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Editor's Column

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Editor's Column

Volume 47, Issue 1

Getting relevant, rigorous, and timely research into the hands of practitioners has been the core mission of the *Journal of Student Financial Aid* (JSFA) since its creation by financial aid practitioners in 1971. This is no easy task, for a host of reasons. Financial aid administrators—like most administrators in higher education—are asked to do more and more even as institutions struggle with declining resources. Time for professional activities viewed as “non-essential” may be scarce. In graduate school, researchers are not generally trained in how to translate highly specialized methods and nuanced findings clearly and concisely for lay audiences. Further, financial aid itself can be highly technical, nuanced, and fast-moving, so researchers may not have the familiarity with the field of practice necessary to design and translate studies to be maximally useful for aid administrators.

Among both researchers and practitioners, I have heard much debate and some lamenting about the research-to-practice divide. Researchers in an applied field like higher education studies want their work to be, well ... applied. Practitioners want to know what works. Although there are no quick solutions to bridging this gulf, over the past six years JSFA has taken a number of steps to do so. First, we have moved all our content online, dating back to the first issue, published in 1971. This should make it easy for both researchers and practitioners to access. Second, we work with authors throughout the review process to make their work accessible and relevant. An example of this is the “Nexus: Connecting Research to Practice” section of each article, wherein authors explain why their findings matter to practice.

Next, we have begun the practice of publishing special issues devoted to pressing current topics relevant to those practicing in the field. In 2015, we published a special issue related to the 50th anniversary of the Higher Education Act. In 2017, we will publish a special issue on research-to-practice partnerships.

Finally, in 2014 NASFAA partnered with the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) to initiate and sustain dialogue about how to translate research to practice. An important part of this partnership is surveying financial aid practitioners about their use of and need for research. Below, Charlotte Etier, Senior Grants Manager and Research Analyst at NASFAA provides some highlights from the most recent survey. A number of points stand out for me as the editor of the *Journal*:

- The majority of respondents did not read the JSFA or any research journal.
- The relationship between financial aid and academic success—among the most studied topics in higher education—remains a top research interest for financial aid practitioners.
- Most practitioners could not recall the name of a recent study related to financial aid that they had read. Those who could recall a study mentioned descriptive reports, such as *Trends in Aid*. Continuing NASFAA’s collaboration with ASHE, we conducted a survey asking financial aid practitioners about the use of research in their daily work as well as topics scholars could study to benefit financial aid administration.

This survey followed-up our 2014 survey, which served as the basis for NASFAA’s 2016 [Research Meets Practice](https://www.nasfaa.org/research_meets_practice) (https://www.nasfaa.org/research_meets_practice) report.

The results from our 2014 and 2017 surveys are compared below. It should be noted that our 2014 survey received 900 responses, while our 2017 survey received only 146 responses. This lower response rate could be attributed to many factors, including association survey fatigue and distribution timing.

Reading financial aid work. In both 2014 and 2017, the majority of practitioners indicated they read about financial aid in a news outlet at least daily, if not more often. Respondents most often cited NASFAA's *Today's News* as their regular source of information about financial aid in both 2014 (60%) and 2017 (77%). They cited IFAP and IFAP Bulletins second across both surveys. In both 2014 and 2017, the majority of survey respondents (86%) indicated they read NASFAA's *Today's News* at least 5-7 times per month, but NASFAA's *Journal of Student Financial Aid* (JSFA) "not at all" (59% in 2014 and 63% in 2017). Survey respondents' readership levels of JSFA were similar to their readership of other research journals, with 56% (2014) and 58% (2017) indicating they did not read any other research journals.

When asked if they could readily recall the name of a report or study on financial aid, 77% (2014) and 81% (2017) said they could not. We asked those who could recall a name to share the name of that report or study. In 2014, survey respondents named The College Board's *Trends* reports (18%) and U.S. Department of Education Reports such as cohort default rate reports (12%). In 2017, one-fourth named The College Board's *Trends* report, 17% named a NASFAA report, and the remaining 57% named a report from another association, think tank, or government office.

Journal of Student Financial Aid. In both 2014 and 2017, the majority of survey respondents (56% and 61% respectively) had heard of JSFA. The chart below illustrates respondents' rankings of articles in JSFA from the 2017 survey. Data are not compared to 2014 due to differences in the ranking scales.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
The articles are relevant to my professional practice.	37%	52%	10%	1%	0%	87
The articles are timely with respect to important issues in the field.	30%	49%	21%	0%	0%	87
The articles are easy to understand and read.	37%	51%	10%	2%	0%	87
The articles have clear implications for practice.	26%	45%	22%	7%	0%	87

Research on financial aid. The survey also asked respondents about financial aid research in general. The chart below indicates respondents' rankings on financial aid research in general from the 2017 survey. Again, data are not compared to 2014 due to differences in the ranking scales.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
It is relevant to my professional practice.	41%	45%	12%	1%	1%	145
It is timely with respect to important issues in the field.	30%	47%	18%	4%	1%	145
Financial aid researchers understand the practice of financial aid.	17%	48%	24%	10%	1%	145
Financial aid research informs financial aid policy.	24%	46%	17%	12%	1%	145

Topics for future research. The 2017 survey included an open-ended comment box asking financial aid practitioners to identify topics about which they would like research conducted to aid their practice.

Seventy-five survey respondents provided this feedback. Top topics included:

- Retention and graduation strategies that include the use of financial aid
- Gainful employment, with a focus on its effectiveness and the cost to comply with its regulations
- Financial literacy, with a focus on the U.S. Department of Education's online entrance and exit counseling tools, as well as a focus on effective methods for educating students various topics
- Best practices, in areas such as professional judgment, for schools to measure outcomes, default aversion, for satisfactory academic progress (SAP) administration, to ensure on-time graduation
- Communicating with students, including ideas for consumer testing, determining the most effective methods for communication, determining the appropriate timing for communicating
- Compliance issues

These topics differed from our 2014 survey, which included topics such as:

- Cohort default rate and default management
- Subsidized Usage Limit Applies (SULA)
- Awarding/packaging
- Audits
- Graduation/retention/completion
- Financial literacy, debt reduction/management of return of Title IV funds

NASFAA and the editorial board of JSFA will continue to seek ways to increase financial aid practitioner use of academic research. The value of connecting research to practice in student aid cannot be overstated; it is an opportunity for financial aid professionals to make decisions based on data-based evidence. This issue of JSFA presents three examples of research with clear implications for practitioners. First, Robert Kelchen examines the potential impact of using a negative EFC on Federal Pell Grant awards as well as non-federal aid. Then, Sonya Britt, David Allen Ammerman, Sarah F. Barrett, and Scott Jones explore how students' financial stress relates to student retention and graduation. And finally, Mark Fincher discusses how approaches to student transfer and parental contribution affect student indebtedness.

Jacob Gross
Editor