Bridging the Research–Policy Divide: Pathways to Engagement and Skill Development

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Researchers generally engage in few interactions with policymakers, which limits the extent to which empirical evidence is used to guide public policy and, consequently, the potential effectiveness of public policies in improving societal well-being. Although many researchers wish to see their work used for social impact, several factors contribute to researchers’ limited policy engagement, including a lack of opportunities for developing policy competencies (i.e., knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy that support effective policy engagement) and limited support or incentives from research, training, and philanthropic institutions. Moreover, despite work that shows that researchers are more likely to engage in policy when they report greater policy competencies, little descriptive or evaluative research has explored the effectiveness of policy training.

The current work seeks to expand the limited empirical base by drawing connections between training approaches and conditions that support policymakers’ use of research evidence. Policy training approaches that combine direct instruction (i.e., information-based, often didactic teaching via classes) and experiential learning (i.e., skills and knowledge obtained through active engagement, hands-on application) appear most promising. Various pathways for policy training are described, and one specific policy training and engagement strategy is further described alongside evaluation data regarding benefits associated with direct instruction and experiential learning approaches. We conclude with recommendations to strengthen researchers’ policy competency development and engagement. These recommendations range from increasing access to training opportunities to adjusting institutional incentive systems that currently hinder researchers’ policy engagement.

Supporting Policymakers’ Use of Research Evidence

Recognition of the limited use of empirical evidence in policy has paved the way toward a bipartisan “evidence-based policy” movement. However, researchers rarely engage in policymaking processes despite having critical insights valuable to policymakers, many of which are obtained through government-funded research and programs. This lack of contact and interaction between researchers and policymakers (and their staff) is a salient barrier to research utilization because policymakers tend to rely on trusted advisors for information because of time constraints and information overload. The perceived credibility of advisors guides policymakers’ inquiry about, acquisition of, and use of information. Moreover, making sense of research is an iterative process that involves discussion, shared understanding, and focused reflection on how knowledge is relevant for specific situations. Researchers need to establish and maintain consultative relationships with policymakers; however, interpersonal and normative differences present challenges in forming enduring working relationships.

Policymakers and researchers compose relatively disparate communities, each of which is characterized by unique norms, values, reward systems, and languages. For instance, decision-making processes differ substantially between these groups. Policymakers tend to engage in prompt policy actions in response to opportunities or crises. They obtain information from advisors and incorporate values, emotions, and indications of public support into decision-making. In contrast, researchers rely primarily on empirical evidence and engage in relatively slower, more systematic decision-making. Such differences in professional cultures can contribute to difficulties...
Policy training approaches that combine direct instruction and experiential learning appear to common pitfalls in communicating with policymakers. For example, policymakers generally desire definitive answers, but researchers often convey nuances and (very real) complexities by describing specific studies, caveats in a study’s findings, and the need for more research. In this way, researchers’ communication styles have the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes of research as irrelevant and self-serving (i.e., justifying a need for more research and related funding). Training can help researchers cultivate their ability to describe existing bodies of research, the implications of such research, and corresponding policy recommendations (e.g., legal language that can be inserted into a bill). By improving interpersonal dynamics, including effective communication, researchers can strengthen their connections with policymakers.

Another factor contributing to policymakers’ use of research is the relevance of translated research to current policy opportunities. Consultative relationships focused on research evidence are more influential when the research findings align with current policy priorities. Thus, researchers must leverage narrow windows of opportunity for policy change, which rapidly evolve based on socio-political factors, including public opinion, media coverage, and national crises. By seizing current policy opportunities, researchers can facilitate policymakers’ use of research and reinforce their relevance to policymaking in a way that engenders trust and ongoing consultation. Thus, there is a need for ongoing identification of current policy opportunities and strategically engaging scientists to translate relevant research in “real” time.

Collaboration based on mutual respect and shared goals related to current policy priorities is particularly promising for supporting policymakers’ use of evidence. Processes in which both parties’ expertise is valued may foster trust, respect, and latitude to share diverse ideas. Such conditions allow collaborators to learn from one another and consider a broader array of policy options, which can potentially lead to innovative solutions. In addition to strengthening interpersonal connections, ongoing interactions around shared goals enable policymakers to be responsive to dynamic policy opportunities. However, some researchers may benefit from supports that prepare them for policy engagement and match them appropriately with policy opportunities in their area of expertise.

In sum, connecting researchers to current policy opportunities and priorities in ways that support relationship development aligns with known facilitators of policymakers’ use of research evidence. However, such connections must be made tactfully, and enhancing researchers’ policy competencies can strengthen the success of their policy outreach.

**Policy Training Pathways**

Researchers who have successfully exerted influence across a wide range of policy content areas indicate that policy competencies can be developed via a variety of training opportunities in diverse settings that afford direct instruction and/or experiential learning. Such diverse policy training and engagement pathways may include some combination of (a) graduate coursework focused on understanding the policy arena and/or how researchers exert policy influence; (b) apprenticeship opportunities with faculty mentors engaged in policy work (e.g., Shaw et al., this issue); (c) policy training programs in university-based policy centers; (d) in-person or web-based training modules; (e) ongoing, collaborative involvement with advocacy organizations and professional associations that engage in advocacy work; or (f) intensive fellowships or practicum.

These experiences may build on one another. For instance, direct instruction through workshops or coursework can provide a strong foundation, and specifically, a graduate course may allow for the development of nascent skills within the “safety” of an internal training program. Then more intensive, external practicum can allow for skill application and refinement. Initial training experiences may also beget further opportunities for training and policy engagement, such as facilitating connections with potential mentors or for an appren-
tieship. Furthermore, a collection of policy training experiences may shape one’s professional identity over time in ways that strengthen their focus around policy-oriented research.

Training opportunities range in intensity, with more intensive trainings involving experiential learning in enduring positions embedded within a researcher’s primary setting (i.e., part of a researcher’s daily, ongoing work). As such, certain opportunities may be more or less accessible, depending on one’s time commitments and career stage. For example, policy-oriented coursework may be more accessible for graduate students, while tenured faculty may have more flexibility for voluntary time commitments that policy work often requires. Therefore, a continuum of training opportunities that ranges in intensity allows the needs of individual researchers to be met. Table 1 provides additional information about various training opportunities and specific examples of each.

In addition to pragmatic considerations for enlisting in certain training opportunities, researchers should consider the particular skills and knowledge they wish to develop when seeking training opportunities, and bear in mind that relevant opportunities may exist outside of their field or professional organization. Through interviews with 79 psychologists who successfully influenced social policy, psychology professor Kenneth Maton found that paths toward policy competency development vary substantially depending on researchers’ needs, preferences, and career trajectories. Researchers interested in developing a nonpartisan reputation with legislators need to consider external training options carefully, as becoming involved with an organization seen as less credible, more partisan, or combative may work against this goal. Finally, engaging in policy training may necessitate grappling with one’s professional identity and values; therefore, engaging multiple mentors throughout policy competency development may be beneficial. Although policy engagement can facilitate professional growth, it also requires forethought, preparation, and persistence.

In sum, a combination of training opportunities—both instructional and experiential—may be most effective for developing policy competencies. Despite this, few training and engagement opportunities integrate a combination of direct and experiential learning. Even fewer opportunities facilitate experiential learning by brokering collaborative relationships between policymakers and researchers. Although research institutions are well positioned to facilitate such collaborations, many do not support researchers’ policy engagement. Therefore, there is a need for external organizations to offer moderately intensive policy training and engagement opportunities.

### Table 1. Continuum of Policy Training Opportunities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training opportunity</th>
<th>Career point</th>
<th>Primary setting</th>
<th>Training approach</th>
<th>Embedded in “home” institution</th>
<th>Time commitment</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate courses</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Typically instructional; occasionally experiential</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Semester</td>
<td>Applied Psychology and Public Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate mentor apprentice opportunities</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Experiential</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>≥1 year</td>
<td>Research Consortium on Gender-Based Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy training programs in policy centers</td>
<td>Graduate, faculty</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Instructional and experiential</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>≥1 year</td>
<td>Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training modules</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>On-site; online</td>
<td>Typically instructional</td>
<td>Not typically</td>
<td>Ranges from 1 hr to multiday series</td>
<td>APA Division Trainings (e.g., SCRA, SPSSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative involvement with advocacy organizations</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>On-site (organization or government)</td>
<td>Experiential</td>
<td>Not typically</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Aldo Leopold Leadership ProgramRPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy fellowships</td>
<td>Postdoctorate</td>
<td>On-site (organization or government)</td>
<td>Experiential</td>
<td>No, but is embedded in external institution</td>
<td>≥1 year</td>
<td>AAASAPA RWJF SRCD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* AAAS = American Association for the Advancement of Science; APA = American Psychological Association; SCRA = Society for Community Research and Action; SPSSI = Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues; RESULTS = REAL Change Organizing and Advocacy Fellowship with RESULTS; RPC = Research-to-Policy Collaboration; RWJF = Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; SRCD = Society for Research in Child Development.
The RPC is intended to be implemented by research institutions or professional associations with the support of an RPC coordinator

there were several policy opportunities in that area that matched the research expertise of participating researchers. The RPC coordinator met with staff of legislators who were sponsoring relevant legislation (e.g., Youth Promise Act) or were members of relevant committees (e.g., judiciary) or caucuses (e.g., crime prevention and youth development) to ask about congressional efforts and ways that researchers could support those efforts. The RPC coordinator received requests for research evidence to answer questions such as, “What aspects of drug courts are effective?”

The second step of the RPC, research network development, involves recruiting researchers with expertise related to the identified Policy Priorities (e.g., effective aspects of drug courts) to a network that can respond rapidly to policymakers’ requests for research. Once researchers join the network, a discussion forum supports experiential learning via rapid responses that solicit input on current policy efforts and legislative staff’s requests for research evidence. At this stage, researchers indirectly support policymakers by providing the RPC Coordinator with relevant reports and articles, recommendations for subject-matter experts, and brief research summaries. The RPC coordinator mediates responses to legislative requests by culling resources and responding directly to legislative staff. Additionally, the RPC coordinator coaches researchers by modeling positive interactions with legislative staff, monitoring follow-up activities, and offering constructive feedback. For example, in the pilot, the RPC coordinator identified instances when researchers could simplify their description of research evidence, demonstrate credibility via reliable, unbiased research citations, and avoid narrow recommendations (e.g., policymakers should expand Medicaid). Such capacity building exercises reflect convergence with the next step, training and coaching.

**Figure 1.** The research-to-policy collaboration model process. The labels of the model steps were abbreviated for illustration. Research-to-policy collaboration model steps are not as linear as this model suggests; iterative feedback loops guide implementation at both capacity building and collaboration phases. This figure was adapted from Crowley, Scott, & Fishbein (2018).
with legislative staff to revisit previously discussed priorities, identify short-term needs, and determine how researchers can provide support. Legislative staff participating in the pilot largely reported needs consistent with prior conversations; however, the requests became more specific regarding short-term legislative activities. This included reviewing impending legislation on prison and sentencing reform and organizing a congressional briefing related to the Comprehensive Addiction Recovery Act. Some other legislative staff had less specific needs, but sought to consult with research experts on issues that were broadly relevant to their work, such as how neurological development in adolescence affects decision-making and risk-taking. The latter needs are consistent with conceptual use of research evidence, which affects how problems are understood, potentially influencing a broad array of decisions. In contrast, instrumental uses directly inform specific decisions and may be relatively circumscribed to a narrower range of policy efforts. In sum, the needs assessment elicited a range of requests to which researchers could respond during face-to-face consultative or collaborative meetings.

The second phase initiates collaboration in the fifth step, the rapid response event, which brings researchers and legislative staff together to discuss the legislators’ needs for research evidence and develop a plan for working together. Rapid response event meetings are facilitated by the RPC coordinator or another staff member of the implementing organization. Researchers and the legislative staff discuss the legislators’ needs for research, and a note taker documents action steps. In the pilot, researchers stated that the training prepared them to adapt to unexpected scenarios and anticipate diverse political ideologies. For example, researchers who had prepared to discuss approaches for improving the “accountability” of judicial block grants pivoted quickly when the staff asked about youth involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice (i.e., “crossover”). This research team’s flexibility and breadth of content expertise enabled knowledgeable and nimble responses to these questions, and this discussion led to a subsequent request for a review of aperture meetings.

Responses to legislative requests can vary from synthesizing research to writing policy briefs to reviewing legislative language.

In the final step, ongoing collaboration, researchers continue to receive coaching and support from the RPC coordinator, but they also operate with increasing independence as they grow their policy competencies. For instance, during the pilot, two researchers who worked with legislative staff to plan a briefing about opioid prevention began to correspond directly with staff (via e-mail and phone meetings) and solicited the research network for input on the briefing agenda, talking points, and speakers. The briefing was organized quickly, was held shortly after the Comprehensive Addiction Recovery Act passed both chambers and was in conference (i.e., negotiating uniform legislative language across chambers) and was well attended by many legislative staff as a result of its timeliness and relevance.

Exploring the Added Value of Experiential Learning Compared to Training-Only

Although both instructional and experiential approaches are used in the full RPC implementation, the instructional component of the RPC (i.e., webinars) can also be provided as a standalone workshop. We sought to explore the added value of researchers’ experiential learning by comparing reported policy competency improvements among researchers who participated in a stand-alone workshop to those who participated in a pilot of the full RPC. A description of measures, methods, and the complete results are provided in the online supplemental materials.

All study participants reported improvements in understanding the policy process. In contrast, only the RPC participants reported gains in policy-related self-efficacy and fewer needs for training. Subsequently, individual items were analyzed to provide detail on which types of policy competencies reportedly shifted for each group. Item-level analyses suggested that experiential learning within the RPC may be particularly useful for supporting interpersonal skills, such as navigating cultural differences, avoiding or mitigating conflict, and dealing with “unexpected issues” in interactions with policymakers’ staff.

Workshop participants reported a few improvements in understanding policy processes that RPC participants did not, such as understanding “objective and nonpartisan” communication approaches and “the definition of and restrictions on lobbying.” The minimal reported improvements in certain types of knowledge among RPC participants may be a reflection of low attendance during some of the webinars, and suggests that certain types of knowledge may be best supported with direct instruction. Nonetheless, findings are consistent with the notion that instruction and experience both support policy competencies, albeit in different ways.

These exploratory findings align with the notion that the best practice for policy compe-
tency development likely involves blending instructional and experiential learning over a sustained duration and engaging multiple learning modalities. Instructional training can be beneficial for cultivating an initial skillset, and subsequent experiential learning through policy engagement allows for applying and refining policy skills. Together, they can support development of skills essential for establishing and maintaining partnerships with policymakers and their staff.

**Improving Researchers’ Policy Engagement Requires Systemic, Institutional Change**

 Whereas innovative training models such as the RPC can enhance researcher–policymaker collaboration, the most substantial impediments to researchers’ policy engagement and experiential learning are systemic and institutional in nature. These barriers pose challenges for researchers at all career stages, including incentive systems that limit the amount of time committed to translating research outside the academic community, few norms that guide policy-relevant research activities, and the lack of policy training in most graduate research programs. Strategic and complex systemic changes may be needed to support researchers’ policy competency development. Specifically, we recommend the following: (a) Research institutions should recognize and reinforce scholars’ public impact, (b) policy-relevant research should be prioritized, and (c) training institutions should offer graduate research students more opportunities for policy coursework and practicum.

**Research Institutions Should Recognize and Reinforce Scholars’ Public Impact**

Applied, experiential learning in policy contexts is time intensive, and time commitment presents a substantial barrier to researchers’ policy engagement because time spent in external activities limits traditional scholarly work. For instance, full-time researchers who become engaged in policy work and develop policy competencies often do so apart from their “day job” of teaching and research. In fact, studies show that the tenure process particularly limits policy engagement among early career scientists. Additionally, policy engagement may be explicitly discouraged because the research community is generally reinforced for within-group activities (e.g., peer-reviewed publications) more than externally reaching research applications. For instance, public outreach activities that make research more accessible and relevant to the public and lawmakers are rarely rewarded through tenure and promotion criteria. Promotional criteria should recognize policy contributions and public outreach. Additionally, award systems may encourage normative shifts, as recognition from colleagues can be a salient motivator in academic settings. Furthermore, such awards could also be referenced for promotion decisions.

**Policy-Relevant Research Should Be Prioritized**

In addition to reinforcing research translation and public outreach activities, a shift in the way research is conducted could strengthen connections between researchers and policymakers. Policy engagement should involve bidirectional information exchange. Interactions with policymakers may shift researchers’ perspective to generate knowledge directly relevant to the current policy context. The authors’ experiences also suggest that when policy engagement is supported by research institutions, policy-relevant research is more likely. Conducting policy-relevant research may have multiple benefits, including increased utilization by policymakers, integration of knowledge production and translation roles, and graduate mentorship that strengthens policy competency development (e.g., Shaw et al., this issue). However, research institutions must be aware that successful researcher–policymaker partnerships require significant time and resources; therefore, the recognized value of this type of research must be weighted accordingly.

**Training Institutions Should Offer Graduate Research Students More Opportunities for Policy Coursework and Practicum**

Graduate programs represent an opportune time and context for students to develop policy competences, as students participate in multiple formative opportunities in a developmental fashion. Additionally, time constraints remain salient for students, as graduate students who seek policy training in their research programs must often do so by constraining the time and energy they give to other training pursuits (e.g., clinical practicum, research). However, few graduate programs integrate policy training or practicum, likely due to current educational priorities. Research-oriented graduate programs may draw upon lessons learned from practice-oriented graduate programs (e.g., Master’s of Social Work), which have made significant strides in policy competency training and underscore the importance of both instructional and experiential learning.

**Filling the Void Until Systems Change Is Realized**

Systemic change will necessarily take time to come to fruition. In the interim, additional resources are necessary to supplement the current, limited level of institutional support. There is a tendency for funding mechanisms to prioritize the generation of knowledge rather than its application and use, which is problematic for experiential learning and enduring policy engagement. Although funding decisions are entrenched in systems themselves, the expansion or addition of programs through increased funding is arguably less systemic than changing rules and norms regarding how research is produced and junior researchers are cultivated. Therefore, we discuss separately areas in which resources could augment the current system, including external policy training opportunities, support for researchers’ policy engagement, and services that broker a match between policy opportunities and researchers’ expertise. We recommend the following: (a) expanding fellowship training programs, (b) offering funding for...
policy engagement, and (c) developing mechanisms to broker connections between researchers and policymakers around current policy priorities.

Expanding Fellowship Training Programs

Substantial demand for both paid and unpaid policy training and engagement opportunities is apparent among both researchers and policymakers, including workshops and fellowship programs. For instance, in 2017, the RPC fellowship program supervised 14 graduate students and early career researchers who volunteered over 1,400 hr of their time to obtain experiential policy training. Furthermore, the demand for paid fellowship programs appears to be vastly underresourced, as there are far fewer paid fellowship positions than the demand for those positions among both policymakers and researchers. More policymakers seek to host fellows than are able to be funded, a demand that may be exacerbated by diminishing legislative staff capacity as deep cuts have been made to U.S. federal congressional staff positions since 1985. The need for improving legislators’ access to high quality, nonpartisan expertise presents an opportunity for researchers. Moreover, given that experiential learning appears to hold particular merit, paid fellowship programs should be expanded substantially because they hold promise for building policy competencies while overcoming barriers by funding researchers’ time.

Offering Funding for Policy Engagement

Research and philanthropic institutions should fund researchers’ policy engagement to facilitate their experiential learning and strengthen the impact of research. Funding researchers’ policy engagement efforts would fortify research institutions’ and universities’ public service missions by advancing the use of scientific knowledge in policy and practice. Moreover, outreach serves the research community broadly by demonstrating the value of research funding, as the majority of research and evaluation is funded by policymakers. Funding researchers’ time should include direct costs (e.g., producing and disseminating written products; convening meetings) and indirect expenses (e.g., course release time). Additionally, travel funds are needed to consult with lawmakers, speak at hearings or briefings, and form and maintain critical relationships.

Developing Mechanisms to Broker Connections Between Researchers and Policymakers Around Current Policy Priorities

Organizations both within and outside of academic institutions, including intermediary organizations (e.g., professional associations and civic organizations), are uniquely positioned to broker researcher–policymaker relationships. These organizations should assess current policy priorities and facilitate a match between policy efforts and researchers who have direct subject-matter expertise and knowledge. For instance, the RPC has demonstrated the demand for brokerage mechanisms in prior work that evaluated feasibility and costs of implementation.

Suggestions for Further Reading


Moving the Field Forward With Additional Evaluation of Pedagogical Approaches

We sought to summarize current knowledge about approaches to researchers’ policy competency development and advance recommendations for strengthening researchers’ policy training and engagement, as supported by the authors’ experiences and preliminary data. The current work begins to document unique benefits of different policy training approaches and how varied experiences contribute to researchers’ policy competencies. Although the current work contributes to the field in meaningful ways, it is important to note that the data presented here are exploratory (e.g., they draw upon small convenience samples) and are insufficient for drawing strong conclusions. Much more research is needed to evaluate training approaches and enhance their effectiveness. Specifically, future research should strive to evaluate impact by longitudinally tracking researchers’ reported confidence and skills, participation in policy efforts, and interactions.
with policymakers. Future efforts should also evaluate the extent to which these competencies translate into policymakers’ increased utilization of research findings.

**Conclusion**

To strengthen the use of research evidence in public policy, researchers’ policy skills and engagement must be supported with both instruction and experiential training opportunities. Although experiential learning holds promise for reinforcing researcher–policymaker interactions that are critically needed, policy engagement is often limited by institutional barriers. Incremental systemic changes and institutional resources are needed to bridge the divide between science and policy in ways that improve public policy effectiveness and enhance impact on population health and well-being.

**Keywords:** government policy making; policy making; evidence-based policy; policy engagement; training and professional development; research institutions