

From Data to Evidence to Policy

Recommendations for the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking

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The William T. Grant Foundation

The William T. Grant Foundation supports research to improve the lives of young people ages 5–25 in the United States. Our goal is to accumulate a body of knowledge that will advance theory, policy, and practice and contribute to improved outcomes and opportunities for youth, today and in the future. In 2014, we launched an initiative to invest in research to identify effective responses to inequality in its many forms. And since 2009, we have supported studies that provide insight into how policymakers, administrators, and service providers acquire, interpret, and use research evidence. In 2015, we signaled a new direction in this initiative, calling for studies that identify, create, and test strategies to improve the use of research evidence in ways that benefit youth.

The Forum for Youth Investment

The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan "action tank" dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are Ready by 21®: ready for college, work and life. A trusted resource for policy makers, advocates, researchers and program professionals, the Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, connections and tools they need to create greater opportunities and outcomes for young people. The Forum manages a number of centers and projects, including Big Picture Approach Consulting, the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, the Children's Cabinet Network and SparkAction. The core work of the Forum is helping leaders, organizations, partnerships and systems – at the local, state and national levels – assess, improve and align their practices and policies.

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Recommendations for the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking

The Forum for Youth Investment and the William T. Grant Foundation are pleased to submit the following recommendations to the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. We are encouraged by the Commission’s potential to promote the use of research evidence in policymaking, and we offer these insights with the hope of helping the Commission make the most of its historic opportunity.

These suggestions are drawn from our experience as conveners of a learning group of senior career staff and appointees in research offices focused on children, youth, and families within the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, Justice, and Health and Human Services, as well as in the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Science Foundation. These agencies invest in research and evaluation to build policy-relevant evidence and will likely be charged with implementing many of the Commission’s recommendations. They also have experience responding to similar challenges in the past. For these reasons, their insights may guide the Commission in developing a transformational set of recommendations.

The Path from Data to Evidence to Policy

A narrow interpretation of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking legislation might suggest the Commission’s charge is primarily to determine how the federal government can share and link administrative data sets. Accomplishing this aim would be of significant value. But a broader interpretation of its charge suggests that the Commission must not stop there. It should also consider *how the federal government can use data to create the evidence required for smart policy decisions, as well as how to create the infrastructure to support the use of evidence in policymaking.*

We urge the Commission to prioritize those elements of its charge that point toward these broader aims:

- Emphasize how data “may be integrated and made available to facilitate program evaluation, continuous improvement, policy-relevant research, and cost-benefit analyses by qualified researchers and institutions;” and
- Examine “how data and results of research can be used to inform program administrators and policymakers to improve program design.”

Sharing and linking data is necessary but not sufficient to achieve these goals. The data must be deployed in research and evaluation to create evidence, which must be then be used to inform policymaking. Laying the groundwork for the path from data to evidence to policy is essential to the Commission’s charge.



Sharing and Linking Data

The Commission should recommend that data are collected and shared in ways that facilitate their use in research and evaluation.

Sharing data is a valuable first step. But the data take on added power when they can be used in research and evaluation studies. The Commission can fulfill its charge of addressing “how data and results can be used to inform program administrators and policymakers” by recommending ways that administrative data systems can be made ready for use in research and evaluation. The Commission could craft recommendations that would help ensure that data are linked; are of sufficient quality; and are delivered in formats that encourage their use in research that answers policymakers’ questions.

Linking separate data sets together increases the value of each for research and evaluation. One federal staff member in our learning group commented, “I am working on linking existing databases to conduct research. I need to figure out what kinds of data are being collected....Who is tracking relevant outcomes, and how do you synthesize that with community-level data from multiple sources to tell the impact of interventions across multiple domains?”

Linking existing data can also enable faster and cheaper research studies. As one participant reported, “There has been a lot of thinking overall in our department on the opportunities these longitudinal data systems have for low cost evaluations. A whole group of people in our program offices are focused on this right now.” But using data that are not designed for research can be challenging. Sometimes the quality of the data is poor or unknown. As a learning group participant put it, “It is not easy to figure out if a given set of administrative data is high-quality enough to be used in a research context.”

Sometimes the ways that the data are shared make it difficult to produce useful research reports. As one learning group participant shared, “Only one or two people in each of our agencies know how to manipulate specific databases, and those people have a long list of requests from multiple agencies to do specific data runs. We are hoping that we can take on the burden of getting the data ready. A lot of the data we have, like those that manage case files, were not created to be used for research, so that is a heavier lift. We want to give agencies a more realistic view of the data they actually have.”

Using Data to Create Evidence

The Commission should recommend that federal agencies adopt a broad and inclusive view of the types of research studies that can and should be produced with administrative data.

The power of data increases when they are used to create **research evidence** (see sidebar). Too often, however, a narrow conceptualization of data as evidence limits the ability of policymakers to gain full understanding of an issue. The Commission could add value to the field by advancing a framework that delineates the types of research evidence that should be created to guide policymaking.

DEFINITION OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The William T. Grant Foundation defines research evidence as “a type of evidence derived from applying systematic methods and analyses to address a predefined question or hypothesis. This includes descriptive studies, intervention or evaluation studies, meta-analyses, and cost-effectiveness studies conducted within or outside research organizations.”

The Commission may wish to reinforce frameworks such as the Institute of Education Sciences/National Science Foundation’s *Common Guidelines for Education Research Development* framework¹ and the Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families’ *Common Framework for Research & Evaluation*.² Adopting these types of frameworks would help ensure that policymakers not only receive findings from the full range of types of research evidence, but review this evidence with a clear understanding of the level of rigor and quality inherent in each type of study, and what types of questions are answerable by each respective research methodology.³

Using Evidence to Inform Policymaking

The Commission should recommend that federal agencies support partnerships between researchers and policymakers that inform key research questions and facilitate the use of research evidence.

Partnerships between researchers and policymakers can improve the use of research evidence by guiding researchers to ask questions that respond to the needs of policymakers, building stronger practice-focused research networks or community-based participatory approaches, and creating a culture of learning in which administrators, policymakers and other government leaders include research evidence in their deliberations.

The growing literature about how and when research evidence is and is not used in policymaking can inform the Commission’s work. These studies “complicate the common conception of research users as merely rational actors who have questions, go in search of research to answer them, and then apply it to their decisions.... In none of their cases does research use easily boil down to a single moment or an isolated decision....It is not a simple process whereby research ‘facts’ are passed from researchers to research users and then applied in a linear decision making process. Instead, research use is contingent, interactive, and iterative. It involves people individually and collectively engaging with research over time, bringing their own and their organization’s goals, motivations, routines, and political contexts with them.”⁴ It is often helpful to construct evidence in a process of engagement, in which the needs of decision makers help shape research questions and findings are delivered in an accessible and timely fashion through relationships of trust and mutual understanding.

The Commission should recommend ways to strengthen the federal infrastructure for producing research evidence that can inform policymaking.

To address its charge to examine how data may be “made available to facilitate program evaluation, continuous improvement, policy-relevant research, and cost-benefit analyses by qualified researchers and institutions,” it is important for the Commission to create recommendations for strengthening the federal infrastructure for using data to create evidence, and using that evidence to inform policymaking.

¹ Available at: <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2013/nsf13126/nsf13126.pdf>

² Available at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/the-administration-for-children-families-common-framework-for-research-and-evaluation>

³ While there may not yet be widely accepted quality standards for the all types of research, some of our learning group members pointed to the following article as a promising start: Gottfredson, D. C., Cook, T. D., Gardner, F. E. M., Gorman-Smith, D., Howe, G. W., Sandler, I. N., & Zafft, K. M. (2015). Standards of evidence for efficacy, effectiveness, and scale-up research in prevention science: Next generation. *Prevention Science*, 16, 893-926.

⁴ Tseng, V. & Nutley, S. (2014). Building the Infrastructure to Improve the Use and Usefulness of Research in Education. In K.S. Finnigan & A.J. Daly (Eds.). *Using Research Evidence in Education: From the Schoolhouse Door to Capitol Hill*. Springer: New York. Available at: <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/resource/building-the-infrastructure-to-improve-the-use-and-usefulness-of-research-in-education>

An infrastructure could include elements such as formal policies, codified practices, established offices, and interagency coordinating structures.

Fortunately, there are existing efforts that the Commission could build upon. The Department of Labor and the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families both created evaluation policies that can serve as models for other agencies.⁵ The Department of Labor created a Chief Evaluation Office, and conducts an annual survey to assess its performance meeting the research needs of program offices. HHS Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning Research and Evaluation also published a set of principles to guide all of its evaluation work.⁶ Further, the Institute of Education Sciences has protections, granted by Congress in its authorizing language, that support scientific integrity and independence from political influence.

Additionally, a subset of learning group participants funded a National Academy of Sciences Roundtable to consider an infrastructure for evaluation that parallels the existing infrastructure for statistical agencies. (Federal statistical agencies receive support from a Chief Statistician housed at the White House Office of Management and Budget; a public-private, interagency Committee on National Statistics; and a carefully codified and updated set of Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency.⁷) The Commission may wish to be briefed on this effort. The Commission may also wish to be briefed on the types of infrastructure that have been created to support federal agencies' performance management functions, such as the role the federal Performance Improvement Council plays in fostering widespread and effective use of performance management practices across federal agencies and sparking cross-cutting performance improvements.⁸

Conclusion

The creation of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking is well timed. As shared in the William T. Grant Foundation's recent blog series *Evidence at the Crossroads*, "research evidence can improve public policies and programs, but fulfilling that potential will require honest assessments of current initiatives, coming to terms with outsized expectations, and learning ways to improve social interventions and public systems."⁹

The Commission is well positioned to drive this work forward, especially if it focuses on the full continuum of activity from sharing and linking data, to using those data to create research evidence, to using that evidence to inform policymaking.

⁵ See <http://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/EvaluationPolicy.htm> and <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/acf-evaluation-policy>

⁶ The HHS principles are posted at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/the-administration-for-children-families-common-framework-for-research-and-evaluation>

⁷ Principles and practices for federal statistics agencies are posted at: http://sites.nationalacademies.org/DBASSE/CNSTAT/Principles_and_Practices_for_a_Federal_Statistical_Agency/index.htm

⁸ On the role of the Performance Improvement Council, see: <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/133807>

⁹ See: <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/tag/evidence-at-the-crossroads>