

Improving the use of research evidence

SUPPLEMENTARY GUIDANCE FOR
APPLICANTS

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Overview

The William T. Grant Foundation has long supported research to improve the lives of young people, but we know that there is considerable distance between the research we support and youth outcomes. Too often, research is absent from deliberations about programs and practices for youth. The stakes of omitting or misusing research evidence are high. And the information needs of decision makers working on behalf of youth too rarely shape research agendas.

The education, child welfare, justice, mental health, and health systems are critical to the development of youth, yet at the state and local levels, these systems continually struggle to respond to new directives and constrained or shrinking budgets. Research has the potential to address these challenges by informing decision makers' understanding of issues, providing strong assessment tools and evidence about effectiveness, supporting strategic planning, and guiding improvement efforts. Conversely, decision makers' failure to use research may negatively affect both short-term and long-term outcomes for youth. For example, ineffective risk assessments may prolong or exacerbate problems, and misapplied interventions waste resources that could be used in more productive ways.

Despite the potential gains and stakes, many question the value of investments in social science research. Every year the federal government invests billions of dollars in the social sciences, but the payoff from that research is viewed as less important than that produced by medical research. Federal funders have had to defend their research portfolios, shift their research priorities, and negotiate stagnant or declining funding levels. Yet we lack a strong evidence base to demonstrate the value of social science research when it is used.

The Foundation's use of research evidence initiative takes up these challenges and seeks to build theory and empirical evidence on ways to strengthen the connections between research evidence, decision making, and youth outcomes. The initiative aims to identify and test strategies to ensure that research reaches the hands of decision makers, answers their most pressing questions, and is used in ways that benefit youth.

Considerations

The Foundation does not have a preference for a particular research design or method. We begin application reviews by looking at the research questions or hypotheses. Then we evaluate whether the proposed research designs and methods will provide strong data and empirical evidence on those questions. The strongest proposals incorporate data from multiple sources and often involve multi-disciplinary teams.

The Foundation also strives to support a diverse group of researchers in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and seniority. We especially encourage high-quality research projects led by African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American researchers.

The Early Years

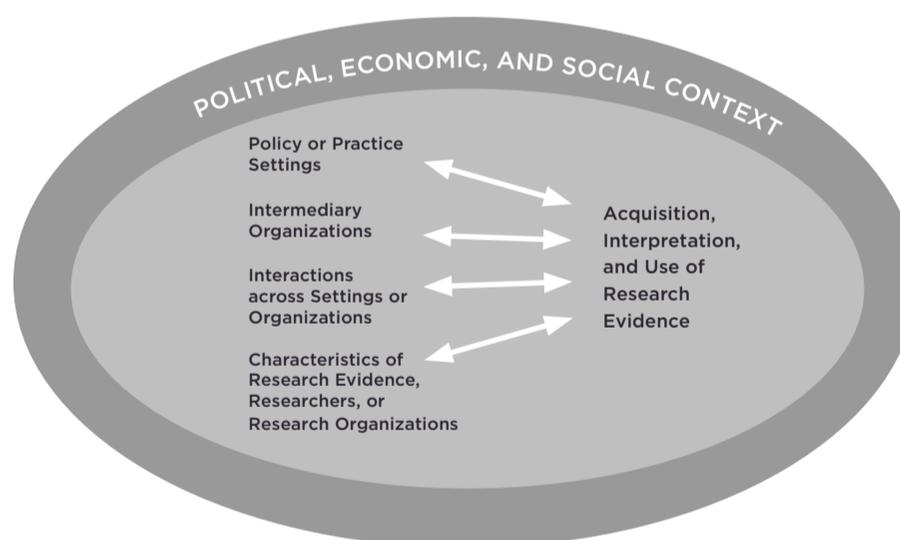
When the Foundation launched this initiative in 2008, the prevailing question in the field was “why isn’t research evidence being used?” (Figure 1). But this question viewed research use as a one-way street. It assumed that if high quality research was produced it would be used, and that decision making and outcomes for youth would improve as a result. Thus, efforts to improve research use often focused on increasing the rigor of research and its presentation.

Figure 1. “Why isn’t research used?”



The Foundation saw the problem a bit differently, and wanted to increase understanding of how research is acquired, understood, and used, as well as the circumstances that shape its use in decision making. To deepen our understanding of the users of research and their worlds, we introduced a new question and prioritized projects that asked “how and under what conditions is research evidence used?” We also encouraged researchers to consider an ecological approach in which the users of research were embedded in a larger political, economic, and social context (Figure 2).

Figure 2. “Under what conditions is research used?”



These projects have deepened our understanding of the problem of research use and offered fresh ideas about how to improve the use of research evidence. For example, the work revealed the prominent role of intermediary organizations—think tanks, foundations, vendors, program developers, and advocacy organizations—in shaping the production and use of research evidence. Studies also underscored the importance of cultivating trusting relationships between researchers, intermediaries, and decision makers, and establishing structural supports to make sense of research evidence and produce research that is responsive to the concerns of decision makers.

A New Direction

Understanding the problem of research use is not enough. As we embark on the next phase of this initiative, we want to support studies of how to improve the use of research evidence in ways that benefit youth. To that end, we are shifting our focus from understanding how and under what conditions research is used to understanding how to create those conditions. This shift is significant in three ways.

First, we invite studies that identify or test actionable strategies to improve the use of existing research. This includes descriptive studies that reveal the strategies, mechanisms, or conditions for improving research use. This also includes evaluations of deliberate efforts to increase routine and beneficial uses of research in deliberations and decisions that affect young people.

Second, it invites teams to identify or test strategies for producing more useful research evidence. This includes examining incentives, structures, and relationships that facilitate the production of research in ways that respond to decision makers' needs and optimize researchers', decision makers', and intermediaries' joint work to benefit youth.

Third, it calls for projects that test the assumption that using high quality research in particular ways improves decision making and youth outcomes.

This is an ambitious next stage for the initiative. To reach our goals, we anticipate that the Foundation, applicants, and grantees will need to overcome several challenges. One challenge is that there is ample knowledge about the obstacles that limit the use of research evidence, but few frameworks that coherently organize this knowledge in ways that generate compelling responses. A second challenge is that we have a rich understanding of the conditions that obstruct or support the use of research evidence, but lack tested strategies for cultivating the enabling conditions. Third, we have few measures that capture changes in the nature and degree of research use.

We encourage researchers to think creatively about ways to overcome these challenges. Research teams might draw on existing conceptual and empirical work about the use of research evidence, knowledge utilization, knowledge mobilization, and implementation science, as well as other relevant areas that can teach us about using research for improvement and about changing research, policy, and practice institutions. We may also need more parsimonious theories and refined hypotheses in order to build and test new strategies for change. Still other investigators will need to construct frameworks and measures for assessing the impact of research use on decision making and youth outcomes. These challenges will call on a wider range of disciplines and methods, and we welcome investigators who can bring new insights and perspectives into this field.

Our Current Interests

Studies should increase understanding of how to improve the use of research evidence in ways that benefit young people ages 5 to 25 in the United States.

We are particularly interested in enhancing the use of research by state and local decision makers and intermediaries.

State and local departments of education, child welfare, juvenile justice face unprecedented demands to be better informed by research. They are also the decision makers who directly influence the frontline practices that affect youth outcomes. Mid-level managers within agencies are particularly important, given their roles deciding which programs, practices, and tools to adopt; deliberating ways to improve existing services; shaping implementation conditions; and making resource allocation decisions.

Intermediaries that shape the production of research and translate and package research for use are also important. These organizations and individuals, including think tanks, advocacy groups, and professional associations, have grown in number and influence over the past few decades. While advocacy groups and think tanks are more prominent in policy, professional associations, technical assistance providers, and consultants have greater influence on agency leaders and managers.

We also seek to build strong portfolios of work in education, child welfare, and justice, and encourage proposals in those areas.

However, because we recognize that the best ideas might fall outside these decision making groups and policy domains, we remain open to groundbreaking studies that fall outside of these areas. Applicants are encouraged to submit innovative proposals and provide compelling arguments for their significance to the field and to the Foundation's overarching interest in improving the use of research evidence to benefit youth.

Below are a few—though not exhaustive—avenues of research that would fit our interests.

Investigations to identify, create, and test the structural and social conditions that foster more routine and constructive uses of existing research evidence.

We seek studies that identify, create, and test actionable strategies for improving the use of research evidence. This includes ways to create the structural and social conditions that foster more routine, constructive uses of research as decision makers frame problems, allocate resources, improve current programs and practices, and implement new ones.

We hope applicants will build on evidence from prior studies about the conditions that foster greater use of research evidence. For example, prior work suggests that when practitioners are involved in framing the research agenda, they tend to have a deeper understanding of the research findings (Honig, Venkateswaran, & Twitchell, 2014; Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2012). A new study might evaluate whether research-practice partnerships that jointly develop research agendas or projects result in more routine conversations about research, greater investment in the research findings, and thus better decisions. Another project might examine whether strengthening collaborations between research and program offices within agencies improves the consistency with which research evidence is used in programmatic decisions.

We also know that decision makers often lack the institutional resources and requisite skills to seek out research, and certain organizational norms and routines can help overcome those barriers (Honig, Venkateswaran, & Twitchell, 2014; Mosley & Courtney, 2012; Nicholson, 2014). Future projects might study efforts to alter conditions in the decision making environment or decision making behaviors. For example, studies might compare the effectiveness of different ways (e.g., technical assistance providers, links to clearinghouses, targeted webinars, and cross-agency teams) to connect existing research with agency leaders' attempts to adopt evidence-informed programs. Still, other studies might exploit natural variation across decision making environments to test the conditions that improve research use.

Studies to identify, create, and test the incentives, structures, and relationships that facilitate the production of new research evidence that responds to decision makers' needs.

We invite studies that identify, create, and test strategies for producing more useful research evidence. This includes ways to create the incentives, organizational structures, and relationships needed to bring about long-term improvements in the production of research evidence and to generate a supply of evidence that is timely, relevant, and ready for use. We are therefore interested in strategies to stimulate research agendas that are responsive to decision makers' questions. For example, many researchers aim to produce findings that are widely generalizable, but decision makers focus on whether research conducted elsewhere is relevant to their state and local contexts. This requires that questions about state and local relevance inform research agendas and that the generalizability of findings is well communicated to decision makers.

Applicants might identify strategies for altering the incentive structures or organizational cultures of research institutions so that researchers conduct more practice or policy-relevant studies and are rewarded for research products that are considered useful by decision makers. Other applicants might identify the relationships and organizational

structures required to put decision makers’ research needs in closer proximity to researchers, for example by establishing stronger ties between universities and trusted intermediaries.

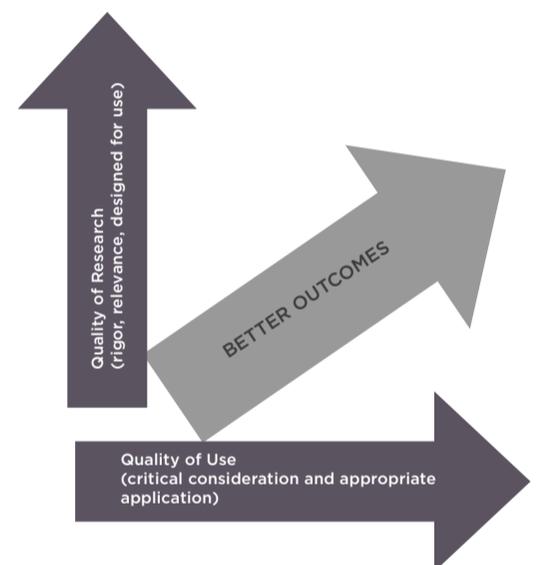
We also welcome studies that optimize researchers’, decision makers’, and intermediaries’ joint work to benefit youth. A study might investigate the effectiveness of funders’ efforts to incentivize joint work between researchers and decision makers and whether structural supports, such as learning communities or coaching, benefit decision making and youth outcomes. Other projects might identify effective curriculum and training experiences to develop the capacity and requisite skills of researchers based at universities or intermediaries to conduct collaborative work.

Studies that investigate whether and under what conditions using high-quality research improves decision making and youth outcomes.

We also invite studies that investigate whether using high-quality research improves decision making and, ultimately, outcomes for youth. This is a long-standing implicit assumption, but the case for using research would be more compelling if there were a body of evidence showing that using research benefits youth.

We suspect that simply using research will not be sufficient to yield positive outcomes. The relationship between the use of research evidence and youth outcomes will be affected by a number of conditions. As illustrated in figure 3, one hypothesis is that the quality of the research and the quality of the decision making will work synergistically to yield strong outcomes for youth. For the purpose of this example, we represented high-quality research as rigorous, relevant, and designed for use. High-quality use is represented as critical consideration and appropriate application of research.

Figure 3. “Untested Assumption: Using Research Improves Decision Making and Youth Outcomes”



Applicants are encouraged to identify other conditions under which using research evidence improves youth outcomes. For example, recent federal policies have instituted mandates and incentives to increase the adoption of programs with evidence of effectiveness from randomized controlled trials. Did these policies actually increase the use of those programs and improve child and youth outcomes as a result? A contrasting example focuses on decision makers’ tendency to increase access to programs without adequate attention to the quality of program delivery, thereby limiting the likely effects of research-backed programs. A study could examine the regulatory decisions that affect program quality to determine whether those discussions lead to child impacts. Another study might look at whether organizations that offer leaders and staff structured opportunities for deliberation and reflection result in greater engagement with research and hence changes in practice that benefit youth.

Developing an Application

General information and application deadlines for our research grants and Scholars Program are available on our website. The following guidance serves as additional recommendations for applications on improving the use of research evidence.

Rationale for the Study

The Foundation is interested in building stronger theory in this area. Proposals should include a strong conceptualization and operational definition of research use, which is drawn from prior work on the use of research evidence and other relevant areas. Applicants should make clear how their conceptualization and operational definition are situated within a larger theoretical framework. Because of the Foundation's interest in improving the use of research, we hope proposals will also build and test theories on how to create that change.

Applicants should clearly describe which decision makers, researchers, research context, or youth-serving context (e.g., education, child welfare justice) they will study.

Applicants will also need to make a compelling case that they are focused on issues for which high-quality research is available for use in decision making that affects youth. Applications should include a description of the body of available research, its relevance to the policy or practice issue under study, and the rationale for promoting its use by particular research users and in certain decision making contexts.

Research Design

The research design should provide credible evidence to support or refute hypotheses about the strategies that improve use of research. This will beg for a range of designs and methods, from experimental and observational designs to comparative case approaches and systematic reviews. For example, a randomized controlled trial might test whether an intervention that provides schools with technical assistance and coaching on the use of research evidence is more likely to lead to adoption of evidence-based programs. We also welcome observational studies that leverage state variation and examine whether states that use research when making decisions improve youth outcomes.

In addition, because the Foundation views research use as a process, we encourage longitudinal designs in which data is collected prospectively and over time. For example, longitudinal work could reveal whether a strategy creates sustained use of research evidence even as staff turn over.

Research Methods, Measures, and Analyses

The Foundation encourages the migration of rigorous methods from different disciplines and fields. Prior grantees have drawn on discourse analyses, social network analyses, bibliometric and social media analyses, systems engineering, and cognitive interviewing.

We encourage applicants to use existing methods, measures, and analytic tools as appropriate, so that we can compare findings across studies. Some recent resources include Palinkas and colleagues' (2014) structured interview on the use of research evidence, and Coburn and colleagues' tool to observe social exchanges around evidence use (2014). Other tools may aid coding and analyzing observations, audio recordings, archived information, survey data, research citations, and networks. For example, Asen and Gurke (2014) have applied discourse analysis to examine the role of research evidence in deliberations, and Neal and colleagues (2015) developed a method for reliably coding themes from audio data. Goldie, Linick, Jabbar, and Lubienski (2014) applied a technique to map citations and examined how research was transmitted across policy levels. Daly and Finnigan (2009) applied network analysis techniques to examine the flow of research evidence.

While existing measures and analytic techniques will address some needs, the next stage of the initiative and a new set of questions will necessitate modifying existing measures and developing new ones. For example, observational and hypothesis testing studies designed to monitor changes in the nature or degree of research use as a result of manipulations will need measures that are sensitive enough to capture changes in research use over time and across conditions. These studies will also have to grapple with conceptual questions about what it means for decision making to improve. Studies involving tests of strategies or of the impact of using research evidence will likely demand measures that are nimble enough to be administered at a large scale and at a reasonable cost.

If proposing work to advance methods, applicants should propose 1) a strong theoretical and empirical rationale for the importance of the constructs or phenomena that will be the focus of the methods work, and 2) the utility of the measures, tools, or analysis strategies beyond their use in the proposed study, and their plans for sharing them.

In measurement proposals, applications should include the basis for the pool of items, convincing plans for testing reliability and validity, and strategies for revising the measures.

Finally, we continue to promote the use of mixed methods wherein multiple types of data are collected and integrated. Research is usually interpreted and used in the midst of complex deliberations and decision making situations that involve multiple reporters, integration of various pieces of evidence, and changes over time. It is questionable whether any single individual can accurately report on what occurred in such situations.

Social desirability and the press to impose order and rationality in describing deliberations and decision making also raise concerns about sole reliance on self-report methods. Given these challenges, applicants might consider examining data from multiple reporters or integrating multiple methods.

Project Teams

Applicants should construct teams with the requisite range of expertise to successfully attain project goals.

The Foundation encourages collaboration among researchers in various fields and disciplines to move the field forward. Our portfolio currently includes researchers from education policy, political science, communications, health policy, community psychology, human services, and sociology of education. We welcome fresh perspectives and methods and hope to involve other researchers with pertinent expertise. Other relevant areas may include those recommended by the National Research Council (2012) report, such as social psychology, behavioral economics, decision theory, organizational sociology, and systems theory.

The Foundation also welcomes project teams that include people with policymaking, program management, or administrative experience. Robust research-policy or research-practice collaborations foster studies that pursue more useful research questions, greater insight into the work of research users, and feasible plans for collecting data from decision makers. Applications should include a description of the roles team members will play and how they will be integrated into the different stages of the project. We discourage cursory nods to multi-disciplinary or mixed-role project teams; tightly crafted single-discipline projects are preferable to superficial integration of people from different disciplines or fields.

Feasibility

Studies concerning the use of research evidence often require collecting sensitive data from decision makers. Applicants should provide assurances as to how data will be successfully collected, the team's prior experience collecting such data, and their strategies for maximizing response rates and access to data sources (e.g., respondents, deliberation and decision meetings, policy documents, etc.).

An inherent challenge in prospectively studying research use and decision making is that an issue gaining traction at the proposal stage may be stalled by the time investigators enter the field. We ask applicants to discuss this concern and to provide their best judgment and assurances for reviewers.

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