

# Issues in Bridging the Divide between Policymakers and Researchers

**Marcie Jefferys, Ph.D**

**Kate Troy, MSW and MPP Candidate**

**Nora Slawik, MPA Candidate**

**Elizabeth Lightfoot, Ph.D**

**Presented by Kate Troy**

**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**

# Acknowledgments

- Council on Public Engagement
- Members of the Minnesota Legislature
- Children, Youth and Family Consortium Policy Work Group

# Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to learn more about:

- Policymakers' views of research
- How they use research in their work
- Their ideas for strengthening the collaboration
- Their opinions on a specific model for increased communication (Family Policy Fellows model)

# Methodology

- Sample
  - Convenience sample of 20 legislators
  - 10 representatives, 10 senators
  - 10 Republicans, 10 Democrats
- Telephone interviews in summer 2006
- Open-ended questionnaire with 3 sections
- Responses were given pattern codes for purposes of thematic analysis

# Limitations of the Study

- Sample
  - Size
  - Non-random
- Responses are based on self-reports versus observation

# Survey Findings

- Most policymakers (17) had experience with academic research prior to serving in the Legislature. They gained experience through:
  - Employment/work-related tasks
  - Academic course work (11)

# Findings

- Most policymakers use research in their work as legislators. The most commonly cited issues were:
  - Early childhood
  - Education
  - Transportation
  - Health care

# Findings

- Policymakers reported using research from multiple sources:
  - Nonpartisan House or Senate Research Departments (most frequently mentioned source)
  - Lobbyists
  - House or Senate Caucus Research (partisan)
  - University researchers
  - Others mentioned more than once include advocates, interests groups, Legislative Reference Library, and State Agency Staff



# Findings

- Legislators most often reported using research to inform their position on a bill. Other purposes noted include:
  - Developing legislation
  - Responding to constituent concerns
  - Gaining personal knowledge
- Several legislators indicating using research for numerous purposes

# Findings

- Half of legislators interviewed reported being contacted personally by a researcher. The most commonly cited purposes for contact included:
  - U of MN Center for Transportation Studies
  - The Legislature’s Early Childhood Caucus
  - “Capitol Conversations” (University-sponsored seminars offered to legislators at the Capitol during the legislative session)

# Findings

- Most policymakers (16) reported that researchers and universities should be reaching out to legislators to share their work.
  - *“I think politicians can govern to a degree by instinct but I think the truth is in the facts. To the extent that better more in-depth research can guide public policy, our state will be better off for it” (Male, Republican).*
  - *“I think that each committee would do a much better job if they weren’t just writing the bills based on what advocates want, but if they were writing their bills based on an informed set of facts about the best practices from all over. One source should be academic research” (Female, Democrat).*

# Findings

- A small minority of legislators expressed reservations, citing concerns that:
  - Researcher-initiated contact would be biased
    - “They should be reaching out as far as that they are available to us...I trust it more if I contact the entity and ask them for specific details” (Male, Republican).*
  - They would be overwhelmed by information

# Findings

- What makes research credible?
  - Unbiased
  - From a source known to provide objective analysis
  - Peer reviewed
  - Replicable
  - Based on fact
  - Not funded by an entity with a political agenda
- Half the respondents reported a belief that academic research is generally unbiased

# Findings

- Others reported skepticism because:
  - Researchers are affected by their own biases  
*“I think all research is somewhat biased. Everyone starts with assumptions and works to prove them”*  
(Female, Republican).
  - Funding sources are biased  
*“...More and more, academic research is being funded by people I don’t trust”* (Male, Democrat).

# Findings

- Most policymakers were uncertain if researchers are researching the “right” issues because they are unsure what work is being done at the University.

*“That is a big chasm between researchers and policymakers—the failure to interact and know if the right things are being researched” (Male, Democrat).*

# Findings

- Legislators' insights into "the failure to interact":
  - Research is not conveyed in a method that is usable or understandable for legislators
  - Legislators do not ask the hard questions that research could help address
  - "Research lags the idea" (Female, Democrat)



# Findings

- Limits to the usefulness of academic research in policymaking
  - There is too much information
  - The format is inaccessible
  - Research timelines and the legislative schedule can be incompatible
  - May be bias

# Findings

- Legislators' ideas for improving the utility of University of Minnesota research:
  - Format research findings in a way that is brief and accessible to non-academics
    - Preference for concise one-page summaries
    - An option of getting the full report
    - Use language that is easily understood by non-academics

*“If it gets too technical when you’re reading it, you tend to tune it out. It may have good information within, but it’s not always presented in a brief enough form that it hits on the highlights”  
(Female, Republican).*

# Findings

- Regularly communicate with legislators so they are aware of the research being conducted at the University
  - Regular e-mail updates that highlight research at the University by topic and provide links to further information
- Share research findings through multiple modalities, in addition to written reports
  - One-on-one interaction
  - Small groups
  - Workshops

# Findings

- Target specific research findings to relevant legislative committees
  - Present findings to a committee as a whole
  - Make connections with individual committee members
  - Target committee chairs.

*“I would think the way to make it relevant would be to tailor particular information to the committees doing the work. Targeting the leadership, chairs, and vice chair. That’s their jurisdiction and they would have a particular stake in it”  
(Female, Democrat).*

# Findings

- Reach out to and build relationships with legislators and legislative staff
  - Take initiative in building relationships with legislators and their staff
  - Ask legislators if they need specific information
  - Build relationships with staff who often stay in their positions a long time

*“I think it is part of the mission of a researcher to make sure their information gets used by someone” (Male, Democrat).*

# Findings

- Encourage legislators to communicate their interests to researchers
- Make research findings and reports available online
- Provide a directory of researchers as a resource for legislators
  - Lists researchers by department or area of expertise
- Collaborate with third parties in the dissemination of research
  - Advocacy groups
  - Think tanks
  - Coalitions

# Findings

- Increase collaboration with legislative research-related offices
  - Legislative Reference Library
  - Office of the Legislative Auditor
  - Research services in the House and Senate
- Translate research findings into policy recommendations or implications
- Meet with policymakers prior to session to discuss “hot” issues

# Findings—Family Policy Fellows Model

- Legislators were generally positive
  - Benefits
    - Opportunity to hear unbiased, or at least balanced views, on an issue
    - Relevant research findings on current issues they are debating
    - Possible status accrued from being a University Fellow
  - Obstacles
    - Timing (legislators' personal schedules, legislative calendar, timing of how an issue moves through process)
    - Geographic accessibility for non-metro legislators



# Recommendations for Future Research

- Survey academics regarding their attitudes toward public engagement
- Further explore the role of third parties, such as advocates, in disseminating research findings