

The Role of Family Economics Research in Developing State Policy

This workshop, sponsored by NCR-52, the North Central Committee on Family Economics, discussed family economics research projects being used in the development of state policy. Ideas for making contacts within state government were presented as well as the advantages and disadvantages of doing this type of research.

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One of the objectives of NCR-52, the North Central Committee on Family Economics is to encourage and facilitate family economics research at the state and regional levels. The committee has established a goal of encouraging greater use of family economics applied research in the development of state policy. Currently, there are a number of family economists working with state agencies to assist in the development of policy. There are several mutual benefits of conducting policy research. The development of state policy is not only a good use of family economics research, state agencies may serve as good funding sources for family economists.

Child Support Enforcement, Garasky

I began at Iowa State University in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) in January 1992. Prior to arriving at ISU, I was an Economist for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Our office focused on policy and evaluation issues related to the programs operated by HHS. My responsibilities generally centered around policies related to the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) and child support enforcement. I mention my background because it has had an impact on my ability to get involved with state policy development.

Shortly after arriving in Iowa, it became clear to me that our department and the state had two things going for it that were going to help me get involved in state policy. First, HDFS has a long history of working with the state, and specifically the Department of Human Services (DHS), on policy research. The State Standard of Need project of which Cindy Fletcher will speak is a wonderful example. Second, the state of Iowa is a child support enforcement leader. The state director, Jim

Hennessey, is extremely interested in establishing a strong research base on which to develop policy.

I spent a large part of my first summer in Iowa (1992) introducing myself to various state government representatives. Jim Hennessey was one of the persons I contacted. By the time we actually met, Jim had become familiar with my work and I had become familiar with a state legislative mandate his unit had to study the possibility of implementing child support enforcement reform in Iowa. Additionally, we were both aware of a funding mechanism that would allow me to obtain funds to do child support related research at no cost to the state. The way it works is that for every dollar the state puts up for child support related research they can draw down two matching federal dollars. For my research ISU provides the state match through items such as my salary and benefits, computer expenses and indirect costs. As a result, the state gets my work at no cost to them and I get to do funded research.

This funding mechanism is appealing to the state for all the obvious reasons, and one more. Many of the legislated state child support enforcement related mandates are unfunded. I represent a way for the state to get this additional work accomplished without pulling resources from other areas.

I began doing policy related research for DHS in the Fall of 1992. I have been the Principal Investigator in all consequent work.

The first of three projects that I have worked on for the state was this state mandate to study child support reform implementation. Specifically, the state was interested in the feasibility of implementing a reform that is known as a Child Support Assurance System. In the report to the state I discussed issues such as defining the parameters of the system (e.g. program eligibility, size of benefits, ...), program costs as they related to the size of benefits, and how the reform might affect other programs

such as the state AFDC program. In the end, the state did not implement the reform for two primary reasons.

First, the federal government never authorized funding for state demonstrations of the reform. The state was not going to implement changes to the child support enforcement system without the support of federal funding.

Second, at this same time Iowa was considering, and recently implemented, a major welfare reform initiative. The thinking was that introducing state child support reform on top of state welfare reform was not a good idea.

I currently have two other projects with the state. First, I am developing a state level microsimulation model that will be used to forecast staffing needs relevant to program changes and policy initiatives. Uses of the microsimulation model are to include allocating current staff, providing justification for staff requests, and conducting cost/benefit analyses. Along with developing this model, I am to make recommendations regarding how to staff a local child support recovery unit. Two local offices have agreed to pilot the recommendations. I will conduct the evaluation of this demonstration. The project is tentatively scheduled to be completed in 1999.

The second current project is much more short term in nature. The state has mandated that DHS begin to charge fees to non-public assistance clients for child support related services. I have been contracted to conduct a study that looks at if and how other states charge fees, and what the costs are to the state of Iowa for providing services to these people. I also will be drafting text to amend the State Code in this area. The report and draft text are due to the state June 30, 1995.

Along with discussing funding and specific projects, I would like to conclude this essay with discussions of the research potential of these projects and some of the intangible benefits I have received. I see much of my work for the state to be unpublishable. Often the issues and analyses are too state specific. On the up side, some of my work has received wide distribution in the policy world. For example, I learned from a former colleague that my study of Child Support Assurance in Iowa was mentioned at a Congressional hearing. Several states have asked for copies of that report. I have established a strong policy and research network as a result of my work for the state.

Another benefit of working with the state is the data to which I have been given access. For example, for the microsimulation project I have access (once all case identifiers have been removed) to the automated state child support enforcement case files. While these data are state specific (only Iowa), they offer a wealth of child support related information that I have not seen anywhere

else. I have begun to use these data to conduct publishable research.

Finally, I have learned a tremendous amount from my work with the state. As a former bureaucrat, I had an understanding of how policy is developed within a federal bureaucracy. State level policy development is in many ways different. I have a much stronger appreciation for the work of the Department of Human Services after having worked with them. I also have a better understanding and appreciation of how local child support recovery units operate after having visited some of them. All of this will carryover into my research.

Standard of Need, Fletcher

Family economists have an important role in forming state policies. The process of conducting policy research can expand the expertise of family economics researchers, create professional linkages with policy makers, and improve the quality of life for individuals and families.

Policy Research

There are differences between traditional academic research and policy research. The research process, time lines, criteria used for decision making, and methods of disseminating results take on new dimensions in the policy arena.

Policy research should be viewed as more a process than a product. Booth (1988) identifies four phases, each of which may contribute independently to the making of policy: discussing and articulating issues; collecting data; producing the report of findings; and disseminating results. Policy researchers look for opportunities for learning and discovery at each phase in the research process. Throughout the process, it behooves researchers to involve end-users. The greater the involvement of researchers with end-users, the more likely it is their research will be used. Policy research provides enough information with a sufficient level of confidence to illuminate the options and choices facing the policy-maker (p. 249). While presenting the traditional academic researcher new challenges, entrance into the world of policy research can yield numerous rewards.

Linkages to State Agencies

Undoubtedly, the hardest part of state policy research is taking the first step to link with policy-makers. Family economists at Iowa State University benefit from several different linkages with state policy-makers. Since the 1960s, state government

has relied on ISU researchers to formulate recommendations for the income guidelines and payment structures for Iowa welfare programs. Over the years, five studies have been conducted by ISU family economists to estimate the income guidelines, referred to as the 'need standard', for the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. The most recent study was completed in 1995 (Fletcher et al., 1995). It should be noted that the Family Support Act of 1988 requires each state to reevaluate the need standard and payment standard for the AFDC program at least once every three years. This particular study, required by federal law, could provide 'the foot in the door' for building linkages between family economists and policy-makers in many states.

ISU's involvement in state policy research has expanded rapidly since the late 1980s. A formal administrative structure, the Child Welfare and Training Project, was established in 1988. From an initial study on the predicted demand for foster care services, the project has grown into a broad-based training and research unit with a multi-million dollar budget. Funding relies heavily on federal formulae that allow university overhead to be used to draw federal dollars on a two to one match basis.

Finally, the informal networks or linkages that evolve among university faculty, legislators, and agency personnel should not be overlooked. Undoubtedly, it is these personal ties that foster professional activity.

1995 Standard of Need Study

The 1995 Iowa Standard of Need study serves as one illustration of the policy research process. The objective of this research is straightforward: to establish recommendations for the Standard of Need for the State of Iowa's Family Investment Program, formerly Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The Standard of Need is defined as the minimum monthly, after-tax income needed by a family to meet basic needs.

The Iowa administrative code defines needs to include: housing, household supplies and replacements, food, clothing, personal care and supplies, medicine chest items, communication, and transportation. The time line for the research was short. A contract was signed with the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) in June, 1994 and a final report was submitted on February 15, 1995. In order to complete this type of research under such a short time frame, it is important to budget both sufficient faculty and graduate student time. Time extensions, while common in traditional academic research, are typically not appropriate when conducting policy research. Findings are needed to feed into on-going legislative cycles.

Our research process involved an eclectic methodology. We used a market-basket approach for most cost estimates, collecting Iowa data on housing and utility costs and using USDA food plans for food estimates. Consumer Expenditure Survey data were used for many of the consumption items that represent small portions of the need standard. Our data collection and analysis decisions clearly illustrate Booth's description of policy research as a process that provides enough information with sufficient level of confidence to illuminate options and choices facing policy-makers. Working as a research team, we constantly made judgment calls that reflected our goal of producing useful, understandable and timely findings. Dissemination of our work has been done in two ways.

First, we met with DHS administrators to discuss findings and answer questions. Second, a final report was submitted. It is organized so that a one-page executive summary and an eight-page summary and recommendation chapter precede chapters that provide technical details. Policy researchers should choose a mode of dissemination that reflects the needs and characteristics of the users. It has been our experience that face-to-face meetings or discussions throughout the research process are important. Our goal was to provide a final report that held no surprises for the end-user.

Results

Findings from the 1995 Standard of Need study recommended 10 to 19 percent increases in income guidelines, but based on our conversations with DHS it appears unlikely that any change will be made during this legislative session. In contrast, the recommendations from our 1991 study were accepted and dramatic increases in Iowa's need standard went into effect in 1991. Booth (p. 255) offers the following advice to policy researchers who work diligently and "still find their work has little impact should not lose heart, remembering that while it is right for them to believe in the value of what they do it is arrogance to have too much faith in its importance."

Child Care Costs, Weagley

Initially, Peter Mueser, Department of Economics at Missouri University, was contacted by an employee of the Missouri Division of Family Services with regard to research on the effect of welfare on the cost of day-care in the state of Missouri. The employee is a former student of Dr. Mueser's. Given that he was on leave and we had previously worked together, he contacted me to join as co-principal investigator on the project. Moreover, he was emphatic that the project be

credited to my department and college as the subject matter match was better.

Once the contact had been made and our collective energies focused, we began to develop a proposal. During opening discussions with Greg Vadner, Director of the Division, and the administrative and data assistants directly involved with child care subsidies, we ascertained their concern and the character of the available information. Moreover, we secured a commitment from each party as to their willingness to assist us in data retrieval and with answers to potential policy questions. In response to a written request, the proposal included each of the following: a theoretical model to be employed in a series of models to test the hypotheses; a formal request for specific data from the State and a compilation of other available resources; a budget which included a summer research assistant, supplemental salaries for us, and a negotiated cost recovery for the University; a statement of our intent to publish the work following completion; and a guarantee that the work would be completed within the constraints of the Division of Family Services.

First, always demand a written request for a proposal even if it is non-competitive. Moreover, understand the scientific and political bases for the agency's solicitation. Ensure that the individual you are working with has the resources to follow through. This will increase the likelihood that the work put into the proposal will reach fruition and lower the probability that political winds change direction.

Secondly, it is imperative that your proposed research has a basis in theory. The research method is what sets the academy apart from the statisticians in most state agencies and is why they hire you. The average state employee understands the importance of such models. They appreciate theory as it forces one to test hypotheses in a manner that is defensible, rather than being totally ad hoc. Governmental agencies do much meaningful research without the assistance of a University faculty member. Perhaps of more importance to the University faculty member, if the work is to be judged by colleagues, such theoretical underpinnings are mandatory.

Third, make your expectations of the agency and its employees known. It is far better to err on the side of too great of expectations than too little. If you have need of data, early in the process make that need known with a data wish-list of both current and future needs. Ensure the confidentiality of sensitive data, for example, by having their data analysts remove client names. Perhaps most importantly, find the responsible computer data manager and befriend him/her. This will be worth all the time it takes. In your relationships with agency employees, never act like a know-it-all unless asked.

Significantly, if there are other resources which you have at your disposal inform the agency of them. Share the experience to help create relationships between your campus and state government. For example, the Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis at Missouri University provided county-level data to supplement the State provided center-level data.

Fourth, don't be afraid to ask for financial assistance. Academicians often make do with very limited resources. Much of the world judges the value of a product by what it costs. Therefore, realistically estimate the cost of your product at market prices. Remember your graduate students. Remember the University. Remember yourself.

Fifth, state your intent to publish the work. Excite the agency about the work being good enough to be disseminated through academic channels. Ask them about their profession's organization(s) that might provide a publishing outlet. This not only facilitates publishing, it greatly increases your credibility and enhances the image of the agency.

Finally, you should issue a guarantee that, if they meet the terms of the agreement, the work will be completed within the agency's time constraints. In a busy semester, research is often neglected. When you work for the State, you have a customer. Focus on your customer's deadline and meet it.

References

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Endnotes

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