educational Laboratories (2012–2017)” available at <https://www.fbo.gov/utills/view?id=50688bfda3cc31d77469838a79649491>.

even within a REL, different research alliances often required different communication strategies. In general, RELs reported responding to communication challenges by using the following strategies:

- **Facilitating early and ongoing in-person and virtual meetings by using creative and flexible methods.** RELs discussed the importance of having in-person meetings when possible and took advantage of opportunities to bring alliance members together. For example, REL Central addressed the challenge of travel payment restrictions by capitalizing on alliance member attendance at both national and state conferences and organizing in-person alliance meetings before or after the conferences. Depending on specific circumstances, RELs may have facilitated in-person meetings during the early alliance planning stages, annually, two to three times per year, quarterly, or monthly. RELs adjusted in-person meetings to reflect the needs and logistics of specific alliances. In some situations, a smaller subset of alliance members (for example, a workgroup within an alliance) met in person more regularly than the larger, whole group. RELs also sometimes hired locally based consultants or had REL staff conduct site visits to alliance members' work locations to foster more face-to-face interactions with alliance members. In other cases, RELs combined in-person meetings with virtual meetings—either by phone or video conference—to ensure that all research alliance members were included in the conversations, regardless of their ability to attend a meeting in person. For alliances that faced technology barriers, RELs explored solutions such as dividing one big alliance into separate and smaller geographically focused alliances or offering in-person meetings that were more efficient in terms of time and travel.
- **Combining formal, ongoing communication methods with less formal, as-needed discussions.** In addition to formal meetings, the RELs reported using other formal communication strategies, such as regular (monthly or bimonthly) email briefs or newsletters, to keep alliance members informed of alliance activity and to foster communication between members. They experimented with creative formats in these newsletters, including adding video clips or infographics. In addition, all RELs supplemented more formal, scheduled communication with less formal, as-needed emails, phone calls, blogs, and members-only Web-based discussions. Although RELs acknowledged the importance of ongoing and diverse methods of communications, one REL pointed out that alliance leads must engage in a “careful balancing act” of keeping participants engaged but not overburdening them with too much outreach.
- **Taking part in regular communication and dissemination events with both alliance and nonalliance members and key stakeholders,** such as state and district staff. RELs reported taking part in the following engagement strategies with both alliance and nonalliance members:
 1. Disseminating early research study findings to a limited set of stakeholders, including state or district leaders;
 2. Encouraging alliance members and other stakeholders to participate in REL events (and monitoring state and district calendars to minimize potential time conflicts);

“There really is no replacement for handshake, face-to-face interactions, and in-person dialogue.”

—REL Year 5 Research Alliance Summary

3. Partnering with alliance members to present information to larger audiences;
4. Providing toolkits or other resources that alliance members can use to train other practitioners;
5. Employing on-site staff or local consultants who have the capacity to communicate more regularly with local stakeholders;
6. Preparing videos and infographics to disseminate work;
7. Forming advisory groups; and
8. Hosting meetings or events across the region’s alliances.

Using multiple techniques to keep the communication lines open: an example from REL Pacific
 REL Pacific used a variety of communication strategies aimed at keeping alliance members informed and engaged. Regular communications through electronic “infoblats” were sent to alliance members at least twice per month. These communications provided information about past and future meetings, included pictures of alliance members, and provided information about the work of the alliances. “Events and Resources” infoblats provided details regarding relevant webinars and events. REL Pacific also connected with alliance members informally through emails and phone conversations to schedule meetings, respond to questions, and gather feedback. They also took advantage of locally based consultants to maintain close connection with alliance members.

RELs discussed the importance of engaging in an intentional “no surprises” communication approach. Because nonalliance members are not as informed of the day-to-day operations of the alliance work, there is a real threat that they will lose sight of the alliance’s progress and their policy-relevant work and be less amenable to encouraging the continued progress of the research alliance’s agenda. RELs reported that carefully planned communication strategies, such as the eight listed for this strategy, made key stakeholders (particularly district and state leaders) aware of ongoing alliance

RELs engaged in an intentional “no surprises” communication approach

work with the hope that they would continue to support staff members who were taking part in research alliance-related activities and to help minimize barriers to successful implementation of research alliance projects.

- **Designating specific staff to facilitate the exchange of information.** Some RELs reported that they found it useful to designate specific staff to focus on communications and act as the facilitators of information exchange within an alliance. Designated staff could be members of the REL staff or of the research alliance.

Challenge 3: Managing time constraints

All REL research alliances faced the shared pressure of limited time. Time constraints influenced issues related to alliance membership, setting research agendas, scheduling meetings, and implementing research and technical assistance projects.

“We are not talking just about meeting time when we talk about the time needed for the development of relationships and trust; we are talking about calendar time.”

—REL director

How did RELs report managing time constraints as a challenge?

In general, there were three categories of time constraint challenges:

- **Competition of obligations among alliance members and other key stakeholders.** Alliance members played various roles within and outside of their alliances, which contributed to challenges surrounding facilitation of REL research alliance work. In addition to barriers to communication, competing obligations made it difficult to engage more generally in the work of the alliance. For example, district or state members who were experiencing changes in policy or legislation related to their jobs may have had to pay full attention to new career-related activities or initiatives, making it difficult to also engage in alliance work. In some cases, this led to turnover in REL research alliance membership or to reduced participation in alliance activities.

“Because of their busy schedules and competing priorities, the research alliance members often have limited time to engage as thoughtful partners.”
—REL Year 5 Research Alliance Summary
- **Choice of projects that would provide timely feedback to inform policy and practice.** REL research alliances needed to negotiate not only what projects were of the highest priority, but also which ones would be realistic, given time constraints. RELs reported that some projects that could have been valuable to an agency or department in the long run were not considered, because the research window did not allow enough time to produce results that would inform imminent policy or practice decisions.²⁸ REL research alliances therefore had to work carefully to identify research priorities and projects that would produce policy- and practice-relevant results that could be addressed within a limited timeframe. Also, district schedule constraints included blackout dates, such as holidays, state testing, and student summers off. RELs noted that these restrictions, coupled with the urgency to provide stakeholders with timely reports and preliminary information, placed a time burden on implementing research studies in school-based settings or finding opportunities to provide technical assistance for school or district staff.
- **The finite 5-year nature of the REL contract.** The 5-year contractual obligations that RELs were under provide a finite timeframe for developing and producing research and technical assistance work. Therefore, long-term research projects, such as large-scale randomized controlled trials, could not be considered because the time constraints of the REL contract required projects to come together quickly and carefully to fit within the 5-year window. This challenge became particularly prominent later in the contract cycle when new needs arose that required a longer time window to address than remained in the contract period.

²⁸ These time constraints are not limited to the REL experience. Coburn et al. (2013) discuss how this phenomenon affects most research-practice partnerships. They suggest that creating timelines that satisfy research-practice partners can be tricky when trying to balance the need to construct high-quality and rigorous research studies with the need to produce time-sensitive results for district decisionmakers.

How did RELs report responding to time constraint challenges faced by their research alliances?

RELs reported learning, over time, that they needed to be realistic about availability of members' time, develop reasonable timelines, and focus on projects that were both policy relevant and feasible. Specifically, the RELs reported confronting issues related to time constraints by using the following strategies:

- **Factoring in members' time restrictions and competing obligations when considering membership roles.** RELs reported creating various configurations of alliance membership to accommodate members' time limitations. Those who took on leadership roles needed to be willing and able to commit significant time to the REL research alliance; while others who wanted to stay connected to the alliance but were time constrained could participate in other ways and take on fewer responsibilities within the alliance.

Finding ways to bridge multiple commitments: an example from REL West

In some cases, RELs were able to take advantage of alliance members' multiple roles by coordinating activities with other entities in which alliance members were involved. REL West's Educator Effectiveness Alliance benefitted from coordination between REL West and the West Comprehensive Center (WCC), with which many alliance members were also affiliated. The WCC convened regular cross-state events and provided opportunities for face-to-face meetings, which REL West supplemented with virtual communication. Each meeting included a research update. Research by REL West was shared with all three of the participating states and was used for decisions in the state that collaborated directly in a given study. The WCC also incorporated the information into their technical assistance to states on implementation of state systems.

- **Continuing to recruit and motivate new members to replace those with insufficient time.** RELs reported that the alliances often continually recruited new members, not just to expand membership, but also to be in a position to replace members who had to leave because of competing demands or changes in priorities. In some cases, RELs reported that outgoing alliance members helped to recruit their replacements. Because turnover was a common phenomenon, RELs also reported the need to quickly engage new members, provide technical assistance when necessary, and have clear documentation of the accomplished work to date.
- **Finding creative ways to support members when there were time lags in dissemination of findings.** RELs noted that, precisely because alliance members were busy, regular contact was necessary to keep members engaged. REL research alliances tried various ways to combat time lags that threatened to disengage alliance members—particularly with long-term research projects that required more time to publish findings. To aid stakeholders who needed information to make timely policy and practice decisions, RELs sometimes disseminated existing evidence-based resources or provided targeted technical assistance on emerging knowledge on a specific topic. For example, REL Southeast's Improving Literacy Research Alliance implemented a study of the effect of Mississippi's K-3 early literacy professional development initiative on teacher outcomes, which required a lengthy data-collection process. While that study was still in progress, elementary school principals were in need of guidance as they embarked on new summer reading camps. Two research alliance members, who were co-authors with REL staff on the research study that was still in process

and were members of the Mississippi Department of Education, worked in collaboration with the alliance lead to develop and implement regional workshops for principals on using the *Summer Reading Camp Self-Study Guide*, which was previously developed by the REL.

- **Developing and (when necessary) revising realistic timelines that fall within the contract period and meet the needs of stakeholders.** The time constraint of the 5-year contract required members to come together rather quickly. Long-term projects were developed early, and in later years, new projects were designed to be shorter in duration. In the middle years of the contract, REL research alliances often chose to refine research agendas and plan projects that built on prior or ongoing work. In year 5 research alliances prepared to wind down their research agenda and focus more on dissemination of findings in preparation for the contract's close, and some discussed possibilities for sustainability beyond the 2012–17 REL contract cycle.

Challenge 4: Working with research alliance members who have different priorities, interests, and expectations

REL research alliances faced the challenge of managing competing priorities and interests throughout their formation, agenda setting, project development, and implementation phases.

How did RELs report differences in priorities as a challenge?

The REL research alliances noted that differences in priorities were due to the following factors:

- **Differences in disciplinary training of researchers and practitioners.** REL research alliances often had to identify and negotiate research agendas that met the needs of both their researcher and practitioner members. Researchers often had expertise in and preference for more complex research methods that required longer timelines or aimed to answer broader questions; while practitioners who worked within different institutions and bureaucracies were often interested in quicker answers to specific and tailored questions.
- **Differences in priorities among practitioners due to their respective positions in their communities.** Practitioners in the same alliance often had different priorities, depending on whether they represented particular localities or broader communities or interests (for example, local-level versus state-level education professionals). RELs reported that research alliances had to find a balance between the individual interests of each member.
- **Varied local needs, priorities, and interests across different communities within a research alliance.** Because of the diversity across alliance members, RELs reported that they had to ensure that alliance members felt buy-in and ownership and sought common ground. Varied needs, interests, and priorities often plagued newly created alliances more than previously existing ones because members had less experience working together toward a common goal. However, RELs reported that even previously existing partnerships were not immune to the challenge of finding common ground, given varied local priorities.
- **Changes in policy contexts over time.** Priorities of REL research alliances were affected over time by changes in school, district, and state leadership and by legislation changes. RELs often reflected

on the constant ebb and flow of local or state priorities. For example, local priorities sometimes shifted because of changes of district or state leaders (such as new superintendents), who set new priorities. Changes to leadership and legislation can affect research alliance membership, member engagement, research priorities, access to data, and overall relationship and power dynamics.

- **Ongoing issues related to power dynamics.** RELs reported that power dynamics came into play throughout all phases of the REL research alliance experience (during initial formation, agenda setting, and alliance change and evolution). RELs noted that power dynamics could occur in relation to the positions that alliance members held outside of the alliance context (for example, state versus district representatives) or in relation to the different roles that members took within the research alliance (leadership or core members versus less active members).

How did RELs report responding to differences in priorities among alliance members?

RELs reported the following ways of dealing with issues around different priorities:

- **Working to find common ground and developing a core agenda around common interests.** In order to manage competing interests, RELs reported that research alliances strove to find commonality among individual research interests and use those common themes to shape the core of the alliances' work. In a few circumstances, when they were not able to bridge these differences between priorities and interests of members to identify a common project, RELs decided to end certain alliances or break them into multiple, more cohesive research alliances.
- **Participating in ongoing reflective work and regularly recommitting to the evolving research agenda.** Given that priorities of all stakeholders would naturally change over five years, RELs acknowledged that research agendas were always evolving. In some cases, REL research alliances chose to narrow their scope of work to address the most pressing needs initially identified by alliance members, while in other cases, alliances chose to broaden work over time to address new or additional needs. On an annual basis, RELs were required by IES to reflect on the prior year and prepare for the upcoming year's work. As part of this reflection, RELs worked with research alliances to develop new projects or revise work plans when necessary. In some cases, RELs reported that REL research alliances asked members to commit formally to research priorities and goals on a yearly basis to help ensure that everyone was engaged and dedicated to the research agenda.
- **Identifying power dynamics and working to develop a positive group dynamic.** RELs reported that power dynamics needed to be acknowledged and understood in order to minimize the chance that agendas become driven by only a small subset of members. To address this concern, RELs suggested that alliances foster open dialogue among diverse alliance members and focus on issues pertinent to all participants.
- **Being flexible, particularly when there were changes in state and local leadership or legislation.** RELs reported that existing alliance members needed to build trust and positive relationships with new leaders in order to encourage buy-in. RELs reported actively working to engage new leaders by discussing their priorities, bringing them up to speed on REL research alliance work, and providing them with examples of how the current or future alliance efforts are addressing the needs of their

constituency. Some alliances evolved and adapted to the changes in leadership or legislation by restructuring their agendas and projects to suit the priority areas of new leaders. Other alliances ended because their work was no longer relevant or applicable or because new leadership had not engaged in the alliance enough to be successful. RELs have indicated that maintaining flexibility, being responsive to changing needs, and keeping lines of communication open were essential to overcoming challenges surrounding leadership and legislation changes.

- **Subdividing an alliance on the basis of geographic areas.** In some cases, when RELs determined that alliance needs were too disparate, RELs reconfigured alliances to cover smaller geographic regions and developed cross-state collaborative opportunities to facilitate the sharing of resources of common interest.
- **Developing smaller, more cohesive workgroups within an alliance.** In other cases, alliances developed smaller workgroups within the broader group to focus on issues that were of particular interest to specific communities or members.
- **Supporting local or regional needs while maintaining a core research agenda.** RELs reported tailoring technical assistance efforts or producing targeted materials to meet the needs of specific communities within the alliance while also maintaining a “core” focus on common needs related to policy and practice across all communities. For example, REL Appalachia’s Virginia Middle School Research Alliance had a broad focus on expanding data use by practitioners to improve teaching and learning. The alliance brought together a collaborative working group of researchers, state-level staff, university partners, and local district- and school-level staff to catalog current data-collection practices, examine what helps and hinders data use, and identify the most appropriate data to track. Importantly, the alliance also provided targeted support to school districts. The alliance developed district-specific workshops on using data or conducting action research. The alliance also provided technical assistance support to districts or the state in analyzing specific data relevant to their pressing needs and interests, such as labor market or disciplinary data.

Challenge 5: Building capacity

The 2012–17 REL program placed a strong emphasis on building capacity to understand and use data and research effectively and productively to inform decisionmaking.²⁹ Many REL research alliance projects therefore aimed to build this capacity among research alliance members and other practitioners in the regions served by the RELs. Researchers and practitioners came from different contexts or perspectives, had different understandings of research methods and how to translate research into practice, and had different levels of experience with framing research questions and agendas. RELs reported that capacity building was particularly complicated because of diversity in understanding of research methods and data use among alliance members.

²⁹ This effort to improve capacity addresses an ongoing challenge in the field of research-practice partnerships. For example, authors frequently discussed the need for building the capacity of practitioners participating in research-practice partnerships to use research findings to influence decisionmaking and practices (Coburn et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2009; Tseng, 2013).

How did RELs report building capacity as a challenge?

Many RELs reported the following challenges related to building the capacity of research alliance members to understand and use data and research:

- **Variation in capacity of alliance members to understand research methods and frame research agendas.** RELs reported that it was difficult to assess alliance members' capacities to use and conduct research, but there was clear variation across alliance members. Variation in capacities became apparent as alliance members grappled with the challenge of developing and refining research questions that they would be able to answer, given the data that they could obtain. In some cases, the research capacity of the alliance partners affected whether projects were short or long term. One REL reported that an alliance's members that had strong in-house research capacity within their agency or organization were more likely to engage with the REL on longer-term projects; whereas, alliances whose members had little capacity in-house were more inclined to focus on answering more pressing, short-term questions. Given the variation in capacity and needs of different members, the RELs were challenged to customize strategies to build capacity.
- **Tension between building capacity and advancing the research agenda.** RELs faced a challenge in advancing the research agenda at a steady pace while also building the capacity of alliance members to help implement research projects and frame the research agenda. Because some alliance members lacked skills in, for example, developing strong and answerable research questions and determining appropriate analytic strategies, RELs used technical assistance activities to strengthen the skills of alliance members. This naturally led to longer timelines in formulating and carrying out the research agenda. However, at the same time, REL research alliances faced pressure to be responsive to the research needs of their members and to produce results in a timely manner.

How did RELs report responding to challenges of building capacity?

RELs reported engaging in the following efforts to enhance the capacity of alliance members to understand and use research and data:

- **Developing toolkits to serve a broad base of alliance members and their colleagues.** RELs developed technical assistance activities and tools that provided support to alliance members and also could be used by alliance members to build capacity among other staff within their respective organizations or agencies. For example, some RELs developed toolkits on particular topics and then trained alliance members on how to use the toolkits to support the development of knowledge among other state and local personnel.

- **Providing targeted technical assistance to meet the individual capacity-building needs of member organizations.** The RELs often worked with research alliance members and their respective organizations or agencies to develop technical assistance that supported their specific needs and fit within the larger goals of the alliance. In addition to building capacity for alliance members and their colleagues, RELs reported that these efforts helped build or solidify strategic relationships within and outside of alliances, energize key stakeholders around the goals of the alliance, and move the work of the research alliance forward.

Developing technical assistance activities and tools to meet the needs of practitioners: an example from REL Appalachia

REL Appalachia administered a survey to gather information for the Metro Nashville Public Schools Data Use Alliance on how teachers were using data and to determine the supports needed to help teachers use data more effectively. The survey and its results led to the development of a Teacher Data Use Survey tool for broader use among alliance members and their colleagues, as well as a webinar series on how to implement and report on the survey.

- **Using locally based staff to help build capacity.** Particularly in geographically distant regions, RELs sometimes used locally based REL staff, consultants, or experienced practitioner alliance members to assist alliances in providing more hands-on and ongoing technical assistance to alliance members; this support was sometimes needed to ensure that the research agenda stayed on pace.

Other strategies used by RELs to support research alliances

As discussed throughout this chapter, RELs engaged in a broad array of strategies to address the challenges that they faced in supporting the development of research alliances. In addition, RELs engaged in the following strategies that could be relevant for multiple challenges that they faced in supporting their research alliances:

- **Capitalizing on the diversity of skills within the RELs** when assigning specific REL staff members to work on as-needed alliance-related projects. Because different REL research alliances had different needs at different times, the RELs designated appropriate staff to meet the needs of the particular alliance for building capacity and developing and carrying out research agendas. For example, during earlier stages when an alliance was developing a plan for a research study, REL staff who had research expertise were needed to support framing a research design and determining appropriate analytic methods. However, if a research alliance's priority at another stage was more focused on capacity building, then RELs would designate staff with expertise in providing technical assistance and support.
- **Engaging in cross-alliance support activities.** In cases where different research alliances within a REL had a shared problem of practice or an issue that they were exploring, the RELs were able to coordinate technical assistance or dissemination efforts across alliances. For example, RELs engaged in cross-alliance webinars on specific topics, including, in a few instances, webinars focused specifically on best practices that support the development of research alliances.

- **Providing opportunities for REL researchers to develop their skills in working with practitioners.** RELs reported providing internal professional development to their research staff for understanding issues related to doing collaborative researcher-practitioner work. This ranges from the formal creation of a professional learning community or training of locally based consultants, to less formal mechanisms such as brainstorming sessions, monthly check-ins, planned “water cooler” conversations held throughout the year, or through providing staff with useful literature and resources related to team-building, engagement, and research-practice partnerships.

Providing opportunities to develop skills to bridge the researcher-practitioner divide: an example from REL Midwest

REL Midwest supported the development of a professional learning community of REL researchers working on research alliance-related projects. This group discussed issues related to engaging in collaborative research with practitioners, breaking down silos between researchers and practitioners, and using time efficiently and effectively. For example, they documented topics of conversation that occurred between researchers and stakeholders and discussed optimal communication strategies that should be considered at each stage of a research project.

- **Participating in cross-REL activities related to the research alliances.** By virtue of working within the larger network of the national REL program, RELs had opportunities for cross-REL communication and collaboration. IES required each REL to designate one member of its leadership team to lead and oversee all alliance efforts; these individuals worked with other internal REL staff and researchers to serve the alliances and also collaborated with their counterparts across the other RELs. In particular, the 2012–17 REL program included cross-REL working groups meant to facilitate information sharing and collaboration across RELs; one working group was focused on research alliances.³⁰ This working group, consisting of the alliance lead staff from each REL, met quarterly to discuss shared experiences and challenges and to make plans for the development of cross-REL products or presentations (for example, presentations at national conferences). This collaboration enabled RELs to learn from the experiences of other RELs and to better serve the membership of their own alliances. Additionally, all REL directors met biannually through meetings that IES convened, often discussing the progress of research alliance efforts and sharing best practices.

³⁰ See the “Performance Work Statement for Regional Educational Laboratories (2012–2017)” available at <https://www.fbo.gov/utills/view?id=50688bfd3cc31d77469838a79649491>.

Conclusion: Implications for networks of research-practice partnerships

Just as past research and work on research-practice partnerships has helped inform the development and implementation of REL research alliances, so too can the REL experience inform current and future research-practice partnerships. The 2012–17 REL research alliance experience is particularly useful to consider, given the wide variety of alliances involved and the scale of the effort. Alliances came in many shapes and sizes and varied in structure, topics covered, membership, and geographic spread. Chapter 4, in particular, highlighted the variety of challenges that REL research alliances faced and the specific ways that REL staff attempted to deal with these challenges (summarized in table 3).

While some of these challenges and identified strategies were specific to the REL experience, many of the methods that research alliances used to address challenges can be applied to a wider set of research-practice partnerships.

Implications for building trust, engagement, and a sense of partnership. Research-practice partnerships may want to consider leveraging existing relationships, encouraging practitioner members to take on key leadership positions, and thinking about how participants can take on differentiated roles to foster ownership and engagement. The REL experience also points out the usefulness of engaging staff members to support the alliances who have a deep understanding of both the researcher and practitioner perspectives.

Implications for fostering communication. The RELs acknowledged that early and ongoing communication was critical in engaging and supporting research alliances as they evolved, which is relevant to any research-practice partnership. The REL experience shows the value of using a myriad of methods to communicate with research-practice partners and other key stakeholders especially when they are spread across multiple communities. This includes both formal and informal communication, using in-person and virtual methods and using a variety of different media such as reports and briefs, presentations, archived videos, and infographics.

Implications for managing time constraints. Research-practice partnership members always have other responsibilities and time constraints that can limit participation. RELs found that it was important to consider time demands when determining who could take on key leadership roles. Also, they found that continual recruitment can help combat membership attrition due to time constraints. The REL research alliance experience also points out the importance of thinking about realistic timelines that meet the needs of stakeholders and ways to creatively deal with time lags in obtaining research evidence by, for example, providing other valued products or services such as sharing materials on emerging evidence or providing targeted technical assistance.

Implications for working with research alliance members who have different priorities, interests, and expectations. The REL research alliance experience shows that size of the research-practice partnerships and geographic (and jurisdictional) composition have strong implications for research agendas and should be considered early on and continually reconsidered as research-practice partnerships progress and evolve. Because state and local personnel change and district and state priorities change, the RELs found that

their research alliances needed to be nimble and flexible. This may require subdividing groups or creating smaller working groups, combining groups, or recruiting new members. As with any research-practice partnership, the RELs found that research alliance members needed to find common ground by collaboratively developing an agenda around a common set of interests and engaging in regular reflective work to ensure that this evolving agenda remained relevant.

Implications for building capacity. The REL program's structure facilitated multiple layers of support for the development of research alliances, which other research-practice partnerships may want to consider. RELs used specific staffing, internal structural strategies, and procedures to take advantage of their organization's capacity to support REL research alliances and to develop the capacity of research alliance members. This included the development of toolkits, providing targeted technical assistance, and engaging locally based staff to support research alliance members. The structure and requirements of the overall REL program also provided opportunities for cross-REL communication and support. While the activities that RELs used were facilitated by the structure of the REL program, other networks of research-practice partnerships can learn from these experiences. In particular, research-practice partnership networks may want to consider how an umbrella coordinating entity can be formally structured to help identify and support broad needs and facilitate opportunities for collaboration and dissemination of lessons learned across various partnership efforts.

The REL 2012–17 contract cycle was responsible for the implementation of the largest research-practice partnership effort in preK–12 education to date. This effort spanned all regions under jurisdiction of the U.S. and territories and included more than 70 distinct research alliances at any point during the 5-year contract cycle. RELs relied on (1) strategies endorsed within the general literature on education research-practice partnerships within public education, (2) the collective research experience within the REL program and IES, and (3) innovative solutions from merging these two bodies of knowledge and practice to address each major challenge encountered in their efforts to establish and support research alliances.

Research-practice partnerships vary considerably in scale and scope, but at the heart, share the common goal of building the knowledge base to support the work of educators. As research-practice partnerships in education continue to grow in popularity, it will be important to continue to document these experiences, understand their commonalities and differences, and share lessons learned.

Appendix A. The 79 REL program research alliances by REL (January 2015)

REL Appalachia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kentucky College and Career Readiness Alliance • Metro Nashville Public Schools Data Use Research Alliance • Virginia Middle School Research Alliance • West Virginia Workforce Readiness Alliance • West Virginia School Leadership Research Alliance • Appalachia Higher Education Consortium 	REL Central <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance • Formative Assessment Research Alliance • Mathematics and Science Partnership Research Alliance • Native American Education Research Alliance • College and Career Readiness Alliance • Rural Education Research Alliance • Systems Development and Improvement Research Alliance
REL Mid-Atlantic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Childhood Education Research Alliance • Mid-Atlantic Historically Black Colleges and Universities College Completion Research Alliance • Longitudinal Data Use Research Alliance • Principal Effectiveness Research Alliance • Professional Learning Research Alliance • Rural Student College Readiness Research Alliance • School Completion and Engagement Research Alliance • Teacher Evaluation Research Alliance 	REL Midwest <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beating the Odds Research Alliance • College and Career Success Research Alliance • Dropout Prevention Research Alliance • Early Childhood Education Research Alliance • Rural Research Alliance • Teacher Effectiveness Research Alliance • Urban Research Alliance • Virtual Education Research Alliance
REL Northeast & Islands <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northeast Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance • Northeast Rural Districts Research Alliance • Urban School Improvement Alliance • Early Childhood Education Research Alliance • English Learners Alliance • Northeast College and Career Readiness Research Alliance • Puerto Rico Research Alliance for Dropout Prevention • U.S. Virgin Islands College and Career Readiness Research Alliance 	REL Northwest <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alaska Statewide Policy Research Alliance • Idaho System of Recognition, Accountability, and Support Alliance • Montana Data Use Alliance • Oregon College and Career Readiness Research Alliance • Oregon Leadership Network • Washington Educational Service District Network Alliance • Road Map for Education Results Alliance • Tribal Educators Alliance
REL Pacific <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hawai'i Partnership for Educational Research Consortium (Optimizing Data Readiness in Hawai'i) • Yap Research Alliance • Chuuk Research Alliance • Pohnpei Research Alliance • Kosrae Research Alliance • Marshall Islands Research Alliance • Palau Research Alliance • Guam Alliance for Family and Community Engagement • American Samoa Alliance for College and Career Readiness • Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) Alliance for College and Career Readiness 	REL Southeast <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving Low-Performing Schools in Alabama Research Alliance • Improving Schools in Mississippi Research Alliance • Improving Literacy Research Alliance • Improving Mathematics Instruction Research Alliance • Georgia Charter School Alliance • School Leadership in North Carolina Research Alliance • School Readiness Research Alliance • Blended and Online Learning Research Alliance
REL Southwest <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arkansas PreK Research Alliance • Louisiana Charter School Research Alliance • New Mexico PreK Research Alliance • New Mexico Achievement Gap Research Alliance • Oklahoma Rural School Alliance • Texas Hispanic STEM Alliance • Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance • English Learners Research Alliance 	REL West <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • California Office to Reform Education (CORE) Alliance • Community College Alliance on Career/Technical Education • Dropout Prevention Alliance for Utah Students with Disabilities • Educator Effectiveness Alliance • English Learner Alliance • Middle Grades School Climate Alliance • Nevada Education Research Alliance • Silicon Valley Research Alliance

Appendix B. The evolution of REL research alliances from year 1 to year 4

Because the REL research alliance effort was a new and groundbreaking initiative for the RELs and because it was implemented on a scale beyond any other research-practice partnership efforts, it was unclear how alliances would change over time. In general, the transformations that REL research alliances experienced from year 1 to year 4 occurred for three main reasons.

Priorities changed over time. RELs conducted needs assessments and worked with their research alliance stakeholders to prioritize goals and to develop research agendas. The priorities of those initially proposed goals may have been adjusted over time as needs changed. Changing priorities resulted in the creation of new alliances and the transformation of existing alliances. In other cases, the composition of alliance membership changed over time, and newer members had different priorities and goals.

Priorities were broad or varied. A majority of the REL research alliances that originated during year 1 were newly created and brought together members from different disciplines, districts, or states for the first time. These stakeholders may have had different priorities, goals, and interests. In some cases, for example, REL alliance members realized that their needs and priorities were too broad or too varied and would be better served by separate alliances (for example, alliances for specific geographic regions).

Priorities evolved as work progressed. Alliance research and technical assistance projects produced lessons learned and suggested next steps that helped to reframe priorities, thus allowing REL research alliances to evolve naturally over time.

While not all REL research alliances changed substantively over time, many did. Among the 58 alliances that were in partnership with a REL in both year 1 and year 4, 22 did *not* substantively change over time. However, 36 alliances did change their name or geographic coverage or were split or consolidated.³¹ Alliance transformations were manifested in the following three ways:³²

- For a variety of reasons, 29 alliances changed their names.³³ In some cases, REL research alliances changed their names to clarify or be more reflective of the work in which they were engaged. In other cases, alliances changed their names to reflect modifications over time in substantive focus or geographic coverage. For example, REL Northwest’s Montana AA District Network Research

³¹ This conception of “transformation” does not reflect changes in REL research alliance membership, which was often in flux over the course of multiple years across alliances. Thus, some REL research alliances that may not have changed in terms of geographic focus or substantive focus may have experienced large changes in terms of individual membership over the 4-year time span.

³² REL research alliances may have transformed in multiple ways. For this reason, the totals across the three categories do not add up to 36.

³³ Alliances that changed their names only slightly (for example, by adding “research” in front of “alliance” or changing “state” to “statewide”) are not included in this count. This count includes name changes due to modifications in focus, geography, or structure.

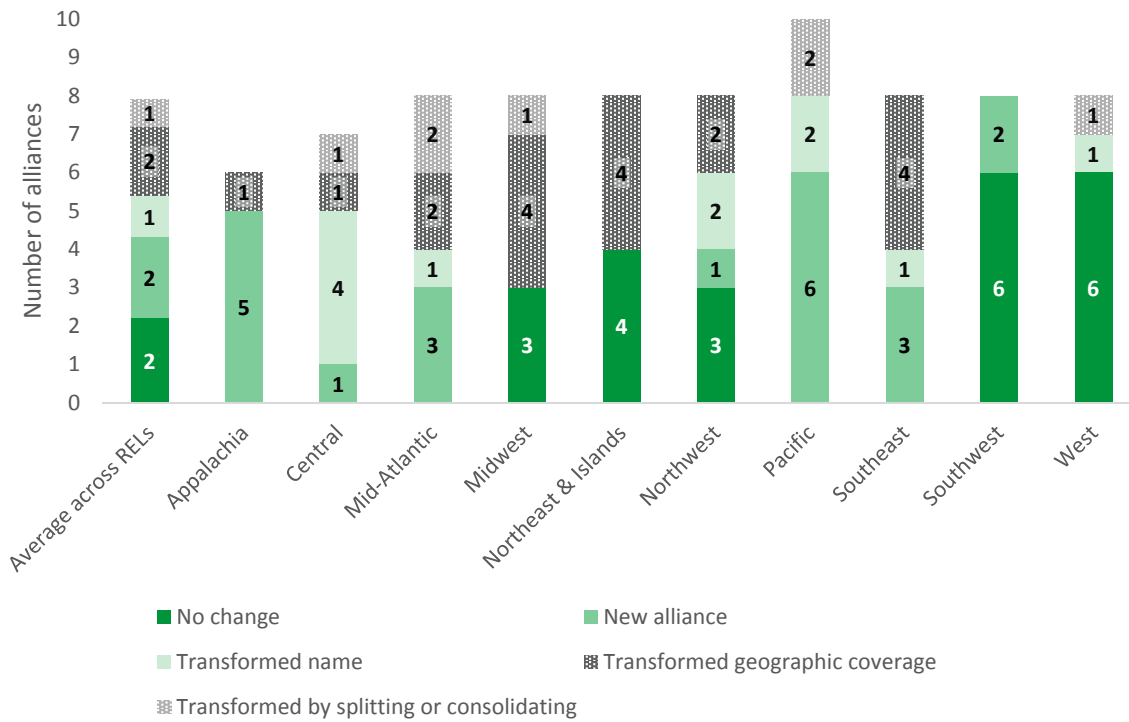
Alliance, which originally started as a seven-school district partnership, expanded statewide and changed its name to the Montana Data Use Alliance.

- At least 23 alliances modified their geographic coverage. As REL research alliances evolved over time, 13 expanded their membership across more states, 8 reduced the number of states involved, and at least 2³⁴ substantially broadened their reach within a state.
- Seven of the alliances active in 2015 were the result of either a split or a consolidation of alliances from their original configuration in year 1. Six split into two or more alliances, and one consolidated multiple alliances into a single entity. For those that split, the REL staff and research alliance members decided that their efforts would be better served as separate entities. For example, REL Pacific chose to break the College and Career Readiness Alliance into two alliances—one focusing on American Samoa and the other on the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. In another example, REL Mid-Atlantic’s initial Teacher Effectiveness Research Alliance broke into two alliances—one focusing on teacher evaluation and another focusing on professional learning. In contrast, REL Central chose to consolidate four alliances related to teaching and professional development into workgroups that operated under the umbrella Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance.

All but one REL had at least one research alliance that transformed in some way by 2015, and there was wide variation across the RELs (figure B1). In 6 of the 10 RELs, at least half of the 2015 alliances had transformed since year 1. Six RELs had at least one alliance that changed its name. Seven RELs had at least one alliance that modified its geographic coverage. Five RELs had at least one alliance that split or consolidated. Seven RELs added at least one new alliance since year 1. For only two RELs, the majority of the alliances in year 4 were the same as those in year 1 with no substantive changes.

³⁴ It is possible that more REL research alliances expanded within a specific state. Our count is based on information documented in each REL’s discussion of its alliances in the annual plans submitted to IES. The RELs were not required to provide this level of detail in their plans.

Figure B1. REL research alliances in 2015 were more likely to be modified versions of 2012 alliances than unchanged or newly created; but changes over time varied widely by REL



Note: This figure reflects only those REL research alliances that were in partnership with a REL as of year 4. It does not include the 15 REL research alliances that were active in year 1 but were no longer in existence or in partnership with a REL as of year 4. In some cases, REL research alliances transformed for multiple reasons. This chart documents the predominant reason for the change, prioritizing changes in the following order: splitting/consolidating, geographic coverage, and name. For example, if an alliance changed its name to account for a geographical expansion, it would be categorized in this figure as “Transformed geographic coverage.”

Here, we have discussed the evolution from year 1 to year 4 in terms of broad issues—specifically, the creation of new alliances and the closure or modifications of existing alliances. In reality, regardless of the consistency of their original name and structural configuration, alliances may have changed substantially in membership composition and research focus over time, as discussed in chapter 4.

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