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Introduction: Communicating Research to Policy Makers—Briefing Report Chapters from the Massachusetts Family Impact Seminars on Youth at Risk

Denise A. Hines and Karen Bogenschneider

Research and policy should go hand-in-hand. With few exceptions, however, the history of research utilization in policy making has been disappointing.¹ Policy makers typically do not have the resources to seek out the growing body of research on the complex issues they face.² Instead, they tend to rely on personal impressions or information from special interests that is often fragmented and biased.³ This practice occurs despite growing evidence that public policy would be more effective if it were based on hard evidence and dispassionate analysis.⁴

How can we better connect researchers and policy makers? One proven, cost-effective, and replicable model was recently named a “Bright Idea” by the Harvard Innovations in Government Program—the Family Impact Seminars (FIS). The FIS are a series of presentations, discussion sessions, and briefing reports that provide state policy makers with objective, high-quality research on timely topics. The six articles that follow were all originally published as policy briefs that were part of the third and fourth annual Massachusetts FIS on “Youth at Risk” convened in spring 2012 and 2013 at the Massachusetts State House. Each seminar featured an expert panel speaking and writing about issues that face today’s youth in the Commonwealth. The Massachusetts seminars are part of a national network of twenty-two sites across the country, all university-based, that are building relationships with and communicating research to state policy makers.

The Family Impact Institute

The FIS were an outgrowth of the 1976 U.S. Senate subcommittee hearings on the state of American families chaired by Senator Walter Mondale of Minnesota.⁵ Originally designed to inform federal policy making, the seminars were adapted for use with state policy makers beginning in 1999 in the wake of landmark devolution legislation that increasingly delegated the design and execution of family policy issues from the federal government to state government.⁶

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At that time, the Family Impact Institute assumed the mission of the FIS to build capacity for family-focused policy decisions and to expand the network of state affiliates.⁷ The Institute is housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under the direction of Professor Karen Bogenschneider, the second author on this article.

State policy makers rate research as low on the list of resources they use when making policy decisions.⁸ Yet policy makers' calls for evidence-based information have become so frequent they are considered "routine."⁹ In response, the mission of the FIS is threefold: (a) improving respect for and use of research in state policy decisions, (b) encouraging policy makers to examine issues through the family impact lens, and (c) providing an opportunity for policy makers to build relationships across party lines that can overcome polarization and build common ground.

To date, FIS sites across the country have conducted over 170 seminars on family issues broadly defined to include growing the state economy, corrections, early childhood education, family poverty, health care, welfare reform, and workforce development. According to evaluations, the seminars increase policy makers' knowledge of research in ways that are useful in their jobs, shape policy decisions, and change attitudes about how valuable research is in policy decisions. Policy makers also report that the objective information and opportunities for dialogue provided by the seminars help them rise above politics and develop the relationships needed to build common ground.¹⁰ FIS briefing reports have been widely used by policy makers across the country.

The Massachusetts FIS

To conduct FIS, a university applies and is accepted into membership by the Family Impact Institute. In 2009, Clark University's Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise, representing Massachusetts, was accepted into the network. The Mosakowski Institute's mission "is to improve the effectiveness of government and other institutions in addressing social concerns through the successful mobilization of use-inspired research."¹¹ The Institute translates university research to policy makers and practitioners, and provides a climate at Clark University that rewards researchers who work to translate their findings for those in a position to affect change.

The annual seminars in Massachusetts, which began in March 2010, target state policy makers, including legislators, legislative aides, governor's office staff, and agency representatives. The program in Massachusetts operates to be consistent with the core components of the FIS model. So that the seminars focus on topics that policy makers are thinking about, not topics that we want them to think about, we ask our legislative advisors to choose the topic they want covered. The program organizers then gather three experts to present at the event.

The experts provide objective information on a range of policy options without making specific recommendations. The presentations are accompanied by a long and lively question-and-answer session. An opportunity is provided that is rare in the lawmaking institution—a luncheon discussion in a neutral, off-the-record setting that allows the policy makers to have one-on-one conversations with the speakers and with one another. In that same spirit of nonpartisanship, advocates and media are typically not invited to the seminars. The seminars also produce a briefing report that summarizes and expands on the research that is presented. Each briefing report chapter is written using the publications of the seminar speakers, and is distributed to all seminar attendees and all legislative offices. A PDF of the report is posted on the websites of the

Massachusetts FIS (<http://wordpress.clarku.edu/dhines/familyimpactseminars/>) and the Family Impact Institute (<http://familyimpactseminars.org/index.asp?p=1&page=site>).

We have held a seminar at the State House each year since 2010. In April 2012, in the first of the two-part series on “Youth at Risk,” three experts spoke on the overall well-being of youth, youth unemployment issues, and online sexual predators. In the second part in March 2013, three more experts spoke on transracial adoption of children in foster care, food insecurity among children, and homeless children and their families. The briefing report chapters that follow are a summary of the research prepared for distribution at the seminar and beyond.

For more information about the Massachusetts FIS, please contact the first author of this article at dhines@clarku.edu. We are especially interested in hearing ideas for future seminar topics. For more information about the Family Impact Institute and its work to build better public policy for families, please feel contact the second author at kpbogens@wisc.edu.

Notes

¹ Vivian Tseng, “The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice,” *Social Policy Report* 26, no. 2 (2012): 1–16.

² Steven R. Nelson, James C. Leffler, and Barbara A. Hansen, *Toward a Research Agenda for Understanding and Improving the Use of Research Evidence* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2009), http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/311.

³ Karen Bogenschneider, Olivia M. Little, Theodora Ooms, Sara Benning, Karen Cadigan, and Thomas Corbett, “The Family Impact Lens: A Family-Focused, Evidence-Informed Approach to Policy and Practice,” *Family Relations* 61 (July 2012): 514–31, doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00704.x.

⁴ A. C. Huston, “From Research to Policy and Back,” *Child Development* 79 (2008): 1–12.

⁵ Theodora Ooms, “Taking Families Seriously: Family Impact Analysis as an Essential Policy Tool” (paper presented at the Expert Meeting on Family Impact, University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium, October 1995).

⁶ Carl Tubbesing, “The Dual Personality of Federalism,” *State Legislatures* 24, no. 4 (1998): 14–19.

⁷ For more information, visit the Family Impact Institute website at <http://familyimpactseminars.org/>.

⁸ Nelson, Leffler, and Hansen, *Toward a Research Agenda*.

⁹ Huston, “From Research to Policy.”

¹⁰ Karen Bogenschneider, *Family Policy Matters: How Policymaking Affects Families and What Professionals Can Do*, 3rd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis, forthcoming).

¹¹ For more information, visit Clark University’s Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise website, <http://www.clarku.edu/research/mosakowskiinstitute/>.