Communicating Demographic Results to Policy-Makers

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Communicating with policy-makers, like doing research, requires …

• Being a credible expert
  - Know your area inside out, & provide relevant, detailed, objective, and persuasive information

• Building and maintaining contacts
  - Work hard to establish contacts, or work with others who have them

• Flexibility
  - Be open to opportunities and willing to accommodate them
I. Being a credible expert

• Policy-makers want to know who they are talking to.

- Always have ready an up-to-date CV and a short bio (1-2 paragraphs) listing your current position, where you got your Ph.D., where you have published, honors or notable activities (NAS committees, awards, etc.).

- If you have published a book or key article on the topic, mention that.

- If you have relevant professional or practice experience, mention that too.
I. Being a credible expert: Providing relevant, detailed, objective, and persuasive information

- Policy-makers do not want to hear one of your papers:
  - You need to understand what questions they are asking and locate the relevant information.

- Policy-makers are uncomfortable with generalities:
  - They want details and documentation (even if provided separately).

- Policy-makers need to know you are objective:
  - Cite scientific studies (your own and others).

- Policy-makers may get overwhelmed by too much information:
  - Use graphs to tell your story.
  - And keep the punchline simple – pick 3 messages and stick to them!
II. Building and maintaining contacts

• If you are organizing an academic event, you contact people you know.

• Policy-makers are no different – they go back to the same people over and over again.

• So, if you are going to communicate effectively with policy-makers, you either have to work hard to cultivate and maintain those relationships, or you have to be connected to others who do so (knowledge brokers).
II. Building and maintaining contacts: The role of knowledge brokers

• Knowledge brokers straddle both worlds:
  - People from your discipline who are working in government (ASPE, Council of Economic Advisors, Congressional staff).
  - Policy staff at professional organizations (PAA).

• These knowledge brokers can get you invited to talk with policy-makers, and they can help you prepare an effective talk.
III. Flexibility

• Academics are notorious for having busy schedules, set months in advance, but policy-makers operate on a different cycle.
  - Issues come up, and events get scheduled on short notice.
  - If we are going to engage with policy-makers, we have to be flexible and willing to accommodate that short notice.

• Our training encourages us to develop areas of expertise and stick with them, but policy-makers may ask about other areas.
  - A good question to ask yourself is not “do I know as much about this as I do about my main area of expertise?”, but “do I know enough to make a useful contribution?”.
  - Also ask “is this an opportunity that I shouldn’t pass up?”
An example: Work-family policies

• A lot of the work I do relates to work-family policies: parental leave, other leave, flexible work arrangements, and child care.

• A typical presentation to policy-makers would have the following 3 messages:

1. American families are changing, fewer children have stay-at-home parents (see graph) (Council of Economic Advisors, 2010; Fox et al., 2011).

2. Our work-family policies need to change too, to help meet the needs of children when parents work, particularly in low-income families (Bernstein & Kornbluh, 2005; Bianchi, in press; Heymann, 2000; Shipler, 2003; Waldfogel, 2007, 2009, in press).

3. Research provides guidance about current policies and what policy reforms would be most beneficial (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003; Waldfogel, 2006).
Figure 1: Trends in Work Patterns

Solid lines: All families, Dotted lines: Single parent families, Dashed line: Two parent families

Note: Shaded bars are recessions as defined by NBER.
Source: Authors' analysis of March CPS data, 1967-2009

Fox, Han, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2011
Another example: Britain’s war on poverty

- I’ve spent quite a bit of time studying the anti-poverty efforts of the Blair/Brown government (in office from 1997-2010) (Waldfogel, 2010a, b).

- When I talk with U.S. policy-makers:
  - I describe the three legs of the reforms – promoting work/making work pay, raising incomes, and investing in children -- emphasizing that many of the policies were based on US evidence (message 1).
  - I also show them that the reforms were successful in reducing child poverty (message 2) (see graph).
  - The bottom line (message 3) is that it is possible to make a serious dent in child poverty if you make a serious effort. We often think child poverty is intractable, but the British experience shows that is not the case.
Figure 1: Absolute Poverty in the U.S. & U.K. 1989–2009


Conclusions

• Communicating with policy-makers involves many of the same skills and attributes we use in our academic lives:
  - Being a credible expert
  - Building and maintaining contacts, and
  - Flexibility.

• And, as with academic work, you do learn from experience. So, if you’re invited to talk with policy-makers, say yes!
References