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When University Researchers Connect with Policy: A Framework for Whether, When, and How to Engage

Universities are renowned for their tradition of producing research that benefits millions of people. When it comes to policymaking, university research is considered more trustworthy than other sources, yet it simultaneously is widely perceived as playing too small a role in public policy decisions. In this article, we consider the engagement of university-based researchers with policymakers and the policy process. As a guide for researchers, we propose a framework that includes three key decisions: whether, when, and how to engage in policymaking. We also apply Boyer's model of engaged scholarship to policymaking, reviewing what research studies and policymakers say about each domain. The domains are illustrated with case examples in which researchers successfully influenced public policy using ethnography, applied policy research, meta-analysis, benefit–cost analyses, program evaluation, and policy forums. We discuss applications of our three key decisions and

draw implications for researchers interested in building research-based, family-focused public policy.

Universities are renowned for their tradition of “creating a prodigious research engine” that has “brought the benefit of new knowledge to millions of people” (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 9). When it comes to public policy, university research is considered more trustworthy than research from advocacy groups and think tanks (Scott, Lubienski, DeBray, & Jabbar, 2014), yet university research is widely perceived as playing too small a role in public policy decisions (Prewitt, Schwandt, & Straf, 2012; Scott et al., 2014; Smith, 1991; Tseng & Gamoran, 2017). We posit that university researchers may question how they can play a role in a fast-paced, influence-driven process like policymaking. To address this problem, we offer researchers a framework for making informed decisions about engaging with policymaking, including considerations for whether, when, and how to engage.

In this article, we use the term *policy* to include not only legislation but also the rules and regulations that govern policy implementation. *Policymakers* thus includes not only elected

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Key Words: Bridging research and policy, family policy and law, public policy and legal issues.

officials and their staff who draft and pass legislation but also executive agency officials who craft rules regarding how policies are executed and judges who interpret and apply legislation. We are particularly interested in “family policy” by which we mean policies that explicitly influence families such as economic support, child rearing, and caregiving. We are also interested in the “family impact lens” which identifies policies that implicitly influence families by assessing the impact of any public policy on family well-being (Bogenschneider, 2014).

In this article, we focus primarily on policymaking at the state level, which has received less attention than its federal counterpart (Huston, 2008). State legislatures enact and administer many policies relevant to families and children, including those related to child welfare, domestic violence, education, and marriage and divorce, but overall they have more limited resources than Congress does in terms of accessing high-quality research. For example, most (not all) state legislative services agencies pale in comparison to the Congressional Research Service, which provided more than 62,000 research products to Congress in 2016 (Mazanec, 2017). Researchers may also find state legislators easier to access than federal policymakers. For researchers at public universities who are accountable to state legislatures for funding, engaging with policymakers may enhance perceptions of the value of government investments in higher education (Weiss, 1999).

In keeping with this state focus, the policymaker quotes included in this article are from a recent qualitative study that included all state legislators in Wisconsin and a random sample of half the sitting legislators in Indiana (Bogenschneider, Day, & Parrott, 2017). In the first round of the study, semistructured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 123 legislators on the contributions that research makes to policymaking, with specific questions about researchers and universities (60% response rate). Participants in Round 1 nominated colleagues who were exemplar researcher users, relationship builders, or youth or family champions. In Round 2, in-depth interviews were conducted with the 89 legislators who received the most nominations as exemplars (84% response rate). Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Line-by-line coding was conducted using MAXQDA software.

We begin by briefly summarizing contemporary debates about the university role in policymaking. Then, to help researchers make informed decisions about policy engagement, we propose three key decisions regarding whether, when, and how to engage with policymaking. We apply Boyer’s model of engaged scholarship to policymaking, reviewing what research studies and the policymakers in our recent study say about each domain. Next, we illustrate the domains with case examples in which researchers studying families have successfully influenced policy, reviewing each in light of the key decisions. Finally, we conclude by discussing implications for researchers interested in building research-based, family-focused policy.

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY RESEARCH AND RESEARCHERS IN POLICYMAKING

Competing arguments exist about whether universities should engage with policymakers. One view is that universities who expect freedom from government interference should refrain from participating in political activities (Prewitt et al., 2012). In contrast, the Kellogg Commission (1999) argued that land-grant universities have a moral obligation to be “engaged institutions,” putting “critical resources (knowledge and expertise) to work on the problems the communities it serves face” (p. 10). In reality, universities unavoidably engage policy through their decisions about which courses to teach, which majors to offer, and whom to admit (Brennan, King, & Lebeau, 2004).

As with universities, competing views also exist about whether researchers should engage with policymaking. Van der Vossen (2015) argued, for example, that scholars risk contamination of their mission if they engage with the political process. Hopper (2013) expressed concern about researchers being co-opted and feeling less free to report politically unappealing findings to policymakers in positions of power if they engage too much in the “dirty work” of trying to generate impact, which he characterized as the “retailing” of research findings. In contrast, Tseng and Gamoran (2017) urged researchers to bridge the gap to policymaking, arguing that they need not sacrifice rigor to pursue relevance and impact. Multiple scientific associations also have called for researchers to do more (Longest & Huber, 2010).

Considerable evidence exists that connections between academia and policymaking occur, as demonstrated by Owen and Larson (2017) and Maton (2016), who documented extensive partnerships between researchers and policymakers. Researchers still may experience barriers to involvement, though, given that policymaking can be a mysterious and complex process. To break through fog of this uncertainty, we propose three key decisions that may help university researchers respond to these calls for action.

DECISION 1: WHETHER AND HOW TO ENGAGE

The gap between researchers and policymakers is often explained using the “two communities” model, which argues that limited understanding and communication occur because each group represents a different community (Caplan, 1979). In this issue, Bogenschneider, Corbett, and Parrott (2019) updated their community dissonance model that elaborates on the cultural impediments to optimal communication. The theory examines professional culture and several dimensions of institutional culture—preferred decision-making processes, interactional preferences, favored epistemological frameworks, dominant influence loops, and salient goals and stakeholders. The premise of the theory is that better understanding in the research community of the inhabitants and institutions of the policy community can increase communication and trust between the two communities and improve the use of research in policymaking.

One of researchers’ first decision points is determining which community to address, whether to focus primarily on their academic colleagues or whether to also consider ways to make their research relevant to a policy audience. For policy engagement, researchers may decide to shift their focus of inquiry to topics that are on the policy agenda or to incorporate questions with policy relevance into their studies. For example, rather than simply studying links between economic self-sufficiency and pregnancy among at-risk, single mothers, researchers might examine how policy changes affect these links. Take, for instance, Olds’s research that links nurses’ home visits to reductions in Medicaid use (Eckenrode et al., 2010). Researchers might also consider ways to rapidly respond to timely topics while still maintaining methodological rigor. For example, mining existing data sets could allow for quicker turnaround

than collecting new data. Researchers also could make it a priority to translate research findings into policymaker-friendly briefs that summarize policy relevant findings in accessible language.

In addition to influencing a policy outcome or creating policy-relevant dissemination products, another purpose of researcher engagement could be influencing the policy process itself (Prewitt et al., 2012). In our recent study, policymakers reported that one frequent contribution that research makes to policymaking is enhancing debate, dialogue, collaboration, and compromise (Bogenschneider et al., 2017). Conceivably, informing the deliberative processes through which decisions are made could have a longer-term, and perhaps more consequential, impact than informing a single policy decision at one moment in time. For example, when research is used in policy debates, policymakers witness firsthand how useful it can be, which may contribute to setting up a long-term expectation that research could and should be used. Researchers also can informally teach scientific thinking in their speaking and writing by explaining, for example, how often the results have been replicated and when results are based on rigorous designs that enable making claims about cause and effect.

Last, at a time when research is growing in sheer volume and sophistication, some studies focus on policy and some focus on families. Few focus, though, on what is needed to inform family policymaking—studies that are both policy relevant and family focused. Researchers need to think deeply about what their research may mean for family policy by asking questions such as the following: “In what ways, if any, do families contribute to the issue? How are families, not just individuals, affected by the issue? Would incorporating family considerations into the design of studies result in a more complete understanding?” and in policy responses that are more effective and efficient (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010, p. 798)?

DECISION 2: WHAT ROLE TO PLAY

Researchers who wish to engage with policymaking must then decide how to position their influence attempts. Long-standing debates surround the appropriate role of experts in democratic societies. Pielke (2007) generated four possible idealized roles for scientists by crossing the role of experts in a democracy with

the role of science in society. One expert role in a democracy is to stand apart from public debates, contributing information but refraining from active engagement. Another expert role is participating proactively in political debates by aligning with interest groups that enable them to apply their academic expertise as an asset in political battles. These roles also differ according to the role of science in society. In the linear model, scientific consensus must emerge before taking political action, versus the stakeholder model, which presumes complex feedback loops between researchers and policymakers. Crossing these two axes results in four different roles. In two of these roles, scientists simply provide information: The “pure scientist” does so without interacting with policymakers, whereas the “science arbiter” engages with policymakers to answer their specific questions but stays removed from the political process. In the other two roles, scientists engage policy alternatives: “Honest brokers” provide research about multiple options, expanding or clarifying the scope of the choices available to policymakers, whereas “issue advocates” engage directly in the policymaking process and recommend a preferred policy decision that has the effect of narrowing the scope of choices. Pielke (2007) acknowledged that these are ideal types and explains that the “real world rarely conforms to such distinctions” (p. 1). Nonetheless, they offer a useful framework for how researchers can position themselves amidst policy and politics.

A particular challenge for scientists is how best to communicate with policymakers about uncertainty in scientific results. Conditions of uncertainty may require researchers to be more engaged, but they also increase the importance of transparency, particularly when policy issues are controversial. Pielke cautions about “stealth issue advocacy,” where one claims to be clarifying or expanding alternatives but really is attempting to limit them. For example, a stealth advocate would imply that a range of options is comprehensive but, in fact, presents a narrow range that was selected for undisclosed reasons. Douglas (2009) also commented on this, noting that given the vast reach of many policy decisions, it is crucial for scientists to be transparent about the “social and ethical implications of error in their work,” which can help policymakers ensure that their decisions are “appropriate and accountable” (p. 136). Determining how best to position evidence and values in their

work can be challenging for researchers; the role they decide to play will shape the selection of a specific influence strategy, which is the topic of the next section.

DECISION 3: WHEN AND HOW TO INFLUENCE POLICYMAKING

Deciding when and how to influence policymaking requires researchers deciding what their goal will be and to select the specific techniques they will use. These decisions are interrelated because influence techniques vary in their fit with different parts of the policymaking process. This process has been depicted in multiple models that typically include at least four phases. Formulation occurs when the need for policy creation or revision is recognized and policy strategies are planned. Adoption takes place when policies are formulated and go through the legislative process. Implementation occurs when policies are carried out, often including the creation of rules and regulations; and revision takes place when policies are evaluated and revised (Maton, 2016). Although this description seems orderly and linear, the process instead is “iterative, interactive, dynamic, and cyclical” (Maton, 2016, p. 27). Multiple steps may occur at the same time, steps may occur multiple times, and the cycle is constantly churning.

Researchers also must determine which approaches to take in their involvement in policy. A wide variety of approaches is possible, including both basic and applied foci, original and translational techniques, and qualitative and quantitative methods. Boyer (2016) famously broadened the conception of what it means to be an engaged university in contemporary society by defining four domains of scholarship — discovery, integration, application, and teaching—which help explain the different approaches researchers may take. We consider each domain of scholarship with an eye toward policy-relevant, family-focused policy, reviewing first what the research literature says, then what the policymakers in our study said.

Boyer’s Scholarship of Discovery

The scholarship of discovery, akin to basic research, is based on the intrinsic value of all knowledge and, for our purposes, its contributions to our understanding of families and the

human condition (Boyer, 2016). Beyond the knowledge that is produced, the use of the scientific method provides policymakers with assurance that the research is rigorous and reliable.

Ethnographic studies. An example of the scholarship of discovery is ethnographic research, which comprises a variety of techniques (Carlson, Singer, Stephens, & Sterk, 2009) that share an emphasis on thick description, or detailed, often insider-based observations of the real lives of people being observed (Thompson, 2001). Ethnographic methods are frequently used to make visible the struggles and strengths of individuals or groups within a local context or culture that may not be readily apparent or a priority to those outside that environment:

The deepest and most enduring injustices, like the unending humiliation of African Americans and the miserable wages paid to unorganized workers are always downplayed by the political parties and by most of the press. . . [and] usually go unmentioned by candidates for political office. (Rorty, 1999, p. 257)

Ethnography may be of particular interest to legislators because of its emphasis on description and detail. Legislators in our study emphasized the importance of incorporating stories into research results whenever possible. One legislator explained, “I usually tell the story and then I talk about the statistics, because people won’t remember the statistics, but they will always remember the story.” Legislators use storytelling themselves throughout the policy process, such as when a topic first comes up on the policy agenda or during testimony for a bill. Another legislator said: “You do have to relate the numbers to kind of real-world stories. If it’s just an isolated, restricted environment, people are going to go ‘Well, that’s not the real world.’”

Applied policy research. With applied policy research, scholars conduct a study, but the question of interest goes beyond simply advancing our knowledge base to advancing knowledge on a question that has confronted and confounded policymakers. Policymakers and practitioners may be involved in shaping research questions and designing the study, as well as disseminating findings, which may also include working with the media (Owen & Larson, 2017).

In our study, legislators made clear that a critical characteristic of the utility of research is that it be policy relevant. Legislators mentioned relevance in terms of research being situated in the policy context—research that “answers the questions they’re looking for.” Collaborating with policymakers throughout the research process inherently meets this need.

Boyer’s Scholarship of Integration

Another domain of scholarship is integration, which Boyer (2016) defined as giving “meaning to isolated facts” by identifying meaningful patterns and trends across studies and disciplines (p. 64). The scholarship of integration has assumed heightened importance in an era of increasing specialization (Kellogg Commission, 1999).

Meta-analyses and systematic reviews. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews of literature are inherently useful for decision making throughout the policy process, given that they provide an overview of a broader literature base (Bero & Jadad, 1997). They can provide information on problems facing states, synthesize findings about program effectiveness, and reveal gaps in evidence or questions that remain unanswered (e.g., Lipsey, 2012). They can cover a plethora of topics and are particularly useful for time-pressured policymakers.

In our study, legislators mentioned the benefits of meta-analyses and systematic reviews as tools for helping shape debate and addressing a problem mentioned by many legislators—finding the “truth” in the research. Legislators explained that when multiple studies present conflicting evidence, it is difficult to draw conclusions. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews help with this problem, as one legislator explained:

[A meta-analysis] was great. . . [T]hat was very helpful because after I read all the individual studies, I was still torn. What do I do? But then when I found this one who had done his research of all those studies, it was very helpful.

Meta-analyses also helped legislators when using research to persuade or educate colleagues. A legislator stated: “It’s easy to discount an individual study. When you get several, I think it. . . requires people to stop and think a little harder.”

Benefit–cost analyses. Systematic analyses of benefits and costs are a popular element of a larger movement toward evidence-based policymaking, which has the goal of focusing funding on programs or policies for which there is documented evidence of impact and that compare favorably to alternatives in terms of cost-effectiveness. The method consists of economic calculations to document direct and indirect financial and other costs, as well as benefits resulting from program or policy options (White & VanLandingham, 2015). Administrations since the 1960s have promoted such analyses at the federal level, yet routine use in the states has been less common (White & VanLandingham, 2015).

Benefit–cost analyses can be a key resource for legislators who are in the business of weighing competing demands for resources. As one legislator in our study stated,

I would argue [good] research doesn't just talk about the touchy-feely but taps down to what matters to us. What does it cost? Who does it affect? . . . Always draw it to the money, because in the end—you know, I hate to say it like that—but we've got to know it.

Boyer's Scholarship of Application

In this domain, scholarship is applied to a specific human problem such as a particular challenge that families are facing. According to Boyer, scholarship that “both applies and contributes to human knowledge is particularly needed in a world in which huge, almost intractable problems call for the skills and insights only the academy can provide” (2016, p. 68).

Program development and evaluation. An applied approach researchers use to influence policy is producing an effective solution to a policy problem. Researchers have designed and evaluated large numbers of programs to address problems such as child maltreatment, marital instability, early learning, and risky behavior among youth, and these programs often are implemented in a variety of locations.

In our study, legislators emphasized their appreciation of research demonstrating scalability across state lines. As one legislator summarized, “The data-driven strategies that

are best practices that have worked in other states completely drives my entire conversation.” Legislators noted an appreciation for research overall, particularly when it provided evaluation or assessment data to show what works and what does not. As one legislator said:

I think there's a level of validity that comes when research is added that frankly is priceless. And when research is connected to not only what's happening, but here are some solutions that have been tried, and this is what happened with those.

Boyer's Scholarship of Teaching

Defining teaching as scholarship was perhaps the most groundbreaking element of Boyer's (2016) model. Less well defined in Boyer's initial writing, the scholarship of teaching has come to mean that research becomes relevant only if it is communicated to and understood by others. According to Boyer (2016), “Without the teaching function, the continuity of knowledge will be broken and the store of human knowledge dangerously diminished” (p. 69).

Policy forums. An extensive literature review on disseminating research to policymakers concluded that the most effective method is forums that provide opportunities for discussion or that adopt a collaborative approach (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). What may be most valuable is “less to generate novel ideas or promote policy ideas in the political marketplace than to create a space for talk and discussion outside the contested turf of bureaucratic and partisan warfare” (Smith, 1991, p. 212).

In our study, legislators expressed the wish that they had easier access to researchers and their work. One legislator said: “We have great colleges and universities around this state, and I don't think we utilize them enough. And part of that is because we don't know what they have.” To overcome this challenge, legislators most often recommended events that bring legislators and researchers together for back-and-forth conversation that would provide legislators the opportunity to ask questions and get immediate feedback. For example, a legislator stated, “If you can get people there who are experts in their field, that's even better than just presenting the data on paper because then committee members have an opportunity to ask questions, and so there's a back-and-forth exchange.”

BRIDGING THE RESEARCH–POLICY DIVIDE:
CASE EXAMPLES

Social scientists have engaged in policy by using diverse methods for different purposes with disparate populations. Maton (2016) conducted an extensive review of researchers who were involved in social policy, 47 of whom were working full-time in academic settings. The rich examples in the book incorporate both interviews with researchers about the reasons for the approaches they chose, as well as “insider” information about their motivations behind choosing particular approaches, the outcomes of their policy efforts, and how their approaches changed over time. We have selected from Maton’s book examples specifically related to family policy at the state level—each that has evidence of policy impact—with the aim of applying Boyer’s model (2016) to illustrate the diverse ways researchers have engaged in policymaking.

Ethnography

Yoshikawa (2011) studied working parents without documentation and their children in New York City, revealing significant risks to child health, cognitive and socioemotional development, and educational opportunities. Yoshikawa reported that in an effort to keep the findings from simply “sitting on the shelf,” he shared the results of his study with the New York Immigration Coalition, which used the findings to guide its lobbying efforts (Maton, 2016, p. 202). Later, Yoshikawa was asked to assist with policy implementation by consulting with local sites. What started out as a one-way flow of information ultimately became a reciprocal relationship, in which both he and advocates shared expertise and knowledge to inform policy design and implementation.

What has been the impact? The early lobbying efforts resulted in funding from New York City for education of undocumented parents, a first in the country (Maton, 2016). As the new program was implemented, Yoshikawa’s research guided outreach efforts to successfully connect eligible families with resources. Later, he completed a report for the Migration Policy Institute (Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). This intermediary organization helped shape a series of executive actions by the Obama administration in 2014 that expanded options for

undocumented parents whose children are U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents.

Considerations for university researchers. Initially, Yoshikawa operated as a pure scientist, sharing the results of his research with an intermediary organization only after the study was completed and with no direct interaction with the processes or products of policymaking (Maton, 2016). However, he did select an issue to study that had strong policy implications. Moreover, his framing of immigration in terms of its implications for children, many of whom were U.S. citizens, focused attention on a population and an issue—the future workforce—that policymakers of most political persuasions care about. Ultimately, Yoshikawa became deeply engaged with not only the problems but also the processes and products of the policy community. He operated as an honest broker, connecting both legislative and executive branch officials with research experts to expand their understanding of evidence. Ultimately, he provided research evidence that guided policy formulation, implementation, and refinement.

An appeal of ethnographic research is that it can generate narratives easily understandable not only by members of the policy community but also by members of the public and the press (Becker, Gans, Newman, & Vaughan, 2004; Maton, 2016). Ethnographies can reveal previously unrecognized problems, the need for new or revised policies, or new ways of thinking about existing problems. They also can reveal insider perspectives about gaps, inconsistencies, and unintended consequences related to existing policies. A challenge associated with ethnographic research is that its reliance on personal observations and researchers’ interpretations, along with public unfamiliarity with standards of scientific quality for such research, can make it vulnerable to concerns about researcher bias (Martin, 2013; Thompson, 2001). Because ethnographic research by definition adopts a critical lens when examining the circumstances of groups who lack visibility or power (Becker et al., 2004; Thompson, 2001), concern for social justice is inherent, making methodological rigor and transparency even more important in ensuring that findings are not dismissed by policymakers (Whipps & Yoshikawa, 2016). Another challenge is that the long horizon needed to complete thorough ethnographic studies makes it difficult to design them with

the goal of informing specific policy decisions at a particular time. However, immigration, like many other family issues, is an ongoing concern that is not quickly resolved.

Applied Policy Research

Steinberg's work on juvenile justice with the MacArthur Foundation Research Network serves as a rich example of applied policy research. Steinberg and his team studied the extent to which adolescents can participate as defendants in their own trial designed with the specific intent for the findings to have policy relevance. Participants in the study were adolescents and adults from four different states, including both community members and individuals in the justice system, who answered questions regarding their competence to stand trial, as well as their judgments and decisions throughout the adjudicative process (Grisso & Steinberg, 2005). Throughout the project, Steinberg and his colleagues engaged policymakers, practitioners, and the media to formulate research questions, receive continuous feedback, and ensure that the work was highly policy relevant (Grisso & Steinberg, 2005). Feedback was solicited from policymakers and practitioners with a wide range of opinions to reduce suspicions of bias when the findings were released. The team also worked closely with key journalists to elevate the issue of juvenile justice reform onto the policy agenda (Maton, 2016) and to increase awareness of the role of families, specifically how parents' monitoring of youth can steer them away from trouble (Steinberg, 2007).

What has been the impact? When the study was complete, the research team worked closely with practitioners to translate the findings to be easily accessible and understandable to members of the legal community (Grisso & Steinberg, 2005). They shared findings with key stakeholders, including attorneys, judges, and practitioner organizations. In the end, Steinberg's work had a substantial impact on the justice system. Steinberg was cited by the U.S. Supreme Court in its decision to abolish the juvenile death penalty (*Roper v Simmons*, 2005). Also, legislators at the state level have revised policies such as those evaluating whether youth have the competence to stand trial in adult court (Steinberg, 2007).

Steinberg and his team were purposeful in their solicitation of feedback and keeping an

open mind regarding what they would find. They knew this was critical to increase their credibility and to decrease the odds that they would be accused of knowing the results before having ever conducted the study. Steinberg and his team recognized that there were multiple solutions or policy options that could be implied from their findings (e.g., banning adult trial for youth younger than age 15; requiring competency testing of youth of a particular age or mental status), so their approach was to be forthcoming in acknowledging that their research was not situated to comment on all of them (Grisso & Steinberg, 2005).

Considerations for university researchers. Steinberg's strategy was to engage with all parts of the policymaking community, as well as other stakeholders. A specific problem directly related to policy was selected for study. Unlike most of the other case examples, Steinberg and colleagues engaged not only with policymakers but also with journalists and practitioners during the earliest stages of conceptualizing their project, as part of a deliberate effort to generate policy impact. Once the research was complete and published in scientific journals, the team developed products specifically for the policymaking community and delivered them using strategies that incorporated specific elements at all phases of the policymaking process.

Steinberg and colleagues operated as honest brokers by engaging with policymakers to expand policy options by proposing alternative approaches to juveniles in the justice system and identifying ways in which existing policies are lacking. They stopped short, however, of making policy recommendations. Unlike many other policy-relevant efforts, they explicitly and successfully targeted the judicial branch of government.

Meta-Analyses and Systematic Reviews

Here, we offer the example of Lipsey and colleagues (Lipsey, 2009), who conducted a series of meta-analyses of research evidence regarding interventions for juvenile offenders with the goal of translating this knowledge into practice. Lipsey (2012) used those findings to create a tool—the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol for Services to Juvenile Offenders (SPEP)—for use by service providers and juvenile justice government agencies to assess

how consistent their operation was with what research has found to be effective. The tool was designed to cover only programs with a therapeutic effect, such as family counseling, mentoring, cognitive behavior, and vocational training. Initially, Lipsey had relatively little contact with policymakers but eventually started receiving invitations to speak at forums attended by representatives of multiple branches of government. Ultimately, an agency official helped facilitate conversations with other agency representatives and provided guidance as the results of the meta-analyses were incorporated into the tool that could easily be used by officials to weigh program alternatives (Maton, 2016).

What has been the impact? The validity of SPEP was tested using data from Arizona's Juvenile Justice Services Division. Findings were promising, providing initial evidence that it can help identify effective programs and improve ineffective ones (Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, & Carver, 2010). SPEP focuses on reducing recidivism but also has been found to benefit family and peer relationships, mental health, and school attendance (Lipsey et al., 2010). SPEP has been piloted in three states and shown promise as a tool that can be used to improve state juvenile justice systems.

Considerations for university researchers. In general, meta-analyses are directed to the research community, given that they typically include highly technical calculations of effect sizes, long tables, and a focus on interpreting rather than applying the findings of existing research. It is certainly possible, however, to select policy-relevant problems for study and to translate the results for policymakers, as Lipsey's work demonstrates. As with both Olds and Yoshikawa, Lipsey initially operated as a pure scientist (Maton, 2016), but with the help of an agency official was able to begin engaging policymakers directly and operating as an honest broker, which ultimately increased the impact of his work.

Meta-analyses have the potential to be useful at all phases of policymaking if the focus is well chosen. For example, analyses demonstrating the existence of a problem could spur policy formulation, and analyses testing policy impact could inform program refinement. Challenges associated with meta-analyses include the fact that they seem unlikely to influence policymakers unless they are translated

into products that are easily accessible and understandable to policymakers. Once this has occurred, the scorecard spirit of meta-analyses is likely to appeal to policymakers in multiple branches of government as well as stakeholders outside government.

Benefit–Cost Analyses

A well-known state example of benefit–cost analysis comes from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP), which has developed a standardized multistep approach to providing results to state legislators using a *Consumer Reports*–type format (National Research Council, NRC, 2014). In 2005, WSIPP, a nonprofit organization that conducts research at the direction of the Washington State Legislature or its board, was asked to review prison needs and cost-effective programs to maintain low crime rates and reduce costs to taxpayers (Aos, 2007). WSIPP conducted a meta-analysis of 571 rigorous evaluations of adult corrections, juvenile corrections, and prevention programs. The analysis determined each program's effect on recidivism compared to conditions of no treatment and treatment as usual. These benefits to crime reduction were compared to the per-participant costs to taxpayers and victims, determining a net benefit or net loss for each program. When viewed through the family impact lens, the programs that were most effective in reducing future crime and in producing benefits that substantially outweighed program costs were the ones addressing juveniles. Of these, the five most cost-effective rehabilitation programs and the single most cost-effective prevention program employed a family approach (Bogenschneider, 2014).

What has been the impact? The Washington State Legislature implemented the recommendations of this benefit–cost analysis by redirecting funds away from less successful efforts and toward evidence-based, cost-beneficial programs. Taxpayers saved an estimated \$200 million, the cost of building a new prison (Aos, 2007). Nationwide, White and VanLandingham (2015) empirically assessed the impact of benefit–cost analyses using data and documents obtained through 260 key informant interviews. On the basis of their interviews, White and VanLandingham (2015) classified each benefit–cost analysis as having direct (e.g., incorporated into legislation), indirect (e.g., received public

attention), or no known impact. Many (52%) of the 190 reports identified by informants had documentable impact, direct in 65% of the cases and indirect in 35%. However, the technical quality and thoroughness of the studies varied widely, with one-third of the studies providing no conclusions regarding return on investment (White & VanLandingham, 2015). White and VanLandingham's work (2015) also led to the Results First initiative, supported by multiple philanthropic funders, which aims to extend the Washington model to 14 states and two counties in California (VanLandingham & Drake, 2012).

Considerations for university researchers. Because benefit–cost analyses compare policy options in financial terms, this *Consumer Reports*–type analyses connects well to policymakers' interests in fiscal impacts. Results presented in forms such as dollars returned per dollar invested are easy to understand and are appealing products for policymakers. However, lack of consistency in methods may mean that the most rigorous studies may not get the most attention (NRC, 2014). Benefit–cost analyses are especially useful during the formulation, implementation and revision phases of the policymaking process, during which they can assist policymakers in choosing from among available alternatives. Benefit–cost analyses are likely to be of greatest interest to legislators and agency officials in the executive branch of government, but members of the judiciary also may find them useful, such as when considering sentencing alternatives (e.g., incarceration vs. diversion programs).

In their most rigorous form, benefit–cost analyses are useful to researchers operating as honest brokers comparing multiple policy alternatives but can also be useful to science arbiters for responding to policymakers' questions about the merits of a single program. Issue advocates may be eager to communicate positive results of benefit–cost analyses to promote a specific program. Risks associated with benefit–cost analyses are that time pressures and the difficulty of securing the necessary resources, expertise, and data can lead to methodological shortcuts such as failing to consider intangible benefits or indirect costs (White & VanLandingham, 2015). Such shortcomings can radically alter results and lead to less-than-optimal policy decisions.

Program Development and Evaluation

Olds (2010) developed the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program to improve outcomes for babies born to low-income, unmarried expectant mothers. The program was designed on the basis of scientific evidence, and over the course of more than 2 decades, Olds completed randomized controlled trials—a gold standard for program evaluation—in multiple locations across the country. This rigorous evaluation demonstrated that the program was effective and generated significant cost savings (O'Brien, 2009).

As awareness of the positive results of Olds's program grew, communities around the country began to adopt it. During this time, Olds resisted overtures to implement nationally until the evidence was stronger and mechanisms could be put in place to ensure fidelity (Maton, 2016; Olds, 2016). As the program expanded to other states with government and philanthropic funding, a separate organization was created to manage program growth (O'Brien, 2009). This allowed Olds to continue his commitment to testing program effectiveness (Olds, 2016).

What has been the impact? According to Olds, his most significant impact has been demonstrating the usefulness of rigorous research in policymaking (Maton, 2016). In 2009, President Obama explicitly promised to expand the Nurse-Family Partnership program as part of an effort to focus on programs with proven results (Haskins & Margolis, 2014). Congress ultimately provided \$1.5 billion to states through the Affordable Care Act that could be used to support the Nurse Family Partnership and other home-visitation programs (Haskins & Margolis, 2014). Today, the program is used in 42 states and has served more than 260,000 families, with a \$5 return for every \$1 invested (NFP, n.d.).

Considerations for university researchers. As did Yoshikawa, Olds chose a policy-relevant problem. He initially did not engage with the processes or products already used in the policymaking community (Olds, 2016), but ultimately became deeply engaged with processes and products. Also, as did Yoshikawa, Olds (2016) initially operated as a pure scientist, and later, his efforts contained elements of an honest broker. He turned over the role of issue advocate to others. His primary emphasis was on basing policy decisions on strong evidence. The non-profit organization associated with his program

solely advocated for the Nurse-Family Partnership with staff lobbyists and policy-relevant products (NFP, 2017).

By developing and testing a specific solution to a recognized policy problem, Olds's work was well suited for policymakers, particularly during the formulation and adoption phases of policymaking. The program achieved high visibility and substantial growth during the Obama administration—an impact that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to plan for, given the 30 years that it took Olds to accumulate a body of evidence he deemed sufficient.

Policy Forums

This section focuses on the State Family Impact Seminar model. Building on a series of seminars on Capitol Hill, state Family Impact Seminars are designed to (a) increase respect for and use of research evidence in policymaking; (b) provide neutral, nonpartisan opportunities for legislators to engage in open dialogue for fostering relationships and finding common ground; and (c) encourage legislators to examine policies and programs through the lens of family impact (Bogenschneider, 2018). The seminars, organized by university and Cooperative Extension faculty, include presentations by researchers, briefing reports, and dialogue among participants, who usually include legislators, legislative staff, executive branch officials, and researchers. Since 1999, over 225 seminars have been held in more than 20 states and the District of Columbia.

What has been the impact? A common protocol is administered at every seminar, and several additional evaluations have assessed whether the seminars achieve their goals. Legislators report using seminar information to share with colleagues, incorporate into speeches and discussions, and develop or evaluate legislation. Examples of connections to specific legislation include the following (Bogenschneider, 2014):

- In Oregon, following the first seminar, a refundable child-care tax credit was adopted, which the legislative sponsor attributed, in part, to information provided by the seminars. In 2003, almost 26,000 taxpayers claimed the credit.
- In Nebraska, after a seminar on rising health-care costs, a state Children's Health Insurance Program law was passed; in 2009, more than 48,000 children were served.

- In Indiana, new legislation was proposed to expand children's access to preschool education less than 24 hours after a seminar focused on its long-term benefits.

The seminars also have had significant impacts on policymakers' attitudes about research and researchers, as well as their ability to build relationships with their own colleagues. In follow-up evaluations of a Wisconsin seminar on the science of early brain development, 83% of legislators reported that because of the seminars, they were "quite a bit" more likely to see the practical value of research, an impact that transcends any single seminar (based on phone interviews of 18 legislators 3 to 5 months after the seminar, with a 69% response rate). In this same evaluation, 72% of legislators reported that because of the seminars they were "quite a bit" more likely to view researchers as approachable, and 50% said they were "quite a bit" more likely to get to know their colleagues on the other side of the aisle (Bogenschneider, 2018).

Considerations for university researchers. Family Impact Seminars address the processes and products of the policy community. The problem focus is selected not by researchers but by legislators, with the goal of selecting timely topics that are rising on the policy agenda or currently under deliberation. Every seminar topic—whether it be education, jobs, health care, or long-term care—is intentionally viewed through the lens of family impact to assess how families are affected and whether there are disparate effects on diverse types of families. For example, a seminar on brain science emphasized how children's ability to cope with toxic stress depends, in part, on stable, caring relationships with parents and caregivers.

Family Impact Seminars also are tailored to the policymaking process through their positioning to share research directly with legislators very close to the policy adoption phase, although information is often presented that also can influence policy formulation and revision. Two explicit elements of process are building sustained relationships of trust between university researchers and legislators, and promoting nonpartisan, off-the-record learning environments for legislators. Seminars also incorporate products that policymakers will use, specifically briefing reports and speaker presentations that are customized for the policy community

(Bogenschneider, 2018). Although the primary focus is state legislators, executive branch officials often are involved in the planning of the seminars and participate in the seminars and in discussion sessions pertaining to their specific interests.

Family Impact Seminars teams operate as honest brokers, promoting the use of scientific evidence in policymaking without recommending specific policy options. Speakers are encouraged to discuss the quality of evidence associated with policy alternatives and often can alert policymakers to nuances or complexities in the data that can help them evaluate information they receive from other sources. By “curating” researchers from around the country to educate legislators in their state, seminar organizers can provide credible information about a wide variety of topics without being limited to the expertise within their own university or state.

Challenges associated with Family Impact Seminars include that they are specifically intended to be long-term activities and require adherence to a specific set of best practices specified by the seminar network. It can be challenging for organizers to maintain sufficient awareness of the research about multiple policy topics to ensure that the evidence presented is always the most current. Key to longevity of any Family Impact Seminar effort, and its influence on policymaking, is the ability to gain and maintain a reputation as a trusted source of relevant and nonpartisan information with policymakers across the political spectrum.

DISCUSSION

The case examples in this article exemplify that researchers have made and can make significant impacts on policy. However, just because researchers can contribute to policymaking does not resolve the question of whether they should do so. We propose here a framework that includes three key decisions researchers can use to guide their own strategies for engaging with policymaking, illustrating them with case examples. Although not exhaustive, the examples offer insights into ways researchers may initially engage in policy-relevant research, how that work may evolve over time, and which considerations to keep in mind.

Consistent with Boyer’s (2016) model, the case examples demonstrate that multiple kinds

of scholarship can successfully inform policymaking. Some researchers used a strategy that builds on their skills and interests, whereas others took on efforts that stretched them outside their comfort zones. What is consistent across the case example, however, is that the onus may be more on researchers than policymakers to reach out; the examples here demonstrate diverse pathways to involvement, yet it was most often the researcher who initiated the connection that led to a strong research–policy partnership. At the state and local levels, researchers may more easily facilitate these connections compared to the federal level, given that policymakers serve a smaller number of constituents, have fewer built-in sources for research, and have closer ties to local universities, particularly those that are publicly funded (Weiss, 1999). These connections may be especially appropriate for land-grant universities and the Cooperative Extension System in each state.

The examples also demonstrate that to have an impact on public policymaking, researchers chose to focus on problems, products, or processes that were policy relevant, all while being cognizant of timing and relevance to the policy process. For example, researchers organizing Family Impact Seminars or conducting benefit–cost analyses (e.g., WSIPP) selected policy-relevant problems by receiving input from legislators on which problems on the policy agenda were most pressing. Other researchers selected problems with clear implications for policy and for families (e.g., immigration, juvenile justice). Products that did not inherently engage in policymaking (e.g., a meta-analysis) were less likely to have an impact on policymaking, but when conducted on a timely topic and given the proper “vehicle” (e.g., creating a tool from the meta-analysis) still made an impact. Across examples, researchers were knowledgeable of the policymaking process and disseminated findings in a timely fashion (e.g., Family Impact Seminars) or worked directly with policymakers throughout the policy process to inform decision making (e.g., Olds, 2010).

Researchers also have choices about the depth of their involvement. The examples mentioned here and elsewhere (Maton, 2016) demonstrate that involvement may evolve and widen over time; it is possible for researchers to start small with their involvement in the policy process rather than diving in all at

once (Maton, 2016). Most often, researchers started with a focus on problems or products but ultimately ended up becoming involved in building relationships with policymakers in ways that influenced policy outcomes and policymaking processes. For example, Olds focused on improving outcomes for babies born to low-income, unmarried, expectant mothers but eventually worked directly with policymakers as his evaluations demonstrated policy-relevant outcomes in cost-effective ways. Yoshikawa initially sought to highlight the challenges faced by immigrant families but ultimately became deeply engaged with policymaking. Researchers across examples found ways to communicate effectively and build relationships with policymakers, which were critical aspects of their success. Once a relationship between a researcher and policymaker was established, it seemed to grow.

Considering Pielke's (2007) classifications, these researchers appeared to have begun with the idea that they would operate as pure scientists, but ultimately became much more engaged. Importantly, in almost all examples, researchers were explicit in mentioning that getting policymakers to use research is different from driving them toward a particular outcome, such as issue advocates would do. Researchers positioned themselves as honest brokers and credited their success to this approach. Scholars integrated their work with the policy process while maintaining a level of transparency regarding their decision making and the implications of their findings. As Grisso and Steinberg (2005) eloquently stated: "The information that [scientists] create is bankrupt if it is the product of a stacked deck. They will utterly fail if their *motives* drive their *methods*" (p. 620). Grisso and Steinberg (2005) noted that they waited to release results until after they were published in a peer-reviewed journal. They also refused to offer a specific policy solution based on the findings, because they thought it would be detrimental to the credibility of their work (see also Douglas, 2009). The science arbiter role was not evident in the case examples we reviewed, although it is possible that it occurred as part of the journey from pure scientist to honest broker that many of the researchers seemed to travel.

Another consideration for researchers is the interconnectedness of their chosen strategy and its fit with the various phases of the policy process. The policymaking path is often messy and

nonlinear, but as the examples here show, some strategies may lend themselves more easily to different points in the process. Benefit-cost analyses, for example, may particularly be useful to policymakers who are formulating new policies based on community needs (e.g., the need for prison beds), deciding which of several competing policies to adopt, or considering the refunding of existing programs. In contrast, meta-analyses may be very useful as policymakers make decisions regarding implementation strategies or policy revision (e.g., the tool Lipsey created). For topics that have an underdeveloped research base and are in the early stages of policy formulation, ethnography may be a good fit, as it can bring to light new problems or topics for policymakers to consider. Although legislators will ultimately decide how and when they use research throughout the policy process, researchers may benefit by being cognizant of when their work may be best received.

The strategy researchers choose also will have implications for the ease of evaluating its impact on policymaking. For example, when a benefit-cost analysis directly results in more funding being awarded to a particular program, the policy impact is easier to discern than research efforts that target building relationships with policymakers or increasing policymakers' awareness of problems and a range of policy solutions. Researchers may need to consider upfront how to measure the impact they wish to have.

Finally, when researchers consider how to engage in family policymaking, they need to take two additional steps—examining the policy relevance of the issue and viewing the issue through the lens of family impact (see Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010). First, determining the policy relevance of an issue may entail communicating directly with policy experts—policymakers or their staff, or knowledge brokers who have existing relationships with policymakers. Second, determining the family relevance of an issue may involve working with family experts—researchers or family professionals who would know how the issues affect and are affected by families. For example, Aos's benefit-cost analysis revealed that family-based approaches were the most effective way to prevent or remediate juvenile crime. A Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar moved the policy response to early brain science beyond the individual to how family relationships affect a

baby and how family-focused, evidence-based policies can improve the lives of vulnerable children.

Our analysis is limited in several ways, five of which we mention here. First, there are undoubtedly additional questions that researchers must answer for themselves as they engage in policymaking. For example, other individual factors may be academic career stage and political sensitivity of one's personal line of research. Second, making good decisions about strategy is only one part of a much larger set of challenging tasks, such as knowing which information is timely and which communication channels policymakers prefer (e.g., Bogenschneider, 2018; Longest & Huber, 2010; Maton, 2016). Third, we have privileged policymakers and the system in which they operate by making recommendations for researchers to cater to policymakers. Other important stakeholders are not considered, including the general public and the media, who also have an impact on the policy process. Fourth, we selected examples to be illustrative of the diverse range of ways that researchers may engage in policymaking, but we recognize that there may be other important examples of how to engage. Finally, we have focused on individual factors, but we fully recognize that the engagement of researchers is influenced by the context in which they operate and the value that universities accord to policy work (e.g., land-grant, public, or private university settings; resource availability; receptivity of university leaders to faculty involvement in public policy; expectations for promotion; Tseng & Gamoran, 2017).

Without a doubt, science has demonstrated enormous value to a range of societal problems (Pielke, 2007). Legislators in our study agreed, frequently noting that they wanted to use research evidence but thought that universities do not do enough to make their researchers and research topics readily available (e.g., unawareness of existing searchable university researcher databases). Thus, researchers may have a willing audience eager to use their work, but the onus appears to be on them to initiate relationships with policymaking. Researchers could be effective in connecting with policymakers but their decisions about getting involved depend on choices about whether, when, and how to engage in the policy process.

AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors thank the state legislators who contributed their time and expertise to the study cited in this article of how research and relationships with colleagues affect policymaking. Bogenschneider also extends sincere appreciation to the W. T. Grant Foundation for funding the study and for their ongoing commitment to building a body of knowledge to improve the use of research evidence in policymaking.

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