



Report on Bridging the Gap Workshop

Foundations and Universities: Promoting Collaboration to Produce Policy-Relevant Research

Held on January 23, 2017 at the School of International Service,
American University, Washington, DC

Summary

On January 23, 2017, Bridging the Gap (<http://www.bridgingthegaproject.org/>) convened leaders from prominent foundations and universities to identify and advance avenues of cooperation across academic disciplines and policy areas. This workshop focused on how the missions of universities and foundations provide a strong basis for synergies and partnerships. In particular, Bridging the Gap identified a core area of common interest: engaged scholars are well-positioned to harness their issue-area and methodological expertise across a wide range of policy areas to co-create research projects with significant public policy and/or social impact – projects that align with the priority missions of foundations. In doing so, university-based scholars continue to serve the core objectives of the academy to create and disseminate knowledge for the betterment of society while educating future generations.

Universities remain a key talent pool for funding organizations seeking to undertake or support research. To maintain that role, universities should endeavor to be ecumenical in the research priorities that they support and place value on applied and translational research, in part through tenure and promotion guidelines. Bridging the Gap encourages the leadership of both foundations and universities to take concrete steps towards increased engagement with one another, including partnering in the development of research agendas and guidelines for assessing the impact of scholars' policy contributions. For its part, Bridging the Gap will develop recommendations for integrating scholars' policy-relevant work into tenure and promotion guidelines. Bridging the Gap will also assist foundations in identifying new scholarly voices to broaden and diversify the range of perspectives in debates on critical global challenges.

Introduction

Bridging the Gap, an initiative that promotes an informed and engaged public discourse on foreign policy challenges through trainings and by advocating for academics to pursue policy-relevant research, convened a workshop on January 23, 2017 with the leadership of prominent foundations and universities. The objectives of this workshop were: 1) to identify and advance avenues of cooperation in developing and promoting policy-relevant research across academic disciplines and policy areas; 2) to focus on collaboration through greater information sharing and other means; and, 3) to jointly identify concrete steps towards the advancement of policy-relevant research. In particular, Bridging the Gap sought to facilitate the engagement of university leadership with the foundation community to better understand foundations' interests and goals – including how they might be evolving in light of recent

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political developments in the United States and globally – as well as areas where universities and foundations can partner for mutual benefit.

The workshop included representatives from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Charles Koch Institute, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the One Earth Future Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council. On the university side, the leadership of American University, College of William and Mary, DePaul University, Duke University, North Carolina Central University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Wake Forest University participated, along with a representative of the American Political Science Association. The workshop had two focused discussions – on foundation priorities and the potential for cooperation with universities, and on universities’ engagement with public policy – as well as a concluding discussion that attempted to identify clear steps for both groups of actors to undertake.

This Bridging the Gap workshop was an outgrowth of a related June 2016 workshop of university provosts convened with the objective of identifying how universities can support public and policy engagement amongst their faculty. That workshop identified the need for universities to heighten the impact of policy-relevant research by encouraging their faculty to pose research questions of major consequence for society, by supporting interdisciplinary research, and by strengthening engagement with issue-area stakeholders. Input from foundation and public sector representatives led to reflection on the disconnect between how university leadership perceived their efforts and how outside groups perceived universities. The June 2016 workshop was successful in identifying specific areas of resistance, real and perceived (e.g., promotion committees *believe* that outside letter writers will not or should not take policy contributions into account), to the advancement of policy-relevant research and public engagement. As a result, we determined that universities should approach policy contributions not as “service” but as a fundamental part of universities’ mission as key institutions in society and review their tenure and promotion standards with this in mind.

Foundation Priorities and Potential for Cooperation

In our discussion of current foundation priorities, Dr. Thomas Asher of the Social Science Research Council addressed criticism of universities by foundations as organizations that struggle with policy relevance, including the ability to do just-in-time policy analysis and incentivize broader public engagement around public policy issues. Foundations themselves often have robust networks of experts outside universities (e.g., think tanks), leading some foundation officials to ask questions about the conditions under which university scholars provide their organizations with added value. On the other hand, universities can play a role in leveraging grant money to obtain greater sums of funding for research initiatives thereby enhancing the impact of initial foundation funding. Dr. Asher encouraged the adoption of a model wherein foundation support for the work of researchers could be viewed as field experiments that universities would scale up when successful proofs of concept were offered. In this light, philanthropic funding should be seen as a catalyst for obtaining further government or private donor funding.

The importance of individual research projects’ alignment with the mission of foundations was emphasized by Dr. Conor Seyle of the One Earth Future Foundation – an organization whose mission includes making use of the best empirical evidence to solve complex problems and catalyze systems that eliminate the root causes of war. Foundations are mission-driven organizations and think about the success or failure of any partnership through the lens of their mission whereas universities additionally place an emphasis on basic research. With this in mind, our discussion addressed the

incentives for foundations to partner with universities. These included: the large talent pool of highly trained researchers – faculty, post-doctoral researchers and even students – available at universities; the methodological sophistication of such researchers; and the independent legitimacy of university-based researchers, including the externally recognized value of their work. However, it remains essential that universities demonstrate institutional buy-in for sponsored research through cost-sharing, reduced overhead rates, and other mechanisms.

Our discussion also highlighted the importance of continuing to push for increased incentives for academics to undertake policy-relevant research. One prong of this effort should be devoted to the promotion of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary collaborative work as a type of research activity well suited to addressing complex problems. Universities have the ability to use institutional “carrots” such as seed money or research institutes that pull talent from across schools and disciplines. Another previously identified area for sustained effort is the revision of tenure and promotion guidelines for faculty to reflect the development of new products by academics (for example, mobile apps) and the value of policy-relevant research.

A major takeaway of this segment of the workshop was that individual academic researchers and universities, more generally, need to move towards an understanding that sponsored research should be seen as a joint project where funders and scholars both contribute intellectual capital and co-create projects. This necessitates a move away from a pitch and response approach towards an engaged conversation about creating good research projects. Foundations should be seen as reservoirs of knowledge, not just sources of funding, as both foundations and universities act to shape research agendas. While such an approach is not without its challenges (e.g., concern over conflict of interest), the benefits of a more intimate relationship could shape research questions in positive ways and spur the development of innovative research approaches. Additionally, large-scale, multisectoral initiatives often have a range of funding vehicles, including private donations, that can be used to leverage philanthropic funds.

The Academy’s Role in Informing Public Policy

Our second session focused on how the academy engages the public policy world and featured remarks by Dr. Michael Halleran, Provost of the College of William and Mary, and Dr. Sarah Mangelsdorf, Provost of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Their remarks emphasized the durable nature of universities as outward looking institutions that act as conservators as well as innovators. Regardless of their public or private nature, many universities reflect some component of the *Wisconsin idea* – to serve the people of the state, the country and the world. Additional valuable attributes of universities as partners were identified, including: the quality of expertise, universities’ major contribution in subsidizing faculty research, and the synergistic environment of a university campus which enables collaborative interdisciplinary research.

Both applied research and research with policy implications are no longer as penalized by universities, in part due to the explicit requirement by government granting agencies that proposals address the “broader impacts” of research. Yet, there are still areas of public policy that do not reflect widely accepted empirical findings. It is therefore incumbent upon universities and initiatives like Bridging the Gap to train academics in the ability to communicate to a variety of audiences: scholars from other disciplines, specialists, non-specialists, decision-makers and the general population. Universities should endeavor to be ecumenical in the research priorities that they support and place value on applied and translational research. We hope that through our continued efforts and the efforts of university

leadership that policy-relevant research will be increasingly valued within academia and by the policymaking community.

Barriers to policy-relevant research at universities remain. In addition to the complex process of revising tenure and promotion standards, the difficulty of assessing excellence in a wide array of contexts remains daunting. And yet, there may be no better equipped group to develop rigorous metrics for measuring policy impact than academics undertaking policy-relevant research. This remains an area of great interest to Bridging the Gap and we will work with our partners at universities and foundations to develop guidelines for assessing the policy impact of scholarship.

Findings

This workshop was held as part of an ongoing effort by Bridging the Gap to bring together various constituencies interested in the conduct and promotion of policy-relevant research. Our discussion identified that there remains a high demand from both universities and foundations for the policy and communications training as well as the mentorship programs offered by Bridging the Gap. In addition, there is clear value in promoting regular dialogue between foundations and universities regarding the gaps in their respective missions.

A challenge shared by many foundations is the limited amount of time that staff are able to devote to sourcing expertise. This creates the space for organizations such as Bridging the Gap to serve as a clearinghouse connecting scholars – particularly younger scholars and/or those from a wide range of academic institutions – to policy-makers, providing training on how to frame research questions and results, and identifying critical challenges and how to translate them into research questions and scholarly projects.

Recommendations

In light of the workshop's discussion and findings, Bridging the Gap recommends that:

- *Foundations as granting agencies should continue to push applicants to address the broader impacts of their research, including policy-relevance*
- *Universities and foundations should partner in identifying research areas of high social value and potential impact and collaborate in the co-creation of research agendas in these areas*
- *Universities and foundations should actively support multi-investigator, interdisciplinary research focused on addressing important and complex problems*
- *Scholarly organizations and academic disciplines should incentivize policy-relevant research, including (but not only) through the adoption of tenure and promotion standards that value scholarly contributions to public policy and public debates*
- *Bridging the Gap and interested partners initiate a project to develop robust criteria and measures for better integrating policy-relevant research and public engagement into university hiring, tenure and promotion standards.*

Bridging the Gap will continue to work with the leadership of universities and foundations to spur interest and build support for policy-relevant research amongst Provosts, Deans and other academic partners, including through discussions and presentations at relevant meetings and conferences.