RESEARCH DISSEMINATION: ACTIVELY BRINGING THE RESEARCH AND POLICY WORLDS TOGETHER

- Research is more likely to be considered and acted upon if dissemination strategies, and a plan to evaluate their effectiveness, are chosen at the start of a research project.
- *Active* dissemination strategies put researchers and policy makers together at the earliest possible point in the research process.
- Research organizations can hire external experts or create their own in-house capacity to initiate and support collaboration between researchers and policy makers.

The following is a summary of a journal article by Ruth Lawrence, published in Evidence & Policy in 2006.

Changes in the worlds of policy-making, technology and government are forcing researchers to rethink how they go about communicating the results of their work. In “Research dissemination: Actively bringing the research and policy worlds together,” Lawrence argues today’s environment demands active engagement between researchers and policy makers and describes two models that can help researchers create more interdependence. Researchers, knowledge brokers and decision makers will find this analytical overview helpful as it offers a succinct “primer” on research dissemination models and their implications.

Changes in the policy-making world

Lawrence argues it is time to re-examine the place of research in policy. In recent years, three shifts in the policy-making environment have put the spotlight on research dissemination. First, evidence-based policy-making has become the gold standard, forcing researchers and policy makers to work together. Second, enhanced communication networks have led to information overload for both policy makers and the public, creating the need for both knowledge management and ever more sophisticated approaches to knowledge dissemination. Third, there is increasing focus on target setting and monitoring, efficiency and deliverable products, leaving policy makers and researchers with the overarching task of measuring the impact of their studies on policy and practice.

Three research dissemination models

These changes in the policy environment have encouraged people to look at possible models for research dissemination. Lawrence eloquently describes three of them — the linear model, the translation model and the linkage and exchange model — and argues only the latter two are relevant in the current technological and political climate.

In the *linear model*, research is produced independently of its potential consumers and is then transmitted by a sender to a receiver, with no feedback link. While a transfer of knowledge occurs in this mode, there is no real interaction between the researcher and policy maker. Lawrence states this model is not an option in today’s world.

The *translation model* identifies intermediaries who can successfully communicate research messages between the misunderstood producers and the impatient users of knowledge. These intermediaries help decision makers navigate research sources and findings and draw out their
implications for policy and practice. For example, the Research in Practice group in the U.K. works to improve consideration of research in children’s services. It conducts learning events, coaches organizations to become more evidence-based, and houses an evidence bank containing annotated, evaluated references, policy-oriented research briefings, and information about dissemination strategies.

The linkage and exchange model, which has a growing number of supporters, finds researchers and policy makers actively collaborating at each stage of the research process – priority-setting, funding, design, implementation and evaluation. To make this interaction work, both research and policy organizations have to make structural changes and get help from neutral knowledge brokers to support and teach both sides. The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation has developed a highly regarded “linkage and exchange model” and tools to support its implementation.

A closer look at Lawrence’s picks for today’s most applicable research dissemination models

According to Lawrence, the translation model is an effective method to promote research use because it uses knowledge brokers (individuals or groups) to synthesize the research and policy perspectives. This in turn keeps researchers up-to-date on relevant policy issues and builds ongoing relationships between them and policy makers. However, the author found brokers often decide what literature to review and what issues to prioritize. The consequence is policy makers can become dependent on this service and fail to become intelligent consumers of research in their own right.

The growing popularity of the linkage and exchange model is largely because it makes policy makers and researchers more aware of the knowledge available and limitations of each other’s world. The model’s drawback, however, is it requires a significant outlay in time, resources and redesign of organizational structures. Therefore, Lawrence recommends researchers and policy makers work together to 1) identify long-term policy and research priorities; 2) choose research dissemination strategies; 3) select research grant recipients; and 4) create clear, simple messages for policy makers. Results are better if the project responsibilities, dissemination strategies and evaluation tools are set at the beginning of the project.

The article identifies several large organizations – Australian, American, Canadian and others – that have embodied the linkage and exchange model and made research dissemination itself an aim, goal or strategic priority. By adopting either the translation or the linkage and exchange model, any organization can increase the chance that policy makers in its domain have access to research that is intelligible and relevant to their needs.

Reference


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