

Workbook

MIT GOV/LAB Engaged Scholarship Tools

2020

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Engaged Scholarship Tools

At the MIT Governance Lab (MIT **GOV/LAB**), we practice a model of engaged scholarship, which we define as a process of rigorous research that is co-created by practitioners and grounded in local problems. We think this model results in more innovative and relevant knowledge and evidence, and ensures that both academics and practitioners benefit from the research process. Furthermore, a collaborative process makes it more likely that practitioners will use the results in their day-to-day work.

MIT **GOV/LAB** is developing tools to support engaged scholarship by practitioner-academic research teams. This workbook includes all our tools to date in an easily downloadable and printable format to help facilitate meetings with partners. This workbook is a living document and we welcome your feedback and experiences at mitgovlab@mit.edu.

Check out our full collection of tools, including guides, online interactives, and learning cases:

- [MIT GOV/LAB Engaged Scholarship Tools](#): An interactive website and workbook to facilitate collaborative research with equitable exchange.
- [How to Have Difficult Conversations](#): A practical guide for academic-practitioner research collaborations.
- [Risk and Equity Matrix](#): An exercise to systematically consider potential impacts for the range of actors involved in the research process.
- [MIT GOV/LAB Learning Cases](#): Featuring research collaborations on civic pedagogy with Grassroot; access to Information with Twaweza; civic leadership in the Philippines; and, the Learning Collaborative.

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Ask each other



1 Incentives & expectations

What do you want out of this collaboration? Ask why five times to better understand who or what is really motivating the research study.

How do you see the roles and responsibilities of your partner? For instance, will the practitioner primarily help facilitate the fieldwork (inroads into communities, translation, etc.)? Will the researcher be integrated into the practitioner organization or act more independently?

2 Exploratory phase & timelines

What timelines matter most? When do big decisions need to be made? Can you create a common, shared calendar, updated in real time?

Are you able to include a "phase zero" in your plan? Taking time to conduct exploratory research, even for a couple of weeks, and spending time with partners in the field is valuable in identifying innovative research questions together before committing to implementation and study components.

At a minimum, can you design and fund a scoping trip to "ground-truth" in person before setting down major parameters of the research design? We find it useful to discuss what type of research—descriptive, observational, lab-in-the-field—would be ideal and what would be minimal for scoping to inform the next stage of your study, given time and resources.

Can there be a regular check-in time? Can we build pivot or exit points into the partnership? These can be around certain key moments—for example, after the "phase zero" or after the pilot—whereby both parties agree to review the progress, content, and direction of the collaboration, and grant each other the right to re-open discussions on how best to proceed, if at all. These pivots or exit points can be built into a Work Plan or Memoranda of Understanding.

Who is part of the team? Do we have sufficient support for the project? Detail out roles, responsibilities, and time in the field for both teams including project managers, junior researchers, students, and research assistants.

Collaborative decision making & team buy-in 3

How should the research be designed? For example, who should be included in the selection of the core themes to be studied, in the design itself, or in adding items to the data collection tools? Who has the final word on critical components of the intervention design and the research design?

Who are the key decision-makers? What are their roles and responsibilities in the research collaboration? What is the process for decision-making for projects and research? Understanding who sign offs on any implementation changes or resources for research support is important for strengthening cooperation and buy-in. This information would be good to document in a Work Plan.

Have you participated in academic-practitioner research collaborations before? Where was it? Was fieldwork involved? This background information can be helpful for initial planning and onboarding.

4 Learning & dissemination

What is the internal review process for each entity before we can share results? Most academics, to preserve academic freedom, will not want to have their findings and conclusions approved, but will welcome reviews, comments and interpretations.

How many iterations or reviews of an output are reasonable? How much lead time does reviewer need? For example, the academic partner should address at least one round of questions and clarifying comments from practitioners before the output is considered final. Good practice is to jointly review sample outputs that you find useful and discuss what it would take to reproduce them.

Does your university or organization have requirements or a process to follow for joint publications, co-branding or using each-others logos? What about sharing news about the collaboration on social or traditional media? Some established organizations may have sophisticated approval processes, so it's important to check ahead of time to avoid complications from any public-facing communications.

How will we spread the word about the results? Dissemination and marketing is almost always an afterthought, so think early about your communications strategy and what would have the biggest impact for your target audience. This might include resources and budget for a meeting, workshop, or webinar as well as expert support for writing for popular audiences, editing, layout and design for print or online multimedia.

Ask your practitioner partner



1 Incentives & expectations

How do you plan to use the results? Is there a specific decision(s) or donor report(s) that the research results will inform?

What is at stake or how important are the results to your organization? For example, are the results important to the core of the organization (mission critical), are you evaluating a key component of your Theory of Change, or do you want to use the results to re-think or re-design a major component of your implementation?

What kind of results do you need? For example, are you hoping to get statistically significant results or show causal impact? Similarly, are you trying to evaluate more than one initiative bundled together? It's important to discuss early on what level of certainty you need for results, because the answers will directly affect possible research designs and budget.

If you're testing a particular initiative, are there still opportunities to tweak or change it, or must it remain exactly as is? Are you able to pilot or test implementation ideas before taking a project to scale? Getting a clear sense of what's already set in stone will help everyone understand the full range of possibilities for the research design.

How will results be received? For example, how would your team deal with mixed, null, or negative results, especially if you have been hoping to confirm a program's effectiveness? We find it useful to illustrate what the potential outcomes from an experimental study might be, so that the practitioner is very clear on the range of possible results.

2 Exploratory phase & timelines

Are you bound by project-reporting or grant timelines? What calendar do you follow? Are there any important funding decisions we should know about? In many cases, practitioners are raising money to support projects and team salaries, which makes these deadlines high-stakes.

What level of results do you need by these various timelines? For example, sometimes descriptive information is enough to update a board or advising committee. Other times, donors might expect experimental results in order to fund the next stage. See Section 4 for more on how results need to be presented to be useful as well as the process and responsibility for producing outputs to inform practitioner decision-making.

3 Collaborative decision making & team buy-in

Are you bound by project-reporting or grant timelines? Who are the main people at the organization who will be communicating with the academics? It's great to have a mix—the leadership, but also others who will be involved directly to help either implement the initiative, the research, or who have a stake in the results. These could be program leads, monitoring and evaluation staff, and procurement.

What is the role of the monitoring and evaluation team in the collaboration, their capacity to participate, and also their interest in gaining practical skills through the collaboration? Monitoring and evaluation teams are in charge of fostering learning in the organization (including use of evidence to inform programming), so their involvement can help ensure that lessons and insights are absorbed in the organizational thinking and decision-making.

Are there stakeholders outside the practitioner organization that should be included in some of the initial discussions? These could be government stakeholders, civil society partners, donors, local academics, or others. Of course, the more people there are to consult and manage, the more likely there will be a communication breakdown at some point, but some carefully-selected outside stakeholders could form a useful advisory group.

4 Learning & dissemination

What are the minimum outputs that you need us to produce from this collaboration? Who is your target audience? Outputs might include descriptive statistics, field reports, final reports, or slide decks. Which are essential? Can you provide examples of what these outputs should or have looked like? Make sure to set expectations for producing outputs written in accessible language and without jargon for target audiences.

What outputs do you want to produce yourself but would like the academics to review? For example, the team may want to produce a “research brief” for policy audiences based on the findings. Best practice is to ask for academic review to ensure accuracy.

Ask your academic partner



1 Incentives & expectations

Are these data for a dissertation or tenure-track promotion? Are you looking for data that will yield a peer-reviewed paper? Academic milestones often have long-term timelines as well as standards for rigor and method that might dictate the research design. Make sure to ask your academic partner to explain these design elements.

Are there specific methods that are a must for you (e.g. do you need an experiment)? What other characteristics of the study are non-negotiable for you (e.g. sample size, ability to randomize, geography, etc.)? Conversely, what components of the research design are flexible and can be adjusted to fit practitioner needs?

Do you foresee yourself as the primary owner of the data? Of all the data (e.g. including descriptive statistics) or primarily experimental data? What does this mean for the ability of the practitioner to use the data —e.g. can practitioners do their own analysis, or produce their own outputs? Is the release of data for you time-sensitive, and what are those timelines? (More on timelines below).

What do you need the practitioner to provide? For example, do you need recommendations or contacts for government officials, communities, or research assistants?

2 Exploratory phase & timelines

What academic timeline matters most and what are the key dates when you need results? For graduate students, important dates might include going on the job market, submitting a dissertation, or graduating. For professors, tenure clocks or promotion timelines can drive the need for publication. Articles for academic journals take on average three to five years from data collection to publication.

How much time are you personally planning to spend in-country for this project? Will you be in country for key decision points in the study, for example, piloting or the start of the fieldwork? If there are particular moments in the research when you want the academic partner to be available, be sure to say that up-front.

How much time are you expecting to spend on this research? Will you be conducting other research projects at the same time? Do you have enough people on your team to cover all the required field work, data analysis, and writing or are you expecting the practitioner to provide support?

Collaborative decision making & team buy-in

3

Who is on the research team? What roles do they play and who is responsible for key decisions on research questions, designs, and implementation?

Would research managers consider working from the practitioner organization's office for a period of time? Often not more than a desk and wi-fi connection is required, and hosting is a good way for both sides to keep in touch about progress. It makes for easier dialogue with a range of folks in the practitioner organization who may be involved in supporting the project, and it expands the possibilities for learning and skills-sharing.

Who at the university is vested—or at least interested—in the collaborative research? Who might spend time discussing the expectations and interests with the wider group of professors, students, and research staff? Oftentimes universities can provide in-residence or sabbatical opportunities for practitioner teams to learn new skills and collaborate on writing and research projects.

4 Learning & dissemination

Who owns the data? If academics are conducting quantitative research, it's possible they will be collecting and storing the raw data, which may contain sensitive or personal information. Discuss whether it is useful to share this data, in what format, and what redactions might be needed for sensitive data.

Will experimental results need to be replicated before they can be used for program or policy recommendations? Replications are when someone independently tries to recreate causal results from the raw data, to see if the analysis is correct. Ask more about what this means for interpreting your results and why it might be a good idea to spend the extra time and resources for this.

How much time can you set aside developing non-academic outputs? This includes resources for policy memos and presentations, and support to translate the results from technical academic jargon to more common language for diverse audiences. In our experience, the minimum package includes a summary report (with detailed methodology and results), accompanying slide deck, and descriptive statistics.

Can you offer opportunities for teaching, skills-sharing, and capacity-building for practitioner staff? Explore what would be of interest (e.g., methodological training on sampling, survey tools, piloting, data analysis). Collaboration and skill-sharing that go beyond the immediate research project is a big part of engaged scholarship.

Risk & Equity Matrix:

Notes on using the template:

- Objective of this exercise is to think about possible risks and to consider if everyone in the research study is benefiting in an equitable manner.
- May be useful to include details at various stages of the research project (e.g., pre-implementation, implementation, post-implementation).
- May be useful to break down the categories of actors into multiple lines (e.g., different subject populations, partners, or government actors involved).
- This is just a suggested template; feel free to adapt to your project design.
- Questions/suggestions on the template? mitgovlab@mit.edu.

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Team members:

Date:

 Costs

 Benefits

 Risks

 Mitigation

Research Subjects

Research Team

Lead Researcher(s)

Practitioner Partner

Government Actors

Other?

(Informal Authorities, Community Leaders, Media, Civil Society, Donors, Enterprises)

	 Costs	 Benefits	 Risks	 Mitigation
Research Subjects				
Research Team				
Lead Researcher(s)				
Practitioner Partner				
Government Actors				
Other? (Informal Authorities, Community Leaders, Media, Civil Society, Donors, Enterprises)				

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Team members:

Date:

 **Costs**

Include any material or intangible items that must be given up in order to achieve the study goals. This might include payments such as time, personnel, or spent political or social capital. Costs can't be directly mitigated.

Should cover any expected or potential positive outcomes for the different audiences, including material or intangible gains like compensation for time, new knowledge, hard resources, capacity building, or reputation-building.

Benefits 

Actor

 **Risks**

References plans to alleviate any potential risks identified for specific actors.

Include a comprehensive list of expected and unexpected events that may happen in the field and that could negatively impact any actors involved. The risks should also be annotated with analysis of levels of likelihood and severity (low to high).

Mitigation 

Workplan Template

Title Updated

Summary

[Practitioner] is partnering with an academic partner on a project focusing on [what the project is about]

The primary goals of the project are: [list 3-5 high-level goals of the project]:

1. [To implement ...]
2. [To test ...]
3. [To collect data on ...]
4.
5.

Main activities

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Document

This work plan outlines the roles and responsibilities of organizations involved. In many activities the two partners are expected to collaborate significantly, although each main role has one of the organizations as the lead. This document should be considered a working document and will be updated during the course of the collaboration.

Workplan Template

Roles & Responsibilities

Practitioner has the lead responsibility to:

Academic has the lead responsibility to:

Joint responsibilities:

Timelines & Deliverables

Detailed timeline with activities and dates as well as corresponding outputs and deliverables. Make sure to include revisions stages for drafts and final outputs.

Describe any review or sign off processes required for external communications (this includes everything from academic publishing to blogs, social media, and presentations)

Date	Activities	Deliverables
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Payment schedule & Reporting

If the partnership involves payment come up with a draft payment schedule. Note what level of reporting is required for finances and project outcomes. List funders if applicable

Date	Payments	Funders list
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Contacts

Name	Contact	Name	Contact
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Note here names and contact information for key team members as well as specific roles and responsibilities for research, management, communications, and finances.

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