



## REQUEST FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS: UNDERSTANDING THE ACQUISITION, INTERPRETATION, AND USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

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The William T. Grant Foundation has a longstanding interest in supporting research that can inform policy and practice. Our particular focus is on policies and practices that affect youth ages 8 to 25 in the United States. In this area, there are significant gaps between research and policy, and between research and practice. Researchers express frustration that policymakers and practitioners do not use, or misuse, research findings. Policymakers and practitioners suggest that research is often not relevant to their work or is not easily accessible or understood. Many researchers, research funders, and intermediary organizations have sought to address these gaps by encouraging the production of more rigorous research evidence, better research syntheses, and improved approaches to disseminating research evidence. Policymakers have also tried to improve the connection between research and practice by mandating the use of research findings through law or regulation.

**Relatively little research attention has been devoted to understanding the user side—that is, studying what affects policymakers' and practitioners' acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence.** At the Foundation, we believe stronger theory and empirical work on this topic will increase understanding of how to improve the production and subsequent use of research for and in policy and practice.

We plan to support research projects, with award amounts ranging from \$100,000 to \$600,000, covering direct and indirect costs for two to three years of work. Our total estimated budget for these projects is \$1.5 million per year.

The Foundation will consider applications for newly initiated studies and add-on studies to existing projects. Add-on studies must address research questions not covered by prior funding from us or other funders, but can cover secondary analyses of existing data or collection and analyses of new data. We encourage interdisciplinary projects, and welcome applications from researchers in various fields and disciplines such as anthropology, communications, economics, education, family studies, human development, organizational studies, political science, prevention research, psychology, public administration, public policy, public health, social work, and sociology.

Applicants should submit letters of inquiry by **May 6, 2010**. Selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposals, which will be due by **October 14, 2010**. Funding decisions will be made at the Board of Trustees meeting in June 2011, and awards can be made available shortly thereafter.

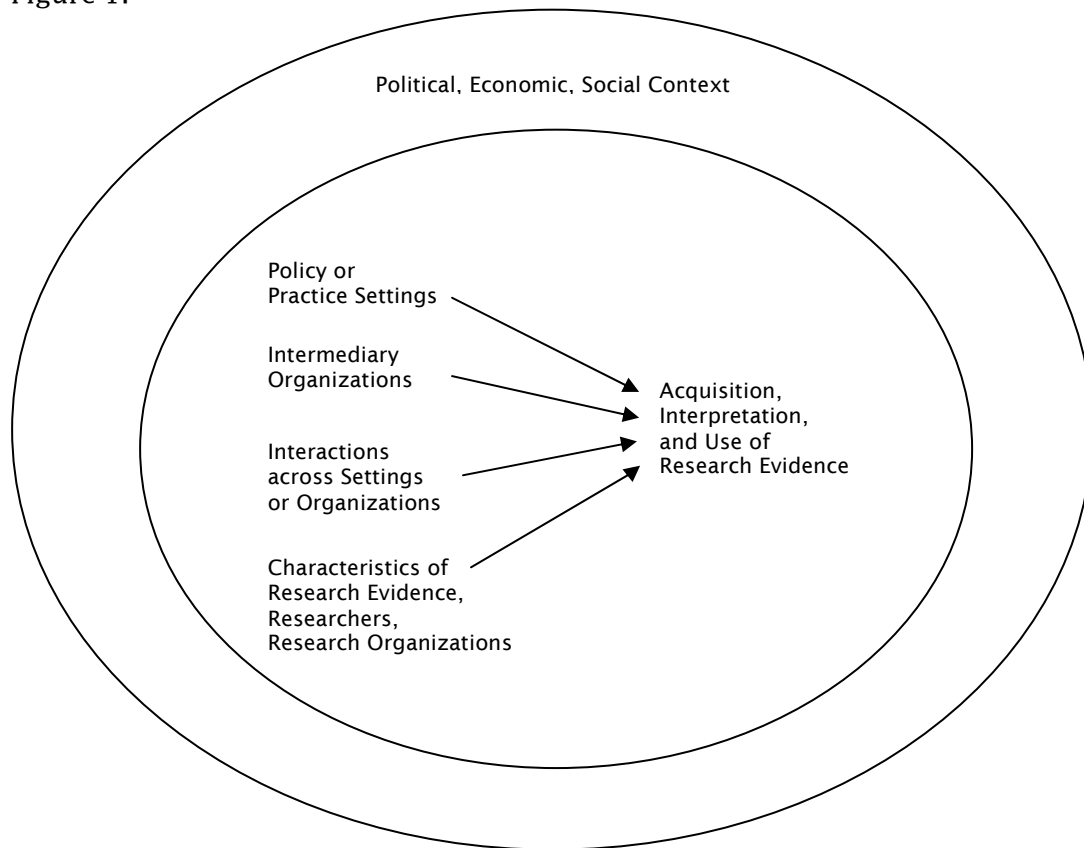
### Focus of the RFP

Through this RFP, the Foundation supports empirical, theory-building studies of what affects policymakers' and practitioners' acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence. We are interested in policy and practice directly relevant to youth ages 8 to 25 in the United States. Areas of focus can include education, juvenile justice, child welfare, health, family support, employment, and youth programs.

Figure 1 illustrates several phenomena that are of interest, given our understanding of the current state of theory and empirical work on the use of research evidence. This includes how policy and practice settings, intermediary organizations, and broader political, economic, and social contexts affect the ways research evidence is acquired, interpreted, and used. It is likely too ambitious for every applicant to study all of these influences on research acquisition, interpretation, and use. Applicants may need to focus on a subset of influences, and either research acquisition or use.

Our early investments in these studies suggest the importance of also developing a strong comprehension of how policymakers and practitioners define research evidence. The Foundation defines *research evidence* as empirical findings derived from systematic research methods and analyses. Our definition includes studies addressing different types of research questions, using various types of research designs and methods, and conducted by researchers working within or outside policy or practice organizations. We know that definitions of research evidence differ across researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, and we want to better understand those differences.

Figure 1.



### How is research evidence acquired, interpreted, and used?

We encourage investigation of the dynamic social processes involved in acquiring, interpreting, and using research evidence. It may be too ambitious for every applicant to propose investigating the acquisition *and* use of research evidence. Therefore, applicants may need to focus on research acquisition *or* use in their proposed investigation. In either case, we view interpretation of research evidence as an integral process in both acquiring and making use of research evidence.

Below, we discuss each of these interests.

- How do policymakers and practitioners *acquire* research evidence? We seek increased understanding of the channels, processes, and vehicles through which policymakers and practitioners acquire research evidence. We are interested both in strategies initiated by policymakers and practitioners, as well as those instigated by others such as advocacy groups and technical assistance providers disseminating research to influence policy and practice.
- How do policymakers and practitioners *interpret* research evidence? This includes understanding how research evidence is interpreted along with other sources of information (e.g., management information data, test scores, practitioner knowledge, expert opinions) and other considerations (e.g., values, fiscal constraints, and political context), and how these other factors affect interpretations of the relevance, credibility, meaning, or implications of research evidence. This also includes how policymakers and practitioners appraise research evidence of different types, quality, and rigor.
- How do policymakers and practitioners *use* research evidence? What role does research evidence play in policy or practice work? Carol H. Weiss, Sandra M. Nutley, and Huw T.O. Davies offer descriptions of several types of research use. *Instrumental use* refers to instances in which research evidence is directly applied to decision-making. *Conceptual use* refers to situations in which research evidence influences or informs how policymakers and practitioners think about issues, problems, or potential solutions. *Tactical use*, related to strategic and symbolic uses, occurs when research evidence is used to justify existing positions such as supporting a piece of legislation or challenging a reform effort. *Imposed use*—recently defined by Carol H. Weiss—refers to situations in which there are mandates to use research evidence, such as when government funding requires that practitioners adopt programs backed by research evidence.

Some applicants are interested in the use of evidence-based programs, practices, or tools. We do not equate adoption of those products with use of research evidence. We are interested in studies of adoption and implementation of those products if they increase understanding of the role of research evidence in decision making. For example, studies might examine whether and how agency administrators weigh research evidence on programs in their decisions to adopt and implement them.

### What affects policymakers' and practitioners' acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence?

We encourage research on how policy and practice settings, intermediary organizations, and broader social, economic, and political contexts influence research acquisition, interpretation, and use. The most promising studies are grounded in a strong understanding of policy and practice work (i.e., the demands and incentives of policy and practice work, the forces that impel and impede change). For example, studies investigating the influence of research evidence on policy ideas often require attending to the role of

advocacy groups and the broader political and social contexts in which they operate. Studies of how school districts use research evidence in making curricular decisions are stronger when applicants have a clear understanding of district decision-making and how it is influenced by organizational culture and capacity, state and federal policy, and local context.

Again, it is not likely that any single study will be able to investigate all the factors that affect the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence. Therefore, applicants will need to restrict their investigation to a subset of important factors, examples of which are below. Investigators should feel free to suggest others.

- What aspects of policy and practice settings affect the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence? <sup>1</sup> Policy and practice settings include, but are not limited to, legislatures, courts, nonprofit agencies, and national, state, and local governmental agencies. We are particularly interested in understanding the organizational and institutional processes and conditions that can account for variation across them. Why are some organizations better able to acquire, interpret, or use research evidence than others? Studies might examine organizational culture (e.g., norms, routines, shared beliefs), policies or rules (e.g., procedures for deliberating about evidence, decision-making rules), capacity (e.g., staffing, material resources), and structure (e.g., interactions between research and administrative units, centralized versus decentralized leadership).
- How do intermediary organizations affect the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence? Here, we define intermediary organizations as those that interpret and distribute research evidence for policymakers and practitioners and/or broker relationships between researchers and policymakers or researchers and practitioners. Intermediaries differ significantly in their missions, constituencies, target audiences, and brokering activities. Important intermediaries include advocacy groups, professional associations, think tanks, governmental and non-governmental research organizations, commercial vendors, news organizations, and funders. What role do intermediaries play in getting research evidence used in policy or practice? Why are some intermediaries more effective than others in fostering the acquisition and use of research evidence?
- How do characteristics of research, researchers, and research organizations affect the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence? Studies might examine how research characteristics (e.g., scientific rigor, topics studied, experimental versus non-experimental designs) and producers affect its interpretation and use. For example, when do practitioners draw on internally versus externally produced research evidence, and what affects their interpretations of the credibility of research evidence from various sources?
- How do interactions between policy settings, practice settings, research organizations, and intermediary organizations affect the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence? Studies might examine how relationships or social networks across organizations affect research use. For example, how does the composition of professional networks influence access to research evidence? How do networks facilitate the diffusion of policy ideas backed by research evidence

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<sup>1</sup> This RFP is not focused on frontline practice as the focal unit of analysis. Applicants may, however, examine those organizations and actors (e.g., school districts, agency leaders, unions) who influence if and how research evidence gets used by the frontline practitioners (e.g., teachers, social workers) who interact directly with youth.

across localities? How do relationships between state legislatures and their legislative service agencies influence the use of research evidence?

- How do the broader political, economic, and social contexts in which policy and practice settings and intermediary organizations are embedded affect research acquisition, interpretation, and use? Studies might examine how a high-stakes accountability environment affects school districts' use of research evidence and how declining state economies affect public agencies' use of research evidence on evidence-based practices.

## Requirements for Applications

1. **Theoretical and Empirical Rationale.** Applications should provide a convincing rationale for how the proposed study would contribute to postulating, refining, or testing theory of what influences the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence in policy or practice. This rationale should be based on a mastery of prior theory and empirical findings on research use and other relevant topics. Theory-building can take multiple forms, such as extending existing theories of research acquisition or use, migrating theories in related areas to research use, developing grounded theory, and subjecting theoretical notions developed from small-sample case study work to broader testing. For example, a current grantee is migrating theory on cultural exchanges to understand how practitioners and researchers interact with each other to make use of research. Another grantee uses social network theory and methods to examine the diffusion of research evidence. A third is employing argument analysis to guide data coding and analysis of how policymakers use research evidence in their deliberations and decision-making. Applicants will inevitably need to focus their studies on particular policy or practice issues and should provide a strong rationale for how those issues are useful for advancing theories of research acquisition or use.
2. **Research Questions or Hypotheses.** Applicants should propose clear and compelling research questions and/or hypotheses. We believe it is more valuable to address a few questions or hypotheses well than to address many questions or hypotheses with less rigor.
3. **Research Design, Methods, and Analysis Plan.** Applicants should propose research designs, methods, and analysis plans that will provide strong empirical evidence on the research questions or hypotheses.

Descriptions of sampling plans should include strong rationales for how the sampling of sites or cases is useful for advancing theories of research acquisition or use. Sampling plans might provide variation on one or two theoretically meaningful characteristics and hold others constant. For example, an applicant interested in whether and how particular forms of organizational capacity facilitate research use might sample organizations that vary in capacity but hold constant other characteristics. It is often useful for samples to include the typical organization, and not solely those that are exceptional.

We encourage applicants to consider using mixed methods, wherein they collect and integrate multiple types of data. Prior studies of research use have often relied on individuals to self-report on their own research use or on use by their organizations. While interviews and surveys can be informative, exclusive reliance on them is limiting. Research is usually interpreted and used in the midst of complex deliberations and decision-making situations that involve multiple individuals, integration of various

pieces of evidence, and changes over time. It is difficult to expect any individual to accurately report on what occurred in such situations. Social desirability and the push to impose order and rationality in describing deliberations and decision-making also raise concerns about self-report methods. These challenges are magnified when individuals are asked to report not only on their use of research, but also on their sources of research and the factors that influenced their research acquisition and use. Given these challenges, applicants might consider integrating multiple types of data. For example, they might observe meetings at which people deliberate over evidence and make decisions, interview meeting participants to understand their perspectives on what occurred and the evidence considered, and find and code the documents that went into and came out of the meetings.

Because we are interested in processes, we also encourage applicants to consider collecting longitudinal data and analyzing change across time. Such work could, for example, reveal how the interpretation of research evidence changes as it is communicated by different people over time.

Given current limits in the field, we view measurement development work as important. Applicants proposing such work should provide a strong theoretical and empirical rationale as to the nature and importance of the constructs, discuss the broader utility of the measures beyond the immediate study, propose convincing plans for developing reliable and valid measures, and have sufficient measurement expertise on the project teams to carry out the work.

We anticipate that some studies will require collecting potentially sensitive data from policymakers and practitioners. In those cases, applicants should provide assurances as to how data will be successfully collected, the team's prior experience collecting such data, and their methods for maximizing response rates and access to relevant respondents, meetings, and documents.

4. **Project Teams.** The composition of project teams will depend on the goals, research questions or hypotheses, and methods of the proposed study, but we encourage applicants to consider developing multi-role and interdisciplinary project teams. We value multi-role teams that include researchers as well as policymakers or practitioners who understand the policy or practice setting under study and can help shape the study questions and methods. We also value teams that can draw upon theories, methods, and content expertise from relevant disciplines and fields.
5. **Feasibility.** Applicants should propose work that can be successfully completed given the resources and time frame. The staffing plan must reflect adequate expertise to successfully carry out the project. Investigators must have the ability to conduct and communicate research successfully, as demonstrated in their prior training, work, and publications.

### **Capacity-Building Support**

In addition to supporting studies, the Foundation has a broader goal of building capacity for the study of research acquisition, interpretation, and use in policy and practice. Capacity-building needs include stronger theory, methods, and measures; incorporation of expertise from multiple disciplines; and stronger integration of the expertise of the researchers who produce research evidence and the policymakers and practitioners who seek to use it.

On December 16–17, 2009, we convened our first meeting for grantees working on the use of research evidence. The goals of these sessions were to generate a learning community and facilitate cross-fertilization of ideas, methods, and measures; help grantees think through conceptual or practical challenges; and more substantially, begin to build stronger theory and empirical knowledge about how people use research evidence. We expect to continue bringing project teams together in regular meetings to learn from each other and from other experts.

To date, we have supported a number of activities that may be helpful to applicants. Our initial thinking is described in our 2007 *Annual Report* essay “Studying the Use of Research Evidence in Policy and Practice.” Our 2009 *Annual Report* essay provides an update on our thinking and reflects the knowledge we gained reviewing applications for the first year of the RFP. The new essay will be available for download in May, but a prepublication draft of the essay will be available online in March. We commissioned a paper by two U.K. scholars, Huw T.O. Davies and Sandra M. Nutley, to help bridge work in the U.K. with the U.S. research community. The paper, “Learning More About How Research-Based Knowledge Gets Used: Guidance in the Development of New Empirical Research,” is based on the review work described in their book *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services* and highlights conceptual frameworks for understanding evidence use in policy and practice. Applicants may also find useful an annotated bibliography of relevant theory and empirical work in the United States. All of these resources can be downloaded from our [website](#).

### **Examples of Funded Grants**

Below are illustrative examples of Foundation-funded studies. These examples are not intended as templates, and our interests are not limited to these types of studies.

- Lawrence Palinkas is studying how leaders and managers in local agencies acquire, interpret, and use research evidence as they consider using an evidence-based program. He is building off a randomized controlled trial in California and Ohio, which tests whether Community Development Teams impact adoption and implementation of Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC)—an evidence-based program—by mental health, child welfare, and probation agencies. Like many complex interventions, MTFC requires collaboration between and within agencies. Palinkas is seeking to understand what shapes consensus on evidence use among decision-makers and the types of interactions between researchers, practitioners, and intermediaries that facilitate the use of research evidence. The initial work involves conducting interviews, focus groups, and participant observations to inform development of two measures that assess decision-makers’ consensus on evidence use and the level of negotiation, compromise, and agreement in their interactions. In the second stage of work, he will examine the factors that predict consensus on evidence use. He will also test whether the Community Development Teams create stronger interactions between researchers, practitioners, and intermediaries and whether those interactions are associated with greater progress in adopting and implementing the evidence-based program.
- Alan Daly and Kara Finnigan are studying how district and school staff acquire, interpret, and use research evidence to improve schools in “corrective action” under No Child Left Behind. A central focus of this work is examining how practitioners’ relationships with one another affect their uptake of research evidence. To do this, they are mapping the social networks of staff in district central offices and schools. They will supplement that data with interviews, observations, and document reviews to understand how research evidence gets used as schools diagnose

achievement problems and develop solutions. By pulling the network and qualitative data together, they will gain greater understanding of the types of relationships that facilitate the diffusion and use of research evidence. The qualitative data will also be used to inform their development of two measures to assess research use and organizational cultures that facilitate research use.

- Robert Asen and Deborah Gurke are examining how school boards interpret and use research evidence in policy deliberations and decisions. Using a method called argument analysis, they will examine how research and other types of evidence are interpreted and used as school boards communicate their positions, offer reasons to support them, marshal evidence for their views, and discount opposing positions. By observing meeting interactions and interviewing board members and other stakeholders, the investigators will explore how research use is influenced by board members' relationships with one another and with other stakeholders.

### **Eligibility Criteria**

Grants are limited, without exception, to tax-exempt entities for purposes that are described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Applicant institutions must make available, on request, letters from the Internal Revenue Service that include the applicant's classification under Section 509(a) of the Code, "Private Foundation Status."

Each institution has its own set of eligibility criteria for who can act as Principal Investigator (PI) on a grant. We require that our applicants meet their institution's specific criteria. Usually, this excludes graduate students. They can, however, be listed as Co-Primary Investigators.

### **Application and Review Procedures**

The application process will proceed in two stages: letter of inquiry and invited full proposals. Letters of inquiry are due **May 6, 2010**. The letters serve as mini-proposals and should demonstrate promise for meeting all application requirements. Foundation staff will review all letters and invite a group of finalists to submit full proposals. Invited full proposals are due by **October 14, 2010**. They will be reviewed by a panel of expert reviewers, and then by the Foundation's Senior Program Team using a rigorous, scientific, peer-review process.

### **Letter of Inquiry Procedures**

1. Applications are accepted through our website at <http://easygrants.wtgrantfoundation.org>. Applications should be submitted under the name and contact information of the Principal Investigator. If you have not submitted online with us before, you will need to register on the website to obtain a Login ID and Password.
2. Select "Click here to start a new application."
  - For grant program, choose "Major Grants."
  - Enter your project title, which must begin with "**Research Use RFP 2010.**"
  - Select your tax-exempt organization.
  - After saving this information, you will be brought back to your home page. Click on the "Major Grants Letter of Inquiry" task.
3. Fill in text boxes for the following information.
  - **Contact Information.** Provide the Principal Investigator's contact information.

- **Principal Investigators.**  
Contact information for the primary Principal Investigator will appear on this page. Check the box to identify the primary Principal Investigator. Add contact information for each additional Co-Principal Investigator.
  - **Project Information**, including:
    - **Project title** (15 words maximum and must begin with “Research Use RFP 2010”).
    - **Brief description of the project** (100 words maximum). The brief description should be written in language appropriate for an educated lay audience, not for other researchers. Begin by stating the major questions guiding the work. Then, briefly summarize the project’s rationale and background, research methods, and data analysis plan.
    - **Start and end dates** of the project.
    - **Grant request amount** (direct and indirect costs combined for the full grant period).
    - **Additional key staff** for the project.
    - **Discipline** of Principal Investigator’s most advanced degree.
    - **Project (sample) demographics.**
4. Upload the following two files:
- **Narrative** (5 pages maximum). Applicants should use 12 pt. font and the document should be single-spaced with a margin of at least one inch on all sides. A reference page is not required, but if included, does not count against the five page maximum for the narrative. The narrative should describe details of the project, including:
    - **Major questions** guiding this work;
    - **Theoretical and empirical rationale**, including brief review of relevant theory and empirical work and how the project will inform theory and either policy or practice;
    - **Specific research questions and/or hypotheses** to be addressed or tested;
    - **Research design and methods**, including sampling plan and data collection and processing procedures; and
    - **Data analysis plan** for addressing research questions and/or hypotheses.
5. **Curricula Vitae.** A one-page vita for each Principal and Co-Principal Investigator should be provided. Please upload all the vitae as a single document.
6. Go to Review and Submit and click “Submit.”

Applicants will receive a confirmation email after submission of this application. Following review of letters of inquiry, those applicants invited to submit full proposals will receive complete submission procedures.