

Influencing Evidence-Based Policy as a Graduate Student

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Few processes impact the lives of everyday people as strongly as the creation of public policy. Public policy may be defined concretely as specific legislation, or it may be thought of more abstractly as the social principles upon which the law is based (McKnight, Sechrest, & McKnight, 2005). In both cases, it aims to impact human behavior to satisfy the greater good of society. Given that the study of human behavior is the foundation of psychological science, psychologists have a unique role in shaping public policy.

Although influencing governmental decisions may seem intriguing, such work also might feel daunting to students: Many are still developing their own lines of research and may not feel as though their work is important enough to impact society at large. While it is true that students rarely are called on to be policy advisors and cabinet members, the skills that psychology students gain, especially through PhD programs, allow us to make a significant impact in the public policy sector. For those interested in policy work, there are several ways to get started:

Strategic Science

Good public policies are evidence-based. Although the role of evidence-based policy is different in every political administration, learning how to explain the relevance of your research to someone who is not an academic is an important step to becoming involved in the policy-making process. While conducting “strategic science” involves designing research that addresses information gaps that are relevant to policy decisions, it also means learning how to communicate that research outside of the academic community (Brownell & Roberto, 2015). To do this, you need to think outside of the box of a research article. Write an Op-Ed to a local newspaper. Consider submitting to a journal that accepts policy briefs on topics relevant to your research. Create summaries of your existing research that can be easily understood by someone outside of your field. Be creative!

Although this article will largely focus on more formal ways to become involved in policy, it is critical to remember that policymakers will not turn to science to inform their work if they cannot understand why the science is relevant. Because of this, it is important to learn how to communicate your work.

Additionally, conducting strategic science in your own work will likely make you more competitive for formal public policy programs.

Policy Fellowship Programs

For those wishing to gain formal experience in public policy work, there are several fellowships geared toward students and early-career professionals. These programs often select a small number of individuals to travel to government hubs (such as Washington, DC) and experience firsthand what it is like to work at the intersection of science and policy. Formal programs can be a great opportunity for students who are considering careers in public policy, as well as a good resource for future psychological scientists who are curious about jobs outside of academia. Some organizations that offer fellowships include:

- **The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine** (students and early-career professionals). The Christine Mirzayan Science & Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship Program provides graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and recent graduates the opportunity to travel to Washington for 3 months and learn about the role of science and engineering in policy work;
- **The American Association for the Advancement of Science** (recent graduates of PhD programs and master's-level graduates with at least 3 years of experience). AAAS Science and Technology Fellowships place recent graduates in executive, judicial, or legislative fellowships to contribute scientific expertise to the public policymakers and federal agencies for one year;
- **The Presidential Management Fellows Program** (recent graduates of master's or PhD programs). This program places recent graduates in 2-year entry-level positions in various federal agencies and allows them the opportunity to rotate through more than one agency; and
- **The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues** (undergraduate seniors, graduate students from underrepresented minorities, and recent graduates of PhD programs). The Society offers several policy fellowships ranging in length that provide students and postdoctoral fellows the opportunity to incorporate psychological science into policy work.

Advocacy Through Professional Organizations

Many scientific and professional organizations organize advocacy groups to visit state or national legislatures to inform and advise lawmakers on important issues. These membership opportunities are often especially relevant for clinical psychological scientists, as many groups have formal programs that advocate for awareness, funding, prevention, and treatment programs for mental health care.

Additionally, given the proposed budget cuts to a number of scientific organizations, psychological scientists from all disciplines have the opportunity to advocate for government support of both evidence-based policy and scientific research in general.

Program Evaluation

In addition to public policy initiatives on a national level, it is also important to consider local policy initiatives. One way to become involved on a local level is through program evaluation. Many community organizations are interested in tracking the impact and assessing the effectiveness of their

programs. Organizations may use this information when applying for public and private grants to support the work that they are doing. For graduate students, working on program evaluation for community groups can be a good way to network with key players who are active in the community. It also may be a way to gain experience with those outside of academia, while learning how to present research in a clear and understandable way. Such partnerships provide benefits for all parties involved — they let you engage in research with a unique population, help community members gain access to more effective programming, and allow community groups to run more efficiently by identifying strength and growth areas.

Of the policy options discussed in this article, working with community partners may be one of the most difficult. Starting new research projects involves consent, institutional approval, and faculty support. This can be a lot of work for an already-busy graduate student. However, working with local groups also can be one of the most rewarding ways to become involved in your community and, by extension, to help inform public policy.

Public policy work comes in all shapes and forms, but it represents a key area where psychological scientists — including students — can become involved. We can use the skills that we spend so many years learning, skills that allow us to conduct rigorous research, to inform public and private programs, laws, and discourse. No matter how divisive the political climate, standing up for science and helping to support evidence-based policies is a worthy pursuit that you can begin now.

References

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