

**RESEARCH GRANTS
EXTERNAL REVIEW**

Foundation Focus Area	Use of Research Evidence
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THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL RATIONALE

1. Fit with the Foundation's Interests. Comment on the proposal's fit with the Foundation's interest in improving the use of research evidence. We support research to do any of the following: 1) identify, create, and test the structural and social conditions that foster more routine and constructive uses of existing research evidence; 2) identify, create, and test the incentives, structures, and relationships that facilitate the production of new research evidence that responds to decision makers' needs; and 3) investigate whether and under what conditions using high-quality research improves decision making and youth outcomes.

This proposal appears to fit well into the Foundation's interest in identifying, creating, and testing the structural and social conditions that foster more routine and constructive uses of existing research evidence. Commendably, the proposal brings much-needed rigor to our understanding of the effectiveness of efforts to improve the use of research evidence in policymaking. The integration of an experimental, randomized design supplemented with ethnographic, qualitative, and quantitative assessments of its impact on the research and policy communities is impressive. The project also takes the important step of estimating the cost of the Research-to-Policy Collaboration (RPC) pilot, an important consideration for universities as they consider efforts to increase their public engagement with policymakers and their commitment to helping address societal problems.

2. Does the proposed work reflect a mastery of prior theory and empirical work on the use of research evidence? Would it advance that field in significant ways?

The proposal does an excellent job of reviewing previous theory and research on the use of research evidence in policymaking with only one exception. The proposal could delve more deeply into how the role of universities as knowledge brokers differs from the role played by advocacy and special interest groups. For example, drawing on Kingdon's theory of open policy windows, the proposal provides a rapid response to research interests that are expressed by legislative offices.

Responding to issues that policymakers are thinking about, rather than what we wish they were thinking about, is one way that a university response can differ from the approach of advocacy groups and special interests. Another difference that could be expanded upon in the proposal is that advocates and special interests only provide research consistent with their agenda, whereas universities can provide an even-handed consideration of research on all sides of an issue. I believe that universities are one of few institutions that could play a role as an "honest broker." Yet without a firm commitment to a nonpartisan approach, research could come to be viewed as just another source of ammunition, and universities could come to be viewed as just another interest group. The proposal would be strengthened with attention to nonpartisanship in the research questions, in the researcher training, and in the sample selection—themes that I will return to.

Below are two sources that are helpful in understanding the subtleties of how the education approach differs from advocacy, why policymakers prefer this dispassionate approach, and what unique contributions it provides to the policy process.

Although not shown here, the reviewer offered a limited number of references to orient the team to another related area of work.

3. Are the policy or practice issue(s) sensible ones to study? Is there a compelling rationale that research evidence plays any role (i.e., conceptual, instrumental, political, etc.) in those policy or practice issues?

The authors provide a compelling rationale for how their model may be able to improve the use of research evidence in policymaking. It is important to study the role that universities, a prominent research engine, can play in communicating high-quality, nonpartisan research to policymakers.

I am less persuaded about the need for developing template legislation for several reasons, four that I will mention here. First, in a couple decades of working closely with policymakers, I have never been asked to assist with developing language for legislation. Perhaps this is because my work tends to provide research earlier in the policy process as issues are rising on the policy agenda and at a time when they are being debated and negotiated. The data from the RPC pilot seems to support this observation with only 4 of 79 requests asking for assistance with legislative language. Second, this section of the proposal seems to target a different population than the other parts of the study. The proposal indicates that executive agency officials will be involved in developing legislative templates. Also, in state legislatures and in Congress, legislative language is often written by the nonpartisan legislative service agencies, who also would be important collaborators.

Third, even if policymakers agree that evidence-based policy is desirable, they can have legitimate disagreements about how to best reach the desired end goal (Weiss et al., 2008). According to policy researchers Thomas Grisso and Laurence Steinberg, “Rarely does research provide evidence that a particular policy is right” (2010, p. 625). Conceivably, developing legislative templates could entail making many decisions that might stray beyond research evidence to advocating for particular ways to respond to the evidence such as whether legislation should target an individual, family or community response; how the funding mechanism will be designed; who will provide oversight; and so forth. One recent example of how legislative design may extend beyond the data was the recent controversy over the Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting Initiative which was driven, in large part, by a debate over scientific.

Finally, writing legislative language could draw contrasts with the organization that is most well-known for such templates—ALEC—the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council. Granted, this is not a reason to abandon legislative templates, but it does suggest that it would take special efforts to differentiate any efforts in this regard to avoid the perception of partisanship (in an environment where perception is often reality).

4. Does the applicant propose clear and compelling research questions and/or hypotheses?

With the exception of the model legislative language template, the guiding questions and corresponding research questions identified in Exhibit 1 to be clear and compelling.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS, AND ANALYSES

1. Research Design and Methods

1a. Comment on the strength of the research design and sampling plan for addressing the research questions and/or hypotheses. Consider the sampling of cases, sites, individuals, documents, and so on.

The research design seems strong. One question is the author’s decision to focus the study on preventing child maltreatment. If the issue is prevention, does this include addressing trauma in children who have been maltreated or policies to reintegrate victims of human trafficking back into their families and communities?

The data in Exhibit 3 suggests that perhaps child abuse may be more of a partisan issue than the topic of the RPC pilot—juvenile justice and prison practices. The proposal state that 54.3% of the Congress is Republican. Yet in Exhibit 3 it appears that only about a third of Republican offices have co-sponsored child welfare bills with 60% of them appearing in the bottom quartile of the list.

This raises concerns about whether a RPC focus on child abuse could be perceived as being partisan and reinforce the stereotype that universities have a liberal bias? Is it possible to select a topic with more bipartisan interest, perhaps juvenile justice and prison practices? Would it be possible to design the study in such a way that it adds new offices and simultaneously examines the "dosage" effect of continuing the relationships built in the pilot project? Another possible comparison group would be testing the model in a state legislature, given that a number of child and family policies fall under the purview of states.

Regarding the sampling of researchers, is there any screening regarding the match between this more dispassionate nonpartisan approach and the extent of knowledge the professional has on the issue, their personal ability to communicate in an even-handed style, and their willingness to commit to the constraints nonpartisanship entails? Also, are web searches conducted to see if the researcher has an online presence of writing op eds or contributing to political campaigns?

Regarding the sampling of research-oriented practitioners and program evaluators from academic and non-academic settings, is there any screening regarding their grasp of research methods, their access to research, and their respect for the role research can play in the policy process? Occasionally, I have encountered practitioners who fall into the trap of reinforcing some of the stereotypes of research—that it is not practical or that it is too complex to understand.

Regarding sampling of legislative staffers, are there criteria established for which of the many staffers in a Congressional office will be involved in the project? I noticed in the proposal that the quotes at the beginning of the grant were from a Chief Council and a Senior Council. Is it important to have a staffer with more experience? Or is it more important to have the staffer assigned to the issue the RPC focuses on?

1b. Comment on the data collection plan, including the strength of the data collection tools (i.e., interview or observation protocols, coding schemes, measures, etc.) and the plans to field those tools.

Sometimes it is (falsely) assumed that research is ignored by policymakers when, in fact, research may slowly seep into the policymaking process over time (Weiss, 1999). Will the timing of the assessments allow enough time for the research to wind its way through the policy process? I remember prevention scientist Richard Price saying once—evaluate no program before it's proud.

Without reading the items in each measure, it is not possible to tell how broadly research use is being measured. Does research use mean only whether it is incorporated into a bill that passes or do you also measure the failure of a bill to pass that runs contrary to what the research evidence suggests? Will the measures examine instrumental uses such as evaluating existing legislation, developing policy positions, or responding to constituent questions? Will the measures examine conceptual uses of research such as improving understanding of the complexity of issues or shifting frameworks or tactics about the best way to respond to policy issues? If research use is a relationship-based process (as the authors suggest), will there be measures of using research to develop relationships with their colleagues in other legislative offices or using research to earn the trust of their colleagues as a knowledgeable and credible information source? Will the measures assess whether policymakers' involvement in RSP affects their attitude about the practicality of research or the approachability of researchers? Will the measures assess whether researchers' involvement in the RPC affects their perceptions of the extent of policymaker's expertise and commitment to the common good?

In the section on federal policy identification, the questions might generate more in-depth and complete responses if they were reframed from the researcher perspective to the policymaker perspective. For example, instead of future research questions, it might be easier for policymakers to respond to a question worded like this: "What are some of the policy questions that are likely to arise? What will you need to know to make a decision on this issue?"

1c. If the applicant proposes measurement development work, comment on (i) the importance of the construct, (ii) the utility of the measure for the field, (iii) the rigor of the measurement work, and (iv) the team's measurement expertise.

1d. Comment on the feasibility of the methods and data collection plan. Many applicants propose to collect sensitive data from policymakers and practitioners. Are you persuaded that the team can successfully collect that data? For example, do they provide evidence that they have successfully done so in the past? Do they have convincing strategies for maximizing response rates and gaining access to respondents, meetings, and documents?

The efforts at ensuring a solid response rate seem sound. It may help to have a signed memorandum of agreement that details what RPC will provide and what the research and the staffer will provide?

2. Data Analysis and Interpretation

2a. Comment on the sophistication and rigor of the analysis plan. Consider whether the team demonstrates an understanding of the strengths and limits of various analytic techniques.

The plan for data analysis and interpretation looks very strong. I wondered if there were challenges that arose in the pilot and what steps are being taken to address them?

2b. If the applicant proposes mixed methods work, comment on the strength of the plan to integrate data from various methods. Does the plan deepen understanding or validate findings across methods?

3. Do you have other comments on the significance or rigor of the proposed work?

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Is the budget appropriate? Does it reflect a cost-effective use of the Foundation's limited resources? Describe any concerns.

Budget looks appropriate. Some of the funds on legislative template development could be redirected to expanding the RPC pilot.

2. Is the project team adequately staffed to successfully carry out the project? If not, what staffing or expertise is needed? (Please note that the Foundation discourages large advisory committees. Each proposed advisor should serve a specific and significant need for the project.)

The project team seems adequately staffed. For the issue of the legislative templates, staff of the nonpartisan service agencies should be included.

"BOTTOM LINE" RECOMMENDATION

The Foundation's long-term aims are to understand how to improve the production and use of research evidence in policy and practice. No single study can fulfill these goals, but we want to support projects that will significantly contribute to achieving them. Is this project worth funding? Why or why not? Consider the questions or hypotheses addressed, quality of the proposed work, and likely contribution to our long-term goals.

Although not displayed, this final section included a clear recommendation about funding and a strong rationale. They also summarized the one or two most critical concerns.