

NEWS

Five tips for translating research findings into smart public policy

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Policy decisions matter, says **Lindsay Shea**. “The unique thing about policy is that one thing changes and it impacts hundreds of thousands of people.” Yet too often, she adds, policy decisions happen without robust input from the research community.

Part of the problem is that scientists aren’t trained to communicate with policymakers. “We don’t write our research or put forward the sort of products that engage the general population that is the constituency of policymakers,” says Shea, director of the **Policy and Analytics Center** at the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. “People cannot advocate and use research to inform perspectives unless they can understand it.”

The worlds of researchers and policymakers also run on different timelines. “Research is slow,” says **Doug Leslie**, director of the **Center for Applied Studies in Health Economics** at Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey, Pennsylvania. “It takes us two or three years to get results out, and policymakers are looking to do something in the next few months.”

In an early attempt to engage policymakers, Leslie proposed a steering committee of state officials to discuss his findings that state policies on Medicaid waiver policies vary. Three or four officials joined for a kickoff meeting. “We presented the study, and they all sounded very excited about it,” he says. But six or eight months later, when it was time to schedule another meeting to discuss possible next steps, some of them had already moved on to other positions.

Even more often, researchers and policymakers make no attempt at coordination. “There’s a lot of different research going on, but everybody’s an island,” Leslie says. “I have topics that I’m interested in, and I write grants and try to get funding to run these studies, but there could be more coordinated networking between investigators like me and the policymakers who need the information that we’re generating.”

Despite the challenges, there are ways to bridge the gap. Here are five field-tested recommendations from Shea, Leslie and others who work to translate research findings into smart policy.

1. Give ’em what they want:

Provide information that’s useful. The RAND Corporation created an Opioid Policy Tools and Information Center for Research Excellence and “worked closely with the National Governors Association and the National Conference of State Legislatures to provide information that is digestible,” says the center’s director, **Bradley Stein**. “One of their comments was that no one reads academic papers. So we created something called key takeaways on our opioid policy center website.”

Mary E. Vaiana, senior communications analyst at RAND, polled policymakers as part of that effort about what they want from researchers: “What they keep saying to us is, ‘Don’t tell us how you got there. We don’t want to know the path. Just tell us what works.’ It’s a matter of giving decision-makers a way to calibrate the science against the real-world context in which they work.”

2. Network, network, network:

Reach out and stay in touch over time. “It’s about having multiple people who you’re connected to, and then you stay in touch,” Shea says. “This is not just about reaching out when you need funding or it’s the right time for you; that’s not an authentic relationship.”

Also, forge new connections. Policymakers are often open to invitations, particularly from groups, Shea says. The invitation could be a letter or an email to attend a support group or event or to work with policymakers and staff to create a new event. And be ready to connect with people you may not agree with, she adds, because “that is how we take our science and make it real.”

The government affairs office at your academic institution can facilitate new connections. Other opportunities for cross-fertilization arise at conferences, Stein says. For instance, “AcademyHealth is a general health services and policy conference, but floating around in the audience are lots of people from federal organizations.”

3. Tailor your approach:

Focus on elucidating trade-offs and how to balance them against optimal outcomes. Resources are finite, and it's important for policymakers to avoid creating ineffective measures. A helpful way to think about evaluating policy is by rating it against four questions, Vaiana says: Is it effective, feasible, affordable and equitable?

It's OK to present empirical evidence on the effects of a policy, but don't tell policymakers what you think they should do based on your opinions. "I have very strong political beliefs, but when I am communicating with people as a researcher, you shouldn't be able to tell what my beliefs are," Stein says. "I hope when I go to policymakers and I talk to people all across the political divide that they can trust my science."

Also, be specific and informed: Cite specific regulations and language choices. "If the language is changed to describe the specific regulation," Stein says, "the legislation, it's worth its weight in gold."

4. Find your people:

Remember that policymakers are part of a broad web. You can find them in local communities and cities and at the state and federal levels.

For researchers and advocates who are interested in policy and just starting out, a good option is to work on a state legislative race in which the candidate needs expertise, Stein says. "I think there's a lot that can be learned ... for researchers to become involved with some of those campaigns, and some of those people end up going into policymaking positions or staff positions."

As part of that, accept invitations from policymakers at all levels. Leslie recently accepted an invitation to testify to a subgroup of Pennsylvania state legislators about the opioid crisis. "It's so rewarding to me as a researcher to be able to communicate with policymakers so that policy is better informed," he says.

5. Take a multipronged approach:

In addition to finding relevant government agencies and representatives to work with, tap into the communities connected to your research. For example, the **Policy Impact Project** at Drexel creates engagement opportunities such as webinars and open 'town hall' hours and uses social media to collaborate with people whom policy decisions affect.

"We often are approached from our web of community stakeholders who are informing us of urgent needs," Shea says. "Housing is one. And so we've been able to partner with Housing and Urban Development to gain access to their data and to pose the questions that the community has brought to us."

The upshot is “an interplay between the community and the data,” she says. “We are the conduits, but we could not do this research in a meaningful way without inputs from both.”

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