

Summary: Lessons Learned from the Use of Research Evidence

As someone who has spent her career in research, Vivian set the stage for her presentation by noting that research has an important role to play in improving policy and practice, and ultimately outcomes in our society. She emphasized that there is promise in what evidence can deliver. At the same time she expressed frustration that, even though we have done a lot to produce more, better, and more relevant evidence, the reality is that evidence does not get used very often. It is that frustration that has led her into this line of work.

Why focus on evidence use?

Vivian provided background information on the William T. Grant Foundation, which is a private foundation that supports research to improve the lives of young people by having research inform policy and practice. To date the foundation has funded 65 studies in this field and Vivian underscored, “We have to ensure that evidence gets used in policy and practice – and this is an ongoing struggle.”

At the foundation they think of evidence use as an area of rigorous scientific inquiry. They want to study this as a topic in its own right, rather than relying solely on people’s personal experience, anecdotes or hunches regarding what it takes to get evidence used. To this end, at the foundation they are committed to building on prior research and knowledge in this field. Vivian noted that in the late 1970s and early 1980s Carol Weiss and some of her colleagues did research on when policymakers use evidence, why they use it, and how to make it happen more and better.

Also integral to the foundation’s work is an emphasis on building stronger theory about evidence use. Theory provides explanatory frameworks for predicting when evidence gets used, why it gets used (or not), and the conditions and strategies that support evidence use. Vivian explained that theory consists of testable propositions. That is where empirical rigor comes in: those theoretical propositions should be subjected to rigorous research design, measures, and methods to determine if they are valid.

What does it mean to use research evidence?

Vivian noted that there are similarities between using research evidence and using data and program evaluation findings. She posited that too often when people think about using evidence, they employ what academics term a rational linear model of decision-making: that you conduct evaluations to identify what works, get others to implement what works, and then outcomes will improve.

Another version of the rational-linear model is that one conducts a research or policy analysis, generates important findings, and then communicates those findings in clear ways. Somehow it is believed that this will lead to improved outcomes. As Vivian acknowledged, most of us know this rarely happens, but it has nevertheless been an alluring model.

As she shared images of a straight roadway and a busy freeway intersection, Vivian explained that when we look at what it takes for evidence to be used, it rarely looks like a linear country road. Rather, it resembles a very busy, very messy freeway interchange. The use of evidence involves many other elements coming into play: data, funding considerations, implementation capacity, and stakeholder input. Further complicating the arena of evidence use are the professional judgments and experience that people bring to the table, as well as their political beliefs and values. It is therefore imperative to recognize the *complexity* of evidence use as we consider ways to *improve* evidence use.

At the foundation they have discovered that it is more helpful to think about how to get evidence *integrated* into policy in productive ways. Vivian emphasized: “Improving the use of evidence in policy is improving the *integration* of evidence into policy.” This accounts for why many people are now talking about evidence-informed policy. When talking about evidence-based policy, this can connote the idea that research or data is the basis for policymaking, when in reality evidence is **one** set of considerations in a complicated decision-making scenario.

Different purposes for Research

In discussing the different purposes for research, two ways of using evidence were delineated: instrumental and conceptual.

Instrumental Use of Evidence

With instrumental use, evidence informs a decision that needs to be made. For example, if people are at a crossroad, evidence can inform which way they choose to proceed. Evidence can be used to make resource allocation decisions, helping to decide what to fund and what not to fund. Vivian also referred to evidence-based programs and federal funding efforts that drive more money to programs with evidence of that effectiveness. In the arena of state legislatures, evidence is used to inform how people vote, influencing whether they back a reform effort, or not.

The instrumental use of evidence is not necessarily straightforward. In complicating our thinking, Vivian reminded us that it is rare that significant decisions are made only at one point in time. Usually there is a stream of decisions being made. Thus, at different stages of the decision process, different types of evidence will be useful, and useful to different actors. As an example, data can help people identify a problem to focus on. At a later stage, evaluation evidence can help people decide which programs to invest in. Still later, when thinking about implementation, descriptive research may be utilized as people contemplate how to successfully implement programs. Perhaps performance measurement can then be used to monitor and improve implementation over time. We have to think about who the users of evidence are at the different stages, and what their specific evidence needs are.

Conceptual uses of evidence

In describing the conceptual use of evidence, Carol Weiss talked about it as the “enlightenment function” of research. Building on this characterization, Vivian explained that conceptual use is about the *way* we understand problems, as that will orient us towards solutions. This way of looking at evidence is often overlooked, as it is harder to pinpoint, and the influences can be more subtle. Nonetheless, conceptual use of evidence is very important. Evidence can help us better understand a problem’s underlying roots and its size and scope, thereby informing decisions about whether it is worth attention and how much resources should be devoted to it.

It can also help people develop consensus: if they develop a shared understanding of what the evidence says, it becomes powerful as a way of forging consensus and influencing the direction in which people proceed. Vivian urged the audience to think about the ways in which the learning agendas they are developing within their federal agencies can help foster a stronger understanding of the problems being faced.

Ways to promote evidence use

Trust

Trust is essential to promoting evidence use. This is seen time and again in a variety of decision-making contexts, whether at the state or federal levels, in K-12 education, public health or child welfare.

Trust plays out in different ways. Often researchers and evaluators think about whether to trust evidence based on what kind of research design and methods are used. However, program or policy actors do not necessarily consider trust in the same way. They are more likely to think about whether evidence is relevant and practical to the kind of problems they are facing. They also think a great deal about trusted sources, and what agenda these sources might have in promoting certain evidence. Vivian underscored that people often trust their peers and those working under similar contexts and constraints to them.

In the case of intermediary organizations and researchers, they often think about people who have come through for them over and over in the past, who have delivered useful and relevant evidence, and who understand the kinds of problems they are trying to solve.

Vivian acknowledged that trust is not an easy thing to build. Rather than being an easily solved technical problem, it is instead a social problem. Trust is something that can be deepened but also disrupted. When trust is established and deepens, it can be very powerful, causing people to be more willing to use research to take on harder and more complicated issues.

The importance of routines

In order to get people to use evidence, Vivian stressed that it has to be built into their flow of work. The goal should be that it is seen as the way they go about their work. To build evidence use into routines requires capacity building. It is not enough to emphasize the capacity to produce more and better evidence; there also has to be an emphasis on building the capacity to use evidence. Leaders need to focus on capacity building by investing the necessary time and resources to build trusting relationships among staff members, and by providing technical assistance and training for staff.

The Promise of Research-Practice Partnerships

One of the most promising strategies for promoting evidence use is research-practice partnerships (RPPs). These are long-term partnerships between researchers and practitioners, as well as researchers and policymakers. At the heart of RPPs is the concept that the people who produce evidence are in deep partnership with the intended users of evidence. In agencies, the intended users could be program staff. What is important to the healthy functioning of these partnerships is that the learning agenda is set jointly. The things that are going to be learned should serve the needs of the would-be users. What should also be considered is that no one study solves a problem. Usually producers and users of evidence need to be in constant collaboration so that what is learned from one study can inform what happens next. Partnerships therefore provide the foundation for the iterative use of evidence. Vivian recommended the foundation's partnership [resources website](#) to participants.

In conclusion, Vivian shared where she would place her bets in striving to help us get to a place with more routine use of evidence that will drive better outcomes:

1. We should focus lots of energy on **evidence integration**, and ways to promote the productive integration of different types of evidence in the decision-making process
2. We have to build evidence use into **our routines**, to create a culture of evidence use and arrive at a place where it becomes a part of the way that agencies structure their work
3. We need to **build trusting relationships** so that evidence gets used in an ongoing way
4. We should **pursue partnerships** as one way of bringing all this together and establishing a shared goal that we are working toward
5. We need to consider how to **build the capacity of agencies and staff** to do this work well, paying attention to resources, budgeting, time, and training.

This event summary was written by Loretta Goodwin, AYPF Deputy Director