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*Issues in Bridging the Divide
between Policymakers and
Researchers*

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Executive Summary

Although many legislators and researchers agree that both legislation and research would be improved if they collaborated more, there are few successful examples of such partnerships. Several challenges face the two groups in efforts to work more closely, especially differences between the “cultures” of policymaking and research. Researchers and policymakers respond to different incentives, operate under different timelines and constraints, often rely on different vocabularies in their work and may even have different personalities.

To gain a better understanding of the policymaker perspective, 20 state legislators (10 representatives and 10 senators, 10 Democrats and 10 Republicans) were interviewed using open-ended questions via telephone. The survey was intended to learn more about policymakers’ views on research, its utility in their work, their experience with researchers and their opinions about a proposed model (Family Policy Fellows) increasing communication. This proposed model would bring a small group of policymakers, researchers and practitioners together over the course of a year to study specific issues.

Survey Findings

- Most policymakers had some experience using research prior to coming to the Legislature, either through their employment or coursework while in school.
- Most policymakers report using research in their work as legislators, especially regarding early childhood, education, transportation and health care issues.
- Legislators were most likely to report obtaining research information from legislative staff (especially House or Senate nonpartisan research offices), lobbyists, advocates and interest groups.
- The most common reason legislators report using research is to inform their position on a bill. Other reasons are to develop legislation, to respond to constituent concerns and for their own personal knowledge.
- Half of the legislators reported having had personal contact with a researcher; most frequently mentioned sources of contact included the University-sponsored seminars offered occasionally during the legislative session at the Capitol (“Capitol Conversations”), the University’s Center for Transportation Studies and through the Legislature’s own early childhood and mental health caucuses.
- Less than half the legislators reported attending Capitol Conversations. Of those who attended, some found the sessions helpful while others expressed concern that there was no follow-up or policy implications provided from the research. Also noted was a lack of balanced opinions among those attending.
- Legislators generally believe that researchers and universities should be reaching out to them, although a few expressed suspicion or concern that they might be overwhelmed if there were multiple contacts offering too much information.
- Legislators judge research to be credible if it is unbiased, from a source that is known to provide objective analyses (e.g., the University), peer reviewed, replicable, based on facts and not paid for by a group with a political agenda. Policymakers were aware of the difficulty of entering into research without preconceived notions or being affected by the funding source, but several believed it was still generally unbiased.

- Most legislators did not know if the right issues were being researched because they are unaware of what research is being conducted at the University. Lack of funding was cited as one of the reasons why some needed research is not being done.
- Legislators had several suggestions for researchers and the University on ways to improve the utility of research for policymakers:
 - Format research findings in a way that is brief and accessible to non-academics.
 - Communicate regularly with policymakers regarding research being conducted at the University.
 - Share findings through multiple modalities, in addition to written reports.
 - Target specific research findings to relevant legislative committees.
 - Reach out and build relationships with legislators and legislative staff.
 - Make research findings and reports available online.
 - Provide a directory of researchers by topic.
 - Collaborate with third parties, such as advocates, in the dissemination of their research.
 - Collaborate with legislative research offices and the Legislative Reference Library.
 - Translate findings into policy recommendations or implications.
 - Meet with policymakers prior to session to discuss “hot” issues.
- Legislators were generally supportive of the Family Policy Fellows concept, especially the opportunity to learn about various sides of an issue alongside their colleagues. A major challenge to be overcome would be timing, both in terms of arranging meetings around legislators’ personal schedules and the Legislature’s calendar. Also of concern were access issues for legislators from outside the metropolitan area.

Conclusion

In general, the findings support efforts to increase information sharing across the University and the Capitol. Researchers interested in considering increasing the use of their work in policymaking might benefit from University-sponsored discussions of the role of research in policymaking, ways to make their research useful to policymakers and changes in University policies that would support ongoing relationships between policymakers and researchers. Recommendations for future research include a survey of academics’ attitudes regarding public engagement and further examination of the role of mediating groups such as advocates and lobbyists in disseminating research results. Recommendations for future action include coordinated contacts with legislators in the 2007 legislative session to begin to implement some of the recommendations from the survey.

Introduction

Although the extent to which policy is, or even should be, informed by research is not agreed upon, there is general agreement that little direct communication exists between University researchers and policymakers. Nevertheless, the notion that policymaking would benefit from more input from researchers, as well as the less commonly posited idea that research would benefit from more input from policymakers, persists. This study interviewed 20 Minnesota legislators to learn more about their experience with, and opinions of, academic research and University researchers, as well as their ideas on ways to increase communication and collaboration with researchers.

Prior studies show little use of academic research by policymakers

Prior efforts to learn about the use of research in policymaking incorporated a variety of methods and sources. Although the extent to which policymakers used research was not usually the main purpose of the studies, the findings support the observation that policymakers rarely turn to University-based researchers for information in their work (Gray & Lowery, 2000; Jackson-Elmoore, 2005; Hy, Verhaus & Sims, 1995; Mooney, 1991). Instead, prior studies indicate that policymakers are more likely to rely on close-in sources, such as other policymakers and legislative staff, as well as lobbyists, advocates, state agency staff or others who are often present at the Capitol.

All of the studies did, however, find some policymakers turning to research or researchers some of the time, especially in the early stages of legislation development (Mooney, 1991). Contacts were likely to be informal consultations (Hy et al., 1995), initiated by the researchers (Trostle, Bronfman & Langer, 1999), although if decision makers perceived the researchers to be imposing themselves in the decision-making process, their views risked being discounted (Trostle et al.). Research was more likely to be used when it targeted “specific issues and offer[ed] short-term, concrete and applicable results,” especially when they are cost-effective (Trostle et al., p. 107).

The most commonly cited reason in Hy et al. (1995) for the lack of reliance on University researchers was that academics are not perceived as being able to “produce products within stipulated time periods” (p. 471). Mooney (1991) concluded that legislators “appear to allocate the time and energy they spend in searching for information where it will benefit them the most. They have little reason to overload themselves with information on roll-call votes for which the determination is simple and the time is short (1991, p. 451).” In addition, “the manner in which research findings are presented for consumption by academic audiences is not always consistent with the preferences for information structuring of busy policymakers, which calls for information to be presented in a practical and useful manner (Jackson-Elmoore, 2005, p. 259).”

Some of the authors suggest even deeper reasons for the lack of interaction. Two other reasons in Hy et al. (1995) were that staff did not think legislators were “really interested in the views of college and university faculty and staff” and that researchers do not have enough applied experience to provide useful products (p. 471). Perhaps even more fundamental is that the “perceived utility of each group’s knowledge is also open to question...some decision makers do not think knowledge of research is necessary for policy and programme development, while some researchers think that decision makers will not recognize their work or will not be able to

put the recommendations derived from research into practice” (Trostle et al., 1999, p. 107). Trostle et al. refer to this as “mutual intellectual disdain” (p. 107).

Generally, however, the primary reason posited for reasons why policymakers and researchers so rarely connect with each other is “culture” (Tonmyr, DeMarco, Hovestad & Hubka, 2004; Shonkoff, 2000; Bogenschneider, Olson, Linney & Milles, 2000). Researchers and policymakers often employ different vocabularies, respond to different incentives, operate under different timelines and constraints, and may even have different personalities, researchers being “temperamentally tentative and natural skeptics” (Shonkoff, 2000, p. 181), and policymakers, presumably not.

Different approaches to the same issue

Certainly their approaches to the same issue are often different. Researchers interested in poverty, for example, are likely to focus on theories of its origins as they test hypotheses about its causes to add to the knowledge base, considering their work “never fully completed” (Shonkoff, 2000, p. 181). They attend to the way a study is constructed and data are collected as much as the results. Their findings often lead, not to calls for action, but to calls for more research. Furthermore, while their research may specify the “social, cultural, economic, and political causes and consequences of major institutions” (Wilensky, 1997, p. 1244), it may be too vague to assist policymakers searching for specific words to put into a bill. Researchers operate under long timelines, with some projects spanning years as they become experts on a narrow aspect of a topic. Tenure gives most senior researchers guaranteed lifetime employment. They strive for approval from their peers and communicate their ideas largely through (often lengthy) written documents published outside of the mainstream media.

Policymakers interested in poverty, on the other hand, are likely to be coming to the topic through legislation they are considering. Rather than focusing on research questions about causes, they are asking questions like: “Who is for and against [this] bill? How do proposals differ? What is the current state of a problem?” (Mooney, 1991, p. 445). “Through a process of negotiation and compromise among competing interests” (Shonkoff, 2000, p. 181), they must consider “the values and opinions of the governing party, its key supporters, interested and affected stakeholders, and the general public; with calculations of who wins, who loses, and by how much...with rules for making decisions and with past policies that may shape and constrain future policies...” (Lavis, Robertson, Woodside, McLeod & Abelson, 2003, p. 225).

Policymakers make yes or no decisions within short timelines on a breadth of topics, many of which are often new to them. As a result, what “is needed for decision-making is the organization of knowledge in such a fashion that it’s very ordering allows [legislators] to see options” (Trostle, et al., p. 104). In contrast to academics, their work is evaluated in a very public forum on a regular basis through which they may lose their jobs (elections). Theirs is an “oral culture,” where information is most often used to persuade or support an agenda (Mooney, 1991, p. 448). Public speaking, not writing, is the critical skill.

Although this cultural divide seems inevitable, the “disjuncture between policy and research is perhaps most extreme in the U.S.” (Wilensky, 1997, p. 1242). According to Wilensky, part of the reason lies in the structure of U.S. government, with its decentralized policymaking spread across states, counties and cities. In countries with a more centralized, ‘corporatist’ system of

government, such as Sweden, Norway and Japan, “a wide range of issues is connected, longer-range effects are more often considered and research findings are more often used for policy planning and implementation” (Wilensky, 1997, p. 1244). Researchers in the U.S., as compared to their European and Asian counterparts, usually operate at a distance from those making and implementing policies, with fewer opportunities for their research to be considered thoughtfully in the policymaking process.

Social science research in particular is less often used as a basis for policymaking. “With a couple notable exceptions, the history of the utilization of social science knowledge in the past 50 years yields few examples of research being used to inform policy making” (Bogenschneider, Olson, Linney & Milles, 2000, p. 327). This may also be particularly characteristic of the U.S. Wilensky (1997) notes that many Americans harbor a deep distrust of government solutions to social problems, which makes the country less likely to support the research-based solutions that often suggest government intervention.

Nevertheless, despite the obstacles presented by these personal, cultural, occupational and even societal issues, “both sides feel they ought to be able to help each other” (Hy et al., 1995, p. 469). There remains a strong belief that research can contribute to better policy making, and that research would be of greater value if it was better informed by current policy.

Several attempts have been made to engender closer working relationships between researchers and policymaker. Among the most well-known is the Family Impact Seminars based in the University of Wisconsin, which sponsors seminars for policymakers with experts representing a diversity of perspectives on issues chosen by legislators (see Bogenschneider, Olson, Linney & Mills, 2000). There are also internet-based efforts to provide policymakers (and/or practitioners) relevant research regarding promising or proven in practices (see the Promising Practices Network on Children, Families and Communities (Cannon & Kilburn, 2003). At least two universities engage faculty and students directly in the policy research process by having faculty work with legislators to identify key issues needing background research, and engaging students or faculty in writing briefs for legislators (Sundet & Kelly, 2002, <http://www.uvm.edu/~vlrs/>).

Survey Objectives and Methods

Most of the efforts to enhance the policy—research connection have not been vigorously evaluated, and little is known about the actual impact on policymaking or (with the exception of the Family Impact seminars) how policymakers “themselves talk about their (actual or potential) relationship” with researchers (Trostle et al., 1999, p. 103). With the latter goal in mind, this study was initiated to learn more about policymakers’ views on research, its use in their work, and ideas for potential collaboration. To collect the information, a telephone survey using mostly open-ended questions was conducted with state legislators in the summer of 2006.

A convenience sample of 20 Minnesota legislators was selected for participation in the telephone survey. Those interviewed included five members from each legislative caucus: Senate Democrats, Senate Republicans, House Democrats and House Republicans. The participating legislators represented a wide range of policymaking tenure, from less than one full term in office

to seven terms. The participants were recruited by a member of the research team who is currently a five-term member of the Minnesota House of Representatives. Thus, the participants were known to the recruiter. Demographically, nine of the legislators interviewed represented rural districts, and eleven were from the metropolitan area with a split of seven from suburban districts and four from urban districts. Nine were male and eleven were female. A summary of the findings and their implications are discussed below.

Policymakers' responses were given pattern codes for purposes of thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The themes were analyzed for prevalence and strength, with nuances noted. The Principal Investigator reviewed the raw data and the summaries to ensure the accuracy of the thematic analysis. The results are summarized below. Numerical counts of the responses (when appropriate) were tabulated and are presented in the text below or in Appendix A.

I. Survey Findings: Policymakers' Opinions on Research

1) Most policymakers had experience with academic research prior to serving in the Legislature, through their schooling and/or prior jobs. They conceptualize research in ways most University researchers would likely do so.

Those legislators who had prior experience with academic research acquired it through a wide range of professional or academic experience, including job-related research as an attorney, graduate work, survey research, and job-specific research. Slightly more than half took research-related courses in college.

The majority of policymakers reported that research is a form of problem solving that involves gathering information, studying an issue, and producing results.

2) Most policymakers report using academic research in their legislative work. They use the research for multiple purposes, most often to inform their positions on bills, but also to develop legislation and answer constituent concerns. They use research on a wide variety of issues. Mentioned most often were early childhood, education and transportation.

One legislator reported using research "to see what's feasible and what's not" (Male, Republican); another said "mostly to inform people and try to persuade on legislation, bills, and amendments" (Male, Democrat).

The following topics emerged when legislators indicated specific issues. The number in parentheses indicates how often the issue was mentioned, if more than once:

- Early childhood (4)
- Education (3)
- Transportation (3)
- Health care (2)
- Academic standards

- Child care
- Crime prevention
- Environment
- Jobs
- Mental health
- Negotiation and mediation
- Smoking and health
- Taxes
- Telecommunications
- Youth alcohol use

3) Policymakers report multiple sources of information for the research they use, but are most likely to rely on nonpartisan legislative research offices. They also use information from lobbyists and advocates. Many policymakers take into account the biases that may enter into information from sources other than nonpartisan research offices.

Below is a list of research information sources cited by legislators, with a number indicating how often it was cited, if more than once:

- House or Senate Research Department staff (nonpartisan) (9)
- Lobbyists (5)
- House or Senate Caucus research department staff (partisan) (4)
- UMN Departments or Researchers (4)
- Advocates (2)
- Interest Groups (2)
- Legislative Reference Library staff (2)
- State Agency Staff (2)
- All of the above (5)
- Coalitions that specialize on certain issues
- Industry representatives
- Internet
- Legislative auditor
- Legislative Commission of Minnesota Resources staff
- Legislative fiscal department staffs
- Newspapers
- People, often constituents, working in the field
- Think Tanks

Regarding lobbyists as sources of information, one said, “I am not impressed with some of the documents that come from lobbying groups and I weigh them that way” (Male, Republican).

4) Half of the policymakers interviewed reported some personal contact by University researchers, mostly on either early childhood or transportation issues. Six reported contacts through the University of Minnesota’s Capitol Conversations initiative, in which a panel of researchers presents their research to legislators in a morning briefing near the Capitol, two-three times during the session. Policymakers’ assessment of the effectiveness of Capitol Conversation

was mixed. Some thought the sessions were helpful, but an equal number did not. Concerns included the failure of the discussions to lead to action and a lack of diversity in viewpoints of those present.

Of those legislators who participated in Capitol Conversations, four legislators said they were helpful. One of those four said it was helpful because, “[Capitol Conversations] was a bridge between research and the legislature” (Female, Democrat).

However, one legislator had difficulty recalling what issues were discussed. Another said, “It’s helpful to have the conversation, but I never knew where it went. There was no follow up. I never saw direct evidence that the responses resulted in anything substantively different” (Female, Democrat).

In explaining why they did not participate, two legislators said the sessions took place too early in the morning and one stated that his busy schedule prevented him from attending. Another legislator spoke more directly about the structure of the event itself when he said, “I have listened to it taped, but generally have not found it to be my best use of time. It ends up attracting the people who already agree with the issues and doesn’t accomplish the goal of educating legislators. I’d rather look at the information myself rather than listen to a lot of “group think”” (Male, Democrat).

When offering suggestions on how Capitol Conversations could be more useful, recommendations included convening the event out of session with an entire committee, including policy implications and recommendations, and working with legislators more one-on-one.

5) Policymakers think researchers and the University should be reaching out to legislators to share their work, although a small minority of them expressed some suspicion of researchers who approach them first. Many policymakers expressed a belief that public policy would be improved if it were based more on facts that emerge from research. They cited several topics from the prior legislative session (2006) on which more findings from research would have been helpful, especially related to specific issues in early childhood, education, the environment, and health care.

All the legislators who responded to this question agreed that researchers should be reaching out to legislators to share their research. One legislator said, “I think politicians can govern to a degree by instinct but I think the truth is in the facts. To the extent that better more in-depth research can guide public policy, our state will be better off for it” (Male, Republican). Another reported that research is an “under-used and under-utilized tool for legislators” (Male, Democrat). A third legislator said, “I think that each committee would do a much better job if they weren’t just writing the bills based on what advocates want, but if they were writing their bills based on an informed set of facts about the best practices from all over. One source should be academic research” (Female, Democrat). One reported hesitancy because “there is always bias” (Female, Republican) and another reported suspicion when researchers contact legislators: “They should be reaching out as far as that they are available to us...I trust it more if I contact the entity and ask them for specific details” (Male, Republican).

Regarding the need for more research-based information during the policymaking process, one legislator said, “I guess more information is always helpful. We operate in such a political context. My feeling has always been if we can have academic research from entities that are not tainted with the partisanship, the more helpful it would be. In all areas, if academic research can be categorized as being not political, not tainted by politics, then on any subject area, it would have been helpful” (Female, Democrat).

The following is the list of issues mentioned by policymakers on which they would have liked more research-based information in the 2006 session:

- Early childhood (*long-term impact, universal preschool, socio-emotional testing*) (4)
- Clean Water Legacy (3)
- Education (*funding, advanced placement programs*) (2)
- Health care (*health outcomes, financing*) (2)
- Biosciences
- Crime (*punishment versus rehabilitation*)
- Gaming
- Immigration
- Mental Illness
- Small businesses
- Social Services
- Sports stadiums (*economic benefits*)
- Taxes (*tobacco tax, income sensitivity*)

6) One of the primary values of academic research to policymakers is its assumed lack of bias. Among the characteristics that make it credible to policymakers is its non-political source, and its basis in fact. Although slightly more than half the respondents expressed a belief that academic research is unbiased, others were more skeptical, especially regarding the potentially biasing impact of funding source and researchers’ personal biases. Policymakers expressed an understanding of the processes that researchers go through to ensure and validate that their work is credible, including being replicable and published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Several themes emerged when legislators were asked what makes research credible. The overarching theme is that research must be unbiased in order to be credible. One legislator remarked, “Not having it come from a political source—that is one of the problems” (Female, Republican). Two legislators raised the issue of the funding source and whether those producing the research “receive funding from a one-sided group” (Female, Democrat). A third theme was the role of the researcher or institution in making research credible, “when it’s done by our own University it makes it more credible” (Female, Democrat). A final theme was the importance of basing research on facts. As one legislator said, “We expect and have to count on research and reports from researchers to be based on fact” (Male, Democrat).

Of the fifteen legislators who addressed the question of whether academic research is biased or unbiased, six legislators responded that academic research is “generally unbiased,” but two legislators reported the belief that all research is biased. As one legislator said, “I think all

research is somewhat biased. Everyone starts with assumptions and works to prove them” (Female, Republican). One legislator remarked that academic research, specifically, is biased when she said, “Academic research is typically quite biased in a liberal manner. It’s a proven fact that 92% of college professors are extremely liberal” (Female, Republican). One legislator stated that “researchers are affected by bias” when gathering facts, and another legislator responded by saying, “I like to think that it’s unbiased, but more and more, academic research is being funded by people I don’t trust” (Male, Democrat).

Legislators used the following concepts when describing what makes research credible: its findings can be replicated, it is empirical and peer-reviewed, and standards and protocols are used to ensure accurate results.

7) Although legislators expressed a good deal of interest in the results of research and using it in their work, most were unable to comment on the applicability of research to their work because they are unaware of what work is being done at the University. They had several specific suggestions on ways to increase the likelihood that research would be used in policymaking by improving the way research is communicated to policymakers.

Most legislators were unsure or unable to answer the question of whether researchers are researching the right issues or asking the right questions because they are unsure what issues are being researched. As one legislator said, “I don’t know because I don’t get to be exposed to what they’re researching. I don’t think I could answer that” (Female, Democrat). Another legislator indicated that their uncertainty speaks to the problem itself: “that is a big chasm between researchers and policymakers—the failure to interact and know if the right things are being researched” (Male, Democrat). Another legislator said, “Maybe we need to be in better dialogue about what research questions we need answered” (Female, Democrat).

Others responded that they do believe that researchers generally research the right issues, or as one legislator said, “I would hate to limit academic research to asking the “right” questions. I think it’s important that they ask whatever questions are necessary” (Male, Democrat). One legislator reported her concern that research is too driven by funding; “Researchers are researching in areas where there is money” (Female, Democrat).

Legislators had several ideas on ways to enhance the use of research in the policymaking process:

Format research findings in a way that is brief and accessible to non-academics

Legislators emphasized their preference for concise one-page summaries that convey the highlights and then provide legislators with the option of the full report if they are inclined. They also stressed the importance of using language that is easily understood by non-academics. As one legislator said, “If it gets too technical when you’re reading it, you tend to tune it out. It may have good information within, but it’s not always presented in a brief enough form that it hits on the highlights” (Female, Republican).

Regularly communicate with legislators so they are aware of the research being conducted at the University

The suggestion that emerged most often is more frequent communication from the University informing legislators of their research. As one legislator said, the University should “somehow communicate what they have available or what their expertise is” (Female, Democrat). Several legislators suggested a regular e-mail correspondence that highlights research at the University by topic and provides links to further information. Three legislators recommended modeling these summaries after the Legislative Reference Library.

In addition to written reports, disseminate research findings through other modalities

Numerous legislators reported that researchers could more effectively communicate their research findings through one-on-one interaction, small groups, or workshops. Several legislators emphasized that personal interaction enables them to ask questions, hear about research directly “right from the source” (Male, Republican) and is more memorable to them than written reports. As one legislator said, “What you see on a paper is single dimensional. If you have a person there, you can get a multi-dimensional answer” (Male, Republican). Another legislator reported a preference for small group meetings, because “you benefit from the questions these discussions stimulate in others and not just what comes to your own mind” (Female, Republican).

Target research findings to particular committees

Several legislators suggested communicating research findings to the committees that have jurisdiction over the issue. These legislators recommended that researchers present their findings to a committee as a whole, make connections with individual committee members, or target committee chairs. As one legislator said, “I would think the way to make it relevant would be to tailor the particular information to the committees doing the work, targeting the leadership, chairs, and vice chair. That’s their jurisdiction and they would have a particular stake in it” (Female, Democrat).

Reach out to and build relationships with legislators

Legislators also recommended that researchers take initiative in building relationships with them and their staff, asking if they need specific information. One legislator said, “If they made an effort to reach out to us, that would be great” (Female, Republican). Another legislator emphasized relationship building with staff who often stay in their positions a long time and will remember researchers with particular areas of expertise if a relationship is in place. One legislator emphasized how important it is for researchers to reach out to policymakers by saying, “I think it is part of the mission of a researcher to make sure their information gets used by someone” (Male, Democrat).

Encourage legislators to communicate their interests to researchers.

In addition to encouraging researchers to reach out to legislators, policymakers also noted their own role in communicating their research interests to researchers. As one legislator said, “I think we have a responsibility if we need information of communicating that as well” (Female, Republican). Another said that legislators have to “ask—the University is receptive. It reaches out and wants to do things that are responsive. I think we have to raise the awareness to legislators as to the ability to shape academic research in a way that would be useful” (Male, Democrat).

Make research findings and reports available online

Several legislators communicated their preference for accessing research findings and reports online. One legislator said, “I like the one stop shop when you can pick your area. The more personal the better initially, but then I like going online to find it” (Male, Democrat). Another said, “Sometimes I think it is a waste for them to send us all these big books...If we could get it online that would be better” (Female, Republican).

Provide a directory of researchers as a resource for legislators

Several legislators recommended a directory that lists researchers by department or area of expertise. One legislator said, “Have a summary of who their researchers are and their area of expertise” (Female, Democrat). Another legislator compared it to the list they have for lobbyists.

Collaborate with third parties in the dissemination of research

Another suggestion several legislators raised is increased collaboration between researchers and third parties, such as advocacy groups, think tanks, and coalitions, who can “move public opinion” (Female, Democrat) and “get [researchers] information to policymakers” (Female, Democrat).

Increase collaboration with legislative research-related offices

Several legislators also recommended that the University collaborate more with established research entities like the Legislative Reference Library, the Office of the Legislative Auditor, or the research services in the House and Senate. One legislator said, “I would rather that the University was more closely aligned with research at the legislature” (Female, Democrat).

Translate research findings into policy recommendations or implications

Several legislators emphasized that research would be more helpful and useful if it included policy recommendations or implications. One legislator said, “Some research I have seen doesn’t have the policy implication added to it. It would be helpful to know how it will impact policy” (Female, Democrat). Another legislator went a step further and mentioned that it would be helpful if researchers could, “specifically cite where in law there could be an improvement” (Male, Republican).

Meet with policymakers prior to session to discuss “hot” issues

Legislators also mentioned that it would be helpful if research findings could be shared before session begins. One legislator even suggested that researchers and legislators convene several months before session “to discuss what some of the hot issues are or if there’s something they could work on and provide for us in a few months. I don’t know if they can pull it together...research by nature takes longer and we’re going a million miles an hour” (Female, Republican).

The following recommendations were mentioned once:

- Engage Master’s students in researching topics of interest to legislators
- Pay attention to the legislative schedule when planning events
- Educate legislators on the different types of research
- Have legislative committees send out e-mails notifying researchers and students on their listservs when there is activity on a particular issue

- Provide a hard copy of research findings
- Use the public good, rather than funding, to drive research
- Have an “idea fair”/symposium where researchers can present their research
- Establish a University of Minnesota office at the Legislature
- Inform legislators of the findings when they are research participants
- Have legislators reach consensus on the major issues confronting Minnesota so the University of Minnesota researchers could research those topics
- Have University “mentors” or “liaisons” on different issues who provide consultation to legislators

8) Legislators also discussed limits on the use of research in policymaking, especially when there is an overwhelming amount of information provided in a format that is not easily accessed by them, when the timelines of the legislative process conflict with the timelines of research and when political decisions have to take into account more than research findings.

Research is of limited value when policymakers receive too much information or it comes in an inaccessible format. As one legislator said, “If it’s too much information where you can’t get at it, you set it aside and never do anything with it” (Female, Republican). The inherent incompatibility of research timelines and the legislative schedule may also limit its usefulness: “Once you’re in the middle of session, it’s tough because everything is so fast. You don’t have much time to write your legislation. The limit is it all has to be timed right” (Female, Democrat). If it is biased or irrelevant to the issues being discussed, it is also of limited value.

Finally, the political nature of policymaking also limits the utility of research. “Limits on a practical level come down to politics and, at times, there are reasons for developing policy that go beyond facts and figures. You may just go with your gut on an issue, and that’s a barrier to having research affect the outcome” (Male, Democrat).

II. Survey Findings:

Policymakers’ Opinions About the Family Policy Fellows Project Concept

Legislators were asked for their feedback regarding a specific model to increase communication between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. In this model, the University would invite a few legislators (especially newer members or those most interested in the topic) to become University of Minnesota Family Policy Fellows. Over the course of a year, they would meet regularly, perhaps monthly (less during session) with experts (researchers and practitioners) to study a specific issue that is currently or likely to be debated by the Minnesota State Legislature. At the end of the study period, they would present their conclusions and recommendations to a wider group.

1) Policymakers were attracted to several features of the concept, including the opportunity to participate in an effort that would allow them to hear unbiased, or at least balanced views, of an issue, and to learn about relevant research findings on issues they are debating. Also noted was the status that might accrue from being a University Fellow. However, while the idea was generally

well-received, it would also have to overcome some major obstacles, including the lack of time policymakers feel they have to engage in such an effort and issues of geographic accessibility for non-metro legislators. To be credible with policymakers, all participants would have to be carefully chosen for their ability to put aside partisanship, and be open to hearing other points of view.

Nine legislators responded to the idea of a Family Policy Fellows project with unqualified support or interest. One legislator said, “That would be fabulous. I think you’re talking about the next group of true legislative leaders—fabulous idea” (Male, Republican). With respect to what would be appealing for legislators, one said “people are looking for something new to put on their literature,” another said participating would be attractive, “if I felt like I could gain some sort of knowledge that I can translate into policy, access to information you might not otherwise have access to, get to know other legislators better, come up with solutions that have some innovation in them” (Female, Democrat).

Eight legislators were generally receptive to the idea but attached conditions or concerns, including the need to have a “well-balanced” group (Male, Democrat). Other barriers to participation that legislators observed include the potential time commitment (e.g., “I think that has some merit. It probably depends on all of the life demands people have, if they can handle that investment of time” (Female, Republican)), and distance for legislators outside the metro area (e.g., “If you live [out-state] you’re not going to be able to get there. I have a reaction that whether or not this is a good idea is somewhat tainted by the fact that it’s an urban idea. It’s giving urban legislators a theoretical advantage over rural legislators...it can be irritating to rural legislators who care. That’s a non-policy response. I think the idea is moderately good” (Male, Democrat)). Another legislator highlighted the importance of synchronizing the study of a particular issue with its legislative action: “Timing would be everything...It would seem to me that it would be best if the people involved in moving the legislation would also be involved in the study group so that they could pace the legislation in a way that would be consistent with the findings of the group. Otherwise...if the bill moves faster than the study group, it would lose its value. They wouldn’t have the information the study group produced available before the legislation got too far down the pike” (Male, Democrat). Others thought there might be better ways to accomplish the same goal: “It sounds time intensive for the average legislator...From the point of view of connecting people and broadening the influence of research, things that are less time intensive would be more popular” (Male, Democrat).

The issue or topic of study would need to be important to entice legislators to participate: “I want it to be something I work on at the legislature in my committees or something I would do after I retire from the legislature” (Female, Republican).

Several legislators recommended possible times, although they were not all in agreement. Different legislators suggested meeting quarterly, mornings or evenings during the week when legislators are already in St. Paul, or every other weekend. One legislator also recommended targeting legislators in their second terms.

2) Legislators mentioned issues related to education most often when asked for their suggestions on topics for the Family Policy Fellows Project. All legislators interviewed indicated a willingness to be contacted in the future if the Family Policy Fellows Project idea is pursued further.

Policymakers suggested topics for study:

- Early childhood education (*accessibility, financing, and reaching at-risk children*) (4)
- Education (*financing, cultural differences, affordability of higher education*) (4)
- Health care (*long term care, generating new thinking*) (2)
- Youth prevention and intervention policies (2)
- Alcohol policy issues and adolescents
- Childhood obesity
- Children's mental health
- Energy (*renewable and wind energy*)
- Family stability and the role of the government
- Fatherhood issues, especially in African American families
- Healthy youth development
- Hunger and food distribution (*root cause of hunger in Minnesota*)
- Impact of different family structures on children (*gay and lesbians' parenting*)
- Out of school time and kids getting into trouble
- Poverty (*minimum wage*)
- Single parent households

Survey Summary and Discussion

Legislators understand and value research

Despite the real differences between the job of a legislator and that of a researcher, most of the respondents in this survey 1) demonstrated a knowledge of the basic components of research, 2) had some experience with research, either through their schooling or prior jobs, and 3) have used research to some degree since they had been in office. Perhaps most importantly, they are enthusiastic about learning more about what is going on at the University and express a desire for research findings to inform more of their work.

Furthermore, the University of Minnesota and academic researchers in general are viewed as credible sources of information. This means that the University has to concern itself less than other groups with establishing its credibility. Because its researchers are generally recognized as basing their work on facts and producing unbiased results, these results suggest that implications arising from University-based research will be taken seriously. However, legislators are also very aware of how preconceived notions and funding sources can bias research results, and researchers may enhance the chances that their work is considered by addressing these issues upfront. Otherwise, legislators shared the same values in determining the credibility of research as do most academics; that is, findings can be replicated, they are empirical, peer-reviewed and standard protocols are used.

Also encouraging to those hoping to enhance the policy-research connection is the generally high degree of appreciation for the differences in working cultures, including time pressures, between

academia and the policymaking world. Legislators were aware of the considerable amount of time some research projects take and understood that the legislative time clock would often make it difficult for researchers to meet legislators' information needs. Regarding the relevancy of academic research to policy, at least one legislator mentioned the need to protect academic freedom, noting that it was important that researchers study what they think is important. Overall, the responses to these questions showed little evidence of the "mutual intellectual disdain" observed between researchers and policymakers elsewhere (Trostle).

At a high rate, legislators reported utilizing research in their work. Consistent with findings elsewhere (Mooney, 1991; Gray et al., 2000), they used research findings most often to inform their position, develop legislation, or to answer constituent concerns, especially on those topics that are considered "hot" at the Capitol: education, early childhood, transportation and health care.

Some legislators also discussed the limits of using research in a political setting. In addition to the time to complete research and issues of academic freedom is the more fundamental issue of the factors beyond research that must enter into their decision making. While they would like their work to be more based on 'facts' and less on biased information, several of them also noted that they must take into account more information than does the researcher when making a final decision about what must be done.

Legislators have little direct personal experience with researchers or knowledge of their work

Despite the value they put on academic research and the University in general, policymakers reported few direct contacts with researchers, with the exception of transportation (especially the University's Center for Transportation Studies) and early childhood. Early childhood researchers have benefited from the increased attention to research on the issue brought about under the leadership of a Federal Research bank officer and the advocacy efforts of a new group (Ready 4 K) focused on improving early childhood programs. The other avenue through which some legislators reported contacts with researchers was Capitol Conversations, which is sponsored by the University's Consortium on Children, Youth and Families. Capitol Conversations was developed to bring researchers to the Capitol to share their knowledge on specific issues with legislators. Evaluations of the impact of Capitol Conversations by legislators were mixed, suggesting that it met some of its goals of making legislators aware of the research and the University, but that several things could be done to improve the effort.

Most of the sources for information about research findings provided to legislators come from groups other than researchers, especially legislative research staff, lobbyists, advocates and interest groups. While many legislators believed these were credible messengers, others are suspicious of information received through these channels (with the exception of the nonpartisan research offices), suggesting the limitations of these groups as messengers of research findings.

Overwhelmingly, legislators reported little knowledge regarding what is being researched at the University. Despite their lack of direct experience with researchers, they generally were very open to getting to know them and their work better. Most legislators were supportive of the idea of researchers doing more to reach out to them and expressed the belief that legislation would be better off if research was utilized more in its development. However, a few legislators expressed

some distrust of researchers who contacted legislators first, assuming their work might be biased, a concern also noted in Trostle et al. (1999). Some legislators felt that they should do a better job of contacting researchers to get information, noting that researchers would likely be very forthcoming. Legislators came up with a long list of topics about which they would like to know more about relevant research. These topics generally reflect issues that have been on the front burner at the Capitol in recent sessions (early childhood, education, transportation, health care, academic standards, child care, crime prevention, and environmental issues).

Different communication styles and needs hamper collaboration

Before legislators are going to be able to utilize research findings, they will have to be presented to them in a manner that they can easily access, given the environment in which they work. As Trostle et al. (1999) noted, “Research is, for purists, the generation of new knowledge, but what is needed for decision-making is the organization of knowledge in such a fashion that it’s very ordering allows us to see options” (p. 104).

The legislators participating in this survey had several, specific recommendations for increasing the likelihood that research would be considered. In summary, they urged greater use of technology (especially emails and the internet), regular and brief communications especially targeted to relevant legislative committees, more efforts to build relationships between legislators and researchers (including meetings to identify topics of interest to legislators), more collaboration with legislative research offices and third parties outside the Legislature, such as advocacy groups, in disseminating findings, and more translation of research findings into policy recommendations for legislation.

Legislators were generally positive about the value of participating in an effort that would bring a small group of them together with researchers to study an issue over the course of a year. The concept, Policy Fellows, builds on the idea mentioned in several other studies regarding the benefits of one-to-one relationship building between researchers and policymakers. The Policy Fellows would implement a recommendation of the 1999 Kellogg Commission Report that policymakers and researchers engage in a two way exchange of information, “defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table” (Kellogg Commission, 2001, p. 13).

The Policy Fellows model explored here would add a third group to the effort, people who work directly in a field (practitioners) to provide more information about the actual impact of policies on people and programs, and practice gaps in research and policy. The Policy Fellows model moves away “from expert-driven models of research dissemination to policymakers and toward more collaborative, reciprocal relationships with policymakers which acknowledge and validate the expertise that each brings to the table” (Friese & Bogenschneider, 2007). Targeted at junior legislators, it would also hopefully contribute to developing the “next generation of leaders” as one of the participants in this survey observed, and help foment new ideas. The model, while generally positively received by those interviewed in this survey, would have to address several issues to ensure participation by policymakers, including issues of time (both their personal time commitment and coordination with the legislative schedule), access (especially for legislators from outside the metropolitan area) and selection of participants who will put aside partisanship and be open to other points of view.

Implications for Researchers and The University

While these results indicate an openness and interest on the part of legislators in learning more about research and using it in their work, several other issues emerge when researchers think about increasing their involvement in policymaking. The paucity of efforts which are considered replicable successes also suggests that the challenges of increasing interaction between researchers and policymakers go beyond mere formatting issues.

Questions remain on the role of research in policymaking

Although the lack of institutional incentives within academia is often mentioned as a barrier to more involvement by researchers in policymaking, more fundamental issues regarding the real contributions of research also exist. One critical but rarely addressed issue is the point at which research findings have attained a level of certainty, or are so compelling, that they should be purposively brought into the policymaking realm.

When the editors of *Epidemiology* reiterated their policy regarding including policy implications in their journal (“Implications for public policy belong in the commentaries and not in the last paragraphs of research reports,” 2001, p. 371), they included a thoughtful discussion about the issues in determining when findings really warrant re-consideration of policies. Noel Weiss, arguing against inclusion of policy implications in journal articles stated, “A policy recommendation will need to be based on a systematic enumeration and weighing of all potential benefits and costs of an intervention if it is to be credible” (2001, p. 373). Legislators in this survey are generally hopeful that what researchers know can improve policy making, and place the responsibility on the researcher to know when information has obtained a certainty worthy of their consideration. However, as the directors of the Promising Practices Network (Cannon & Kilburn, 2003) observe, many studies with valuable insights do not meet the methodological standards that science demands, and similarly, as the editors of *Epidemiology* note, statistically significant findings do not necessarily ensure that the findings warrant policy change.

As respondents in this survey also noted, research findings are most likely to be used when they are placed directly into the policy under consideration, either by the researcher drawing out policy implications or identifying where in law the implied change should occur. Information provided to policymakers must be “fine tuned to the types of decisions they face and the types of decision-making environments in which they live or work” (Weiss, in Trostle, p. 224). Yet, keeping up with current policy is a challenging task, even for those who do it full-time. The researcher hoping to produce policy relevant research is likely to need help in fitting their work into current policy debates. In addition, while few studies include cost analyses, the failure to address costs limits their usefulness: “Even the most attractive results of high quality research should be evaluated in terms of their cost and effectiveness before they can be considered as the basis for a policy or programme” (Trostle, 1999, p. 133).

Furthermore, as one respondent in this survey observed, increasing policymakers’ attention to University research brings with it some risks as well. In addition to increased attention to politics driving the research agenda, some of the research done within the University may be at odds with the values of some policymakers. A recent highly visible example is stem cell research.

Finally, many academic observers see no problems with the current relationship between researchers and policymakers. Like Wilensky (1997) and the editors of *Epidemiology*, Birnbaum (2000) believes that the useful ideas flowing from research will find their way into policymaking in due course without the direct insertion of researchers and their work into the policymaking process. Through their teaching and the gradual dissemination of new ideas through society, “yesterday’s ideas” will become policy. “What is important is not that individual studies affect decisions, but that scholarly work over time influences the systems of knowledge and belief that give meaning to policy” (p. 127).

For these and other reasons, University researchers should be thoughtful and clear about why and how they are getting involved in policy making: Is it to shape the public agenda in some way? Is it to inform the debate, regardless of its outcome? Is it to impress policymakers with all that is happening at the University, with the hope that this will translate to increased appropriations? Are researchers willing to be drawn into controversies that might result from their involvement, and how will the University respond? How should the University evaluate its effort to expand activities in this arena?

Researchers can consider multiple models and goals for their engagement in policymaking

To learn more about researchers’ actual experience in policymaking, Friese and Bogenschneider (2006) interviewed 14 nationally recognized academic experts who had extensive involvement in the policy arena to better understand their experiences and perspectives regarding that involvement. Most of the researchers in their survey did not initiate contact with policymakers, and many admitted holding negative views of policymakers before becoming involved, i.e., policymakers are “arrogant, seeking easy solutions to problems, more interested in sound bites than solutions,” etc. After their contacts they reported much more positive opinions of policymakers, “regardless of their political affiliation.” They add: “In general, the more contact academics had with policymakers, the more they came to view them as intelligent, rational, and committed to the public good.” Many of the fears that researchers had before getting involved, including seeing their work misused, were not borne out.

While the researchers in the Friese and Bogenschneider study did find it necessary to address some of the cultural issues mentioned elsewhere (e.g., language and time frames), the most important effort they made was to develop relationships with policymakers. One researcher for example “no longer thinks about disseminating information to policymakers, but instead focuses on developing relationships with them...Through these relationships, researchers reported gaining a richer, more nuanced understanding of the types of decisions policymakers have to make, and what researchers can contribute to the policy process.”

Despite the obstacles involved in strengthening the policy-research connection, those with actual experience doing so report a good deal of satisfaction with the outcome. Researchers in the Friese and Bogenschneider survey believed there were contributing to “making the world a better place,” even when policy change did not directly result from their efforts. They appreciated “the excitement of seeing research applied to the real world,” and the “respect” they received for their expertise in the policy arena. Likewise, legislators interviewed about their experiences with the University of Wisconsin’s Family Impact Seminars (Bogenschneider et al., 2000) gave the effort high marks when it met the criteria ranked as important by legislators in this survey (e.g.,

nonpartisan discussions with colleagues and experts, oriented to issues of relevance to the upcoming legislative session, etc.).

Almost thirty years ago, Carol Weiss (1979) laid out seven models of research utilization that still provide a useful guide to ways of thinking about policymaking. The knowledge driven model assumes that basic research leads to applied research, which leads to its development and application. The problem solving model assumes that policymakers see a gap in the knowledge necessary to enact effective policy, which is then filled by social science. The interactive model is one in which “all kinds of people involved in an issue pool their talents, beliefs and understandings in an effort to make sense of a problem,” researchers being just one of the participants (Weiss, p. 428). In the interactive model, while researchers may be without “authoritative findings” to contribute, they have the expertise necessary to contribute to the discussion (Donnison, in Weiss, p. 428).

The political model described by Weiss is the circumstance in which research findings are used by one side to bolster its case. This is a legitimate use of research, she argues, as long as it does not distort or misinterpret the findings and everyone has access to the same information. The tactical model doesn't actually utilize research findings but is used by organizations (e.g., government agencies) to demonstrate their recognition of, and responsiveness to, an issue while not actually doing anything (“We are waiting until the research is completed...” (p. 429). The enlightenment model is the notion that “the concepts and theoretical perspectives that social science research has engendered permeate the policy-making process.” In the enlightenment model, study findings are not directly conveyed to policymakers but rather “percolat[e] through informed publics and com[e] to shape the way in which people think about social issues” (p. 429). Finally, the “research as part of the intellectual enterprise of the society” model is one in which research is just one of the many “intellectual pursuits of a society” (p. 430). Research, like policy, is influenced and influences the “larger fashions of social thought” (p. 430)

All of these models are useful in thinking about potential ways in which research and policy interact. Weiss' concluding paragraph is worth considering for its relevance to the effort described here:

Perhaps it is time for social scientists to pay attention to the imperatives of policymaking systems and to consider soberly what they can do, not necessarily to increase the use of research, but to improve the contribution that research makes to the wisdom of social policy (p. 431).

The results reported here as well as other efforts suggest that, to be truly effective in bringing research findings to policymakers, several issues should be carefully considered. However, the results also suggest that those efforts are likely to result in rewards for both policymakers and researchers, as they share a “mission to contribute to the common good” (Friese & Bogenschneider).

Recommendations for Action and Research

Recommendations for future research

The generalizability of these findings is limited by the non-random selection process of those interviewed. The extent to which the interviewer's status as a colleague affected the results is also unknown. It may have resulted in more candid responses than a University researcher might have elicited, but it also may have resulted in some policymakers responding in ways to enhance her perception of them. The findings are also limited by the fact that use of research is based on policymakers' self-report and not actual observation. To learn more about increasing the connection between research and policymaking, research that delved more deeply into the ways policymakers understand and use research would be useful. Similarly, more knowledge about researchers' views of involvement in the policymaking process, both from those who have ventured in as well as those who have not, would inform efforts to enhance the connection.

One of the issues raised in this survey is the role of mediating groups, such as legislative research offices, advocates and lobbyists. It would be interesting to learn more about the role these groups do and could play in disseminating research, including: How do they differ from policymakers in their desire for more research-based information, how do they access the information and how do they translate the findings for their purposes?

Recommendations for action

Legislators in this survey had several specific suggestions about how to make research more accessible to them, which the University could disseminate to academic units. To ensure consistency and reduce the confusion that could result from multiple efforts to contact legislators, efforts should be coordinated, at least at the college level. First efforts could include a monthly email to legislators with very brief descriptions of relevant research findings (organized by committee topic) with links to longer reports that include policy implications and/or recommendations. To begin the contact, selected researchers and/or center directors, or department chairs should meet with legislators, especially legislative committee chairs, before January to a) gather input on issues on which legislators would like more information and b) begin to develop relationships that might lead to further collaboration. University relations staff should be kept informed of these contacts, as well.

Given the importance of legislative research staff (and the Legislative Reference Library) in this survey as sources of information for policymakers, University researchers could also establish an ongoing structure for disseminating information to these offices as well, and consider designing activities for the interim period between sessions when staff could participate in University forums. These legislative offices also produce research briefs and reports that would be helpful for researchers looking for up-to-date information about public programs, and could be part of two-way information exchanges with University researchers.

The University should also consider encouraging Minnesota-specific policy-relevant publications and test a notion such as the Family Policy Fellows Project, or other variations implemented elsewhere, such as the Family Impact Seminars. Also of benefit to researchers wanting to be

more engaged in policy-relevant research would be development of resources that helped them stay on top of current policies and proposed changes in their field of study.

On campus, the University could hold forums to discuss the findings of this survey and other relevant research to explore in depth the concerns researchers may have regarding greater involvement in policymaking. These sessions could include training in drawing out policy implications, orientation to the policymaking process and potential resources for learning about current policies and laws. They could also provide an opportunity for reviewing current and past University efforts to encourage more connections between researchers and policymakers, including the successful efforts mentioned in this report regarding transportation and early childhood research.

The University of Minnesota, like other universities across the county, is engaged in an effort to encourage more multidisciplinary work. In addition to the contribution to scholarship this effort will make it could also provide an opportunity for the University to encourage its researchers to pull together and synthesize their research toward the “higher levels of sophistication in its effort to create scientific findings that truly meet the needs of decision makers” (Greenbaum, 2001, p. 377).

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