Forging Connections: Grantee Experiences Reaching Audiences Beyond the Academic World

Lenore Neier

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Last year, the William T. Grant Foundation took stock of our initiative to support research on reducing inequality in youth outcomes. We wanted to understand, in part, the pathways through which grantees' research findings may be reaching audiences including researchers, journalists, policymakers, and practitioners. Five years into the reducing inequality initiative, what evidence did we have of such reach, and what signs were there that the funded research was relevant and meaningful to subsequent research, policy, and practice?

Taking Stock

Our review showed that we're funding a diverse, highly accomplished group of researchers who are carrying out rigorous studies that span policy domains. Despite the relatively early stage of the initiative, several studies have yielded causal information about programs or policies that reduce inequality. Others have identified promising mechanisms for reducing inequality that could be tested in future research. On a number of measures, grantees appear to be leading voices in their disciplines and research areas.

To explore engagement with broader audiences, I reviewed the communication and outreach activities of all major research grantees and William T. Grant Scholars whose studies focused on reducing inequality (67 as of December 2019). On their annual reports, nearly half reported forging connections beyond academia through communications activities such as writing op-eds, providing radio and television interviews, drafting policy and legal briefs, and participating in legislative meetings.

For a deeper dive into these activities, I interviewed a subset of grantees who had reported outreach activities external to the research community. Because of the relatively early stage of the initiative, I

didn't necessarily assess direct use in policy or practice—rather, I sought evidence of steps along the way. I was especially attuned to indicators that the research we are supporting is connecting with people beyond research circles and that grantees are laying the groundwork for broader engagement.

Relevant and Meaningful Research

Grantee reports of their experiences echoed what we've learned from research on conditions that facilitate the use of evidence (much of which has been funded by the Foundation in our use of research evidence focus area). For instance, we know that for research to be used, it needs to be relevant: It needs to illuminate questions and answers that matter. As my colleague Vivian Tseng has written, relevant research is "in dialogue with existing ways of defining problems and solutions, not in a separate academic dialogue" (2017). Although the researchers I spoke with are at different stages of their career and at different points in their grants, they all reported similar qualities and processes consistent with this approach to interacting with policy makers and practitioners, listening and responding even as they bring relevant evidence to light.

Awareness

Building awareness through media coverage can help shape the public's understanding of issues that are central to the research. Importantly, among those grantees that are reaching wider audiences this way, media coverage is not as an end in itself, but as a means of opening avenues for future collaboration with stakeholders on the ground.

- *"It was a great way to broadcast my findings more broadly and reach people I wouldn't normally have access to. As a result, I am on the rolodex of journalists and have been contacted by influential advocacy groups."*
  — Amy Hsin

- *"Journalists who can translate research to a broader audience help make a bigger impact and reach more people. It encourages legislators to consider an issue that they didn't think was important or hadn't been aware of."*
  —Bruce Baker

Relationships

Beyond building general awareness through the media, forming relationships that allow for direct engagement with those for whom the work is most relevant is an essential component in creating pathways for research use and ultimately making an impact. As Kim DuMont has written: "Relationships shape what research evidence individuals and organizations acquire and how they make sense of it" (2015). Recent findings indicate that research is more likely to bring about change when those who are putting it into action have the "opportunity to learn from research-based ideas, [are] assisted by others, and [have] opportunities to respond to and deepen understanding of challenging ideas" (Honig et al., 2014). By being generous with their time and knowledge, grantees have built trusting relationships that help to support a nuanced understanding of research and make it more likely that it will be used effectively.

- *"We invest a lot in relationships with school districts partners. We are responsive to their needs. We build collaborative relationships. It takes effort and commitment, but the rewards are there: The quality of research is better."*
  —Carolyn Heinrich

- *"I'm responsive to the Office of Workforce Development on different issues, some of them unrelated to the grant. I'm in the trenches with them."*
  —Alicia Modestino

- *"…it's been productive to cultivate relationships over time with advocates and policymakers who find that my work can inform their efforts."*
  —Mark Courtney

Mutuality

Grantees also reported that these relationships are most productive when they are based on principles of mutual exchange and reciprocity. That is, when researchers are able to incorporate the information needs of policy or practice partners into their studies, it helps to ensure the relevance of the work while also building trust and respect. As Vivian Tseng writes, "Two-way streets can foster a cycle of iterative work, of practice to research and back" (2015).

- *"We are co-generating research that addresses the issues that the school districts are concerned with. We are truly partnering."*
  —Carolyn Heinrich

- *"I have a good relationship with San Diego Unified School District and the LA School district. We update them on what kinds of research we have currently going on and what kinds of research questions that they might have the future."*
  —Laura Hil

- *"The behind the scenes briefings that I conducted in the Mayor's office...have driven my relationship with the city. I am in contact with the Chiefs of two different departments within the Office and have been engaged in meetings to determine the direction of the program. I'm involved with them as they think about changes to the program."*
  —Alicia Modestino

Understanding

Finally, building on the idea of two-way streets, recent work on the "social side" of evidence (Dumont, 2019) underscores that research use isn't a simple transaction, but a matter of deliberation, discovery, capacity building, and enlightenment. Researchers are most able to make an impact "when they influence *how* policymakers think about an issue," not necessarily "*what* they think" (Yanovitzky & Weber, 2020). Our review found that grantees who are building a broad base of relevant findings are well poised for such influence:

- *"Having data allows an issue to have more currency. Allows it to be discussed and to gain importance. We built an evidence base for the problem that was already there. It was an issue that lacked an evidence base and we set out to create it. Having evidence matters for policymaking."*
  —Daniel Schneider

- *"There's a big decision that has to be made in the state about reclassifying English Learners. We have found a range of policies that might work. And this idea of range was something that we wanted to make sure that people understood..."*
  —Laura Hill

Conclusion

I n keeping with our mission to support research to improve the lives of young people, we've taken on the challenge of reducing inequality in youth outcomes by bringing the best possible research to bear on the problem. After five years of supporting this work, we're proud of the body of work that grantees are producing. We're also inspired by their efforts to inform thought and action beyond the university gates.

We've seen that grantees are advancing their work in both broad-brush and more targeted ways. They're building relationships built on mutuality and trust, leading to collaborative partnerships, greater respect and understanding of the research, and in some cases, instrumental use of the findings.

To grantees and potential grantees reading this essay: As a communications unit within the Foundation, we are eager to help amplify your voices. We commonly work with grantees to produce original web content, promote writing you've published in the academic or popular press, and call attention to your contributions in social media. In addition, the Foundation maintains a working relationship with outside groups that support researchers in communicating with the public and engaging policymakers, and we can help make these connections for you.

Looking ahead to another five years from now, we hope to see even more grantees studying strategies for reducing inequality, engaging with audiences outside the academic world, and helping to bring the insights of research to decision makers who can act upon them.

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