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We can move mountains: Engaging in state-level policy work

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We can move mountains: Engaging in state-level policy work

Introduction

In this essay, we offer some insights and considerations on engaging in these types of collaborations and the resulting state level policy work. Interested readers, whether researchers or policymakers, are welcome to reach out to us for further discussions. Much of the information offered in this essay applies to any partnership and the researchers and policymakers in those partnerships, but our focus will be primarily on state-level policy in the areas of criminal justice, criminology, and victimization. It is geared primarily towards researchers but provides valuable information for policymakers regarding what to expect from research partners.

Setting the stage

There is a growing desire among researchers to either conduct policy-relevant research or to share existing research they believe could inform the policy process. Even with this increased interest in policy work, few researchers receive any education or training during our doctoral studies on exactly how to engage in this process or initiate policy-relevant work. Similarly, legislators want to make the best decisions we can; however, we are making decisions not only about policy approaches but also about how taxpayer dollars will be spent. Appropriate research and data can guide us as to what has been deemed an effective policy solution (or not).

Starting out

There is no time like the present to reach out. There is no one perfect time in your career to begin policy work. There are a few different options of where to begin: state agencies, associations, community organizations, commissions or committees, and legislatures, and all have pluses and minuses. If you have little to no experience doing researcher-practitioner partnerships or policy work, beginning with a local agency or small community organization is likely best given the

lower profile of their work and the smaller impact zone of the policies. Sometimes, opportunities will come to you and you won't have the option of starting small. If you have prior policy work or partnership experience, starting in statewide efforts may not seem so daunting.

The quickest way to start is to contact state agency directors or executive directors of community organizations in your area of interest, such as a department of corrections or state supreme courts, or allied agencies, e.g., health and welfare or education. Statewide community organizations could encompass domestic and sexual violence coalitions, child abuse prevention agencies, ACLU, United Way, or NAACP as examples. A simple Google search can lead you to agency and organization websites to see their mission statements, organizational structure, and current policy efforts. Ask colleagues doing policy work for recommendations and introductions. Being introduced by someone already known to the agency or organization provides you with a certain amount of credibility through association. Once you've identified the agencies and/or organizations, make a list based on the relevancy of their work to yours. This will be a rough list as completely basing your perception of relevancy based on web presence is fraught with problems, but it's a start. Craft an introductory email that states your areas of expertise and asks for a meeting.

State crime commissions are also a good option. Reach out to the chairperson and ask for a meeting to introduce yourself. Start attending meetings to get a feel for what issues they are working on and where you might be of assistance. Offer to present an overview of relevant research on topics where your interests converge or to write a research brief for the committee. Before being appointed to serve on our state crime commission (ICJC), Lisa spent several years writing white papers and conducting small surveys for ICJC, some funded, some unfunded. This was a time of trust-building for everyone and let ICJC see the benefit of research-informed

decision-making. Once a public member seat opened, the commission asked the Governor to appoint a researcher so that voice would always be present.

The highest stage for policy work is at the statehouse. It's not for the faint of heart so it is in your best interest to invest time in learning its landscape. State legislatures have websites listing all house and senate committees and which legislators are assigned to them. Most criminal justice researchers will be interested in judiciary committees, but education, health and welfare, and state affairs committees also hear bills of interest. Observe multiple committee hearings so you can learn the protocols of offering testimony, the political leanings and personalities of legislators, what the Q & A portion of testimony is like, and how decisions are made. As you attend committee meetings, you may get a feel for where members stand and the things they value. Unlike a courtroom, some questions and comments make it clear what stances are being taken.

Legislators may not have contacts within higher education or with topical area researchers, which means you may have to come to us. Most of our legislative planning and bill development will happen during breaks, so these connections must be made ahead of the session, and much of our work occurs in committees which may provide a focal point for researcher outreach. Contact committee chairs during legislative session breaks to introduce yourself and offer to provide research relevant to upcoming bills or issues. Similarly, identify and reach out to legislators on these committees who show interest in your area(s) of expertise. Once in session, be ready to respond quickly to requests for additional information or testimony due to time constraints. Legislators work on a different time frame and many expect you to respond at a moment's notice. Being involved during the off season makes the session much easier as you are able to make quick searches for needed data and research. Beyond the mechanics of how the

legislative process works, it is also essential to understand how politics may impact decision making and policy. As a legislator, I have found that more policy decisions are made based on other, non-scientific things, but research guides me about the type of action to take when addressing a problem. Most decisions are not made solely based on good information and research; party politics and values play a major role. Naivete and/or ignorance of this reality is not your friend.

You're in the room

You never know where one meeting or contact will lead. State-level agency directors have vast networks. Whether government or non-profit, directors will turn to colleagues for recommendations for outside assistance. Cultivating one strong partnership, even in a tangential area of interest, will result in opportunities for other partnerships that may be of greater interest to you. Lisa's first contact with our statewide domestic and sexual violence program was when they were applying for a grant and needed a research partner. No one knew each other. To this day, most of her practitioner contacts, gubernatorial appointments, and legislative work can be traced back to someone she met through that one grant. Always take the first meeting. Prior to her work as a legislator, Melissa was the Director of the (then) Women's Center at Boise State University; that's where we met and began working together on victimization issues. She could not have forecasted then that, a more than a decade later, she would be a legislator championing many of the victimization issues she spearheaded at the University.

Be adaptive. Obviously, everyone will not hold the same understanding of research as you. Meet people where they're at by avoiding jargon and using common language. Most policy makers are balancing many areas of interests and priorities and need information delivered quickly and understandably. As a legislator, I just do not have the time to conduct original

research and need to be able to rely on reputable and responsible researchers to provide the type of information I need, in an easily digestible format, to make the best decisions possible.

Similarly, be open and adaptive in your approach. People with a limited research background may need a more education-focused tact, while others may be ready to delve into specifics.

Getting people to climb aboard the research wagon is more difficult than getting them to believe the actual research outcomes. If you don't recognize where the resistance is coming from, you will not be effective in overcoming it.

Test the waters. Trust must be developed before these bodies will open up for critical analysis. You are also testing the waters with your partnership. Initially, researchers will rarely know the agency directors or legislators who reach out for assistance and the reverse is also true. Not all researcher-practitioner partnerships are successful for a variety of reasons that span from personality clashes to political realities and bad timing to competing interests, or even organization readiness (yours or theirs). Take on a small data or policy analysis project. This allows all parties the freedom to see if the foundation exists for a good partnership without the pressure of a potentially high profile or devastating failure. That doesn't mean you should turn down a large, funded project with a brand new partner, but know that most partnerships don't develop that way and the pressure is much greater on all involved when it does.

Partnerships require give and take from both parties to get the work done. It's important to educate partners about academia and what is required to obtain tenure and promotion, so they understand why even small amounts of external funding are valuable. However, access to data is just as important to a career in academia as external funding and, in many instances, more important due to the heavy weight given to publications in tenure or promotion decisions. Agencies do not have unlimited discretionary funds; economies falter. True partnerships have to

weather these storms. Be flexible and creative. Before the Great Recession, Lisa did funded work with a state agency. As the Recession started, the director hesitated about a new project because he could only offer a fraction of the previous funding, but it was enough to fund a graduate assistant and we agreed to go forward. When the economy crashed and budgets were cut, so was all research funding. Graduate students were willing to do independent study to meet elective requirements and the data were used for publications. When the economy rebounded, the agency returned to funding projects with us. The moral of the story: the partnership and the policy impacts are what's most important and partners honor that in both lean and flush times.

The vast majority of state-level policy work with the governor's office, the legislature, or commissions is unfunded. Your opportunity for data is often limited, but your impact on the system and the lives of people who come in contact with it is not. When it's unfunded, you can count it as part of your service load; when you have data resulting from it, you can count it as part of your research load. It's a win either way for you and the policymaker who now gets much needed research and analysis previously unattainable because they lacked funding.

Hone your skills at being direct yet civil. You never know who is watching; assume everyone is. Most state-level work is done on committees. Even work done with individual state agencies usually has a presentation component in front of a large audience that may include people from outside the agency, a state level committee, or the legislature. It is common for frustration or disagreements to occur and you may be directly challenged about the information you are providing. As a legislator, I may get stuck on "getting something done" and then may not like hearing the results of the research being presented if I perceive it as a barrier that singular focus. However, for researchers, retreating from what data tells us is not an option, and that is where the ability to speak directly is needed. The success of any partnership or committee is

dependent on the collaboration of its members, so people need to be able to continue working together regardless of disputes. That is where civility comes in; being challenged on your expertise feels personal. Most of the time it isn't personal, but every so often it is. The ability to be direct and civil, to state your case, and shake hands at the end of the meeting will speak volumes to everyone present and shared with others who are not. An inability to do so will also be shared yet with negative results. Remember, disagreements are often reflective of the goals and constraints of professionals' different roles and this push and pull of goals and constraints provides a more holistic perspective on the issues for which you collaborate.

Some have referred to the direct yet civil willingness to offer critical, but research-based, commentary contradicting elected officials and agency directors as fearless. In our opinion, that is a potentially dangerous perspective. Make no mistake, doing this work is like walking back and forth on a tightrope with moments of people shaking the rope in the hopes you'll fall. It's initially terrifying but over time your balance improves; yet, even then, you are always well aware of your potential to fall and this fear provides a check on any potential overreach in terms of research and your position. The good news is that there will be others casting a net beneath you because they know the value of what you bring to the table. Those people are your true research partners.

State your boundaries up front and respect both yours and theirs. While researchers and policymakers may share a desire for research/evidence-driven methods, differences in role constraints exist, resulting in different parameters of what each can do in these efforts. For legislators, it may appear that researchers are too tied to their results to see the larger picture of our work and that, at times, change must be incremental. For researchers, we may feel as though legislators are asking us to either ignore our results for the benefit of legislation or offer

testimony or recommendations that extend well beyond the scope of our results. Essentially, what we teach students in design and methods about the benefits and limitations of research apply to partnerships and policy efforts as well. The overgeneralization of results and conclusions in order to support partners' efforts will routinely backfire which can be a death knell not only to the partnership in general but to the very real efforts to reform policies. This underpins the importance of acknowledging that your role and boundaries are set by the research. When legislators or agency directors are facing political backlash, as a research partner, you can support them by pointing to their willingness to engage in such inquiries and their desire to adopt an evidence-based perspective as opposed to ideological whims.

Researchers must be mindful of how their research and data are presented and used. Some legislators will only seek out research from you that supports their agendas, regardless of its applicability, which inevitably leads to questions about the researcher's subjectivity and ideology. Accepting appointments to statewide committees poses additional hurdles as they are often viewed by others, including other faculty colleagues, as political gifts. As such, you should tread cautiously when actively seeking such appointments. Appointments are most successful if they are clearly based on your experience and research base. Faculty should notify their chair and/or dean at the time of application (or consideration of appointment if it is unsolicited) and explain your interest in the appointment, what impact you could potentially make, and how it could (or won't) affect your department-related work. Once offered an appointment, you must solidify a non-negotiable understanding that committee service does not preclude, if warranted, critical comments of the government administration, nor does it authorize you to be a spokesperson for it. In addition, given the contentiousness of the political process, it may be

easier to remain politically unaffiliated. This allows for some measure of protection from charges of political favoritism, even superficially.

Other practical boundaries for faculty are your university's and any funder's policies surrounding "advocacy" or "lobbying". Most have clauses prohibiting faculty or PI's from engaging in such activities. These are real and enforceable. Rather than seeing them as a hindrance to your state level policy work, they should be viewed as a security blanket. At the statehouse, you can expect us (legislators) and lobbyists on both sides of the issue to exert pressure on you to "take a side" or to speak on our behalf. That is usually because we have no knowledge of these constraints on your work. Those 'no-lobbying' policies offer you an easy out: Your role is to educate decision-makers about the research on the issue at hand and the potential consequences of legislation whether that is through testimony at hearings (written or oral) or legislative meetings. Instead of asking you to speak on our behalf, if we find the research compelling, legislators and lobbyists can shorten or cede their testimony in order to provide you with more time to speak. Respecting boundaries is not only necessary to good collaboration, it allows everyone to play to their individual strengths.

Here is a great piece of advice given by a state agency director: "Regardless of what happens in the future, you can never allow people *to think* that you are a mole for any elected official or agency director, including me. That won't be easy, but it will be necessary." It isn't easy and it is necessary. If done well, working at the state level will ultimately provide you access that many others do not have. The seduction of what that access can offer your career (read as 'ego') can be too overwhelming for many who will compromise their role in order to maintain access. Once that happens, your credibility and the credibility of any research you bring

to the table becomes questionable and your effectiveness diminished, if not erased. So, boundaries have to be clear and upfront.

You're not the expert on everything. You are an expert in the room, but you are not the only expert in the room. While you know about the research relevant to the issue at hand, you are a rookie when it comes to how individual agencies or state governments work. If you assume otherwise, you'll come off as arrogant and belittling to the expertise of others and won't be open to what your partners are telling you about the issue at hand in the environment in which you need to work. Given that attitude, they likely won't share the information anyway which will ultimately limit your ability to foresee potential challenges, identify appropriate evidence-based solutions, and/or design the best study to gather needed data. Plus, You. May. Be. Wrong. Remember that this is not your classroom. Policymakers are your partners, not your students.

This extends to topical areas of research as well. Legislators and other policymakers will often suggest projects that do not fall within your area(s) of expertise. They've built trust with you and so may be reticent to start all over again with someone new. Similarly, you have also invested significant time building credibility and access and may be reticent to "turn it over" to someone who hasn't done any work to establish a relationship. This is a crucial point in the researcher-policymaker partnership. As a legislator, I need trustworthy, honest, and reliable people around me to give me information about the potential impacts of legislation, so I can make more informed policy decisions. I am going to rely on my research partner to tell me when it's outside her scope and, if she doesn't, that can have real world impact on both her credibility and mine. Ethics must drive this decision as the purpose of the partnership is to advance evidence-based policymaking and that requires topical expertise. So, find the right person for the new project. You can choose to remain involved or not depending on your workload, interest,

new researcher's experience with partnerships, and the wishes of your policy partner. Your partnership will actually be stronger for it as policymakers recognize that this isn't about you but rather using research and scientific inquiry for the benefit of public interest.

At the end of the day

Know when to say no. The need for new or additional researchers on a policy project highlights a crucial aspect to policy work, burnout. It's the case of "if you build it, they will come". Once you establish your credibility and partnerships, more projects from different policymakers will be offered, along with opportunities for committee work and legislative testimony. It can easily overtake your career. If policy work was your dream as a researcher, you won't have complaints. If policy work is one of many interests, including an extensive peer review publication record and/or innovative teaching, you will need to construct a personal rubric for when you say "no". This is an important skill for your own well-being and because the potential consequences of policy work are too important to not have the time and attention it requires from a researcher. Saying 'no' is easier when there are others in the waiting. The ability to meet many of the suggestions offered in this essay relies on more researchers and policymakers becoming involved in these partnerships. Often this will require (1) conversations with others about the value of partnerships to the policy process, (2) guiding them through their early forays into policy work in general and partnership development, and (3) readying future researchers and policymakers (our students) to engage in policy partnerships.

Successful policy skills and partnerships are a long ball game, not a short one. Working on state-level policies is kind of like being an entertainment or sports celebrity. A few people make a quick splash seemingly out of nowhere, but the vast majority of people work behind the scenes, in supporting roles, or on projects or teams they aren't excited about for years before they

reach the big time. While the quick splash cuts ahead in line, they are also more likely to make mistakes and fall out of the limelight faster than those who toiled away behind the scenes. They had time to learn how to avoid those mistakes or made them out of the spotlight where they were able to correct them without much notice. It's going to take a while to establish these partnerships and even longer at times to change policy. Adjust your expectations accordingly.

Celebrate the wins and support the losses. Engaging in policy work is the epitome of being part of a learning organization. Our policy partnership has likely resulted in more failures than successes. It's not easy to change established thoughts, policies, and practices within organizational and political structures, let alone society. Yet, every success is informed by all of the previous failed attempts. Those failures allow you to better understand the opposing arguments, refine policy breadth and language, identify procedural roadblocks, garner more support, gather new or additional data, and likely solidify your partnership even more than the successes do.

Final thoughts

As we write this essay on state level policy work and partnerships, the world has seemingly blown up. Most of us have endured months of isolation due to an ongoing pandemic and are facing an unknown future with unanswered questions that affect every aspect of our lives. At a time when crisis could narrow societal divides, a virus has highlighted the continuing disparities in the U.S. Scores of people across our country have been moved to protest against the systemic racism that is pervasive in each of those aspects of life affected by the pandemic, but particularly the criminal justice system. The anti-racism work that is so desperately needed in our society will necessitate the revision of existing public policy and, in some instances, the reimagining of systems. For change to work, it must be grounded in scientific evidence across diverse methods;

otherwise, we will likely repeat the mistakes of the past resulting in little real change at all. The time is now for academics to leave the comfort of their campuses, roll up their sleeves, and use the knowledge and skills they've worked so hard to obtain to ensure that this does not occur. Empirical-based policymaking, informed by our work, is needed now more than ever.