

# A Global Movement for Engaged Research

Philanthropic organizations have a special role to play in setting bold new expectations for a research enterprise that works in direct dialogue with the rest of society.

The US research enterprise is famously well developed, but there is a mismatch between the research knowledge that is produced and the socially robust knowledge that is needed to address the challenges facing coming generations. We are two research funders whose efforts began separately—one in conservation and the other in education—but as our paths crossed and eventually merged, we came to share a new vision of how to produce what we call “engaged research,” the production and use of knowledge through active collaboration with policymakers, practitioners, or communities. From our shared experience, we are now working to build a new global network of donors, public funders, and foundations that share the aim of expanding an approach to scientific research that is inclusive of and relevant to the rest of society.

This is the story of how we came to see such engaged research as a method to bring together government, civil society, and communities to shape research agendas for *their* needs and grounded in *their* expertise, as well as to foster *their* uses of research to drive policy and practice to benefit society. We feel that our experiences in this realm offer important insights that can be applied more broadly in future science policy initiatives.

Philanthropic organizations have a special role to play in setting bold new expectations for the research process, workforce, and institutions. By tearing down systemic barriers to engaged research, funders can spur a new vision of science that is in direct collaboration with the rest of society. The organizations in our new network

support research that leads with societal needs across many sectors, including environment, education, public health, medical research, international development, and foreign policy. Each has pushed hard against deeply entrenched conventions about how research is conceived, conducted, and utilized, and we now hope to accelerate progress by working collectively.

## Separate paths, similar goals

The story begins with finding common purpose in separate paths. One of us (Bednarek) worked for more than a decade with colleagues at The Pew Charitable Trusts developing a grantmaking program, The Lenfest Ocean Program, aimed at supporting policy-relevant research about ocean conservation. The program started as a classic dissemination model of funding academic research and then communicating it to relevant audiences. Over time, program leaders shifted to engaging decisionmakers and other stakeholders directly in the development of research questions to ensure support was going to projects that policymakers needed and wanted. They also built trusting relationships between researchers and policymakers by supporting intensive engagement.

The further program leaders developed this approach, the more they realized the complexity of the problem. Teasing out Lenfest’s contribution as a funder was difficult in the swirl of advocates and other actors working on a specific policy issue. In addition, what did it mean to inform policy? Did it mean that decisionmakers talked about the

research in their deliberations? What if they decided on a course of action that wasn't grounded in the program's research findings? None of the usual measures—citation counts, impact factors, media hits—helped Pew understand how decisionmakers were using the research it was funding.

The program's leaders also realized that spending time talking to policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders led them to formulate more useful research questions. But this required not only an intensive amount of staff time, but also the expertise to facilitate researcher-policymaker engagement and knowledge translation. Research grantees didn't necessarily have the time, skillset, or institutional incentives for these tasks. And it was often difficult to find additional staff with these skills because this kind of boundary-spanning work wasn't a well-recognized role.

At the same time, the other of us (Tseng) was working with the William T. Grant Foundation (WTG) to support research in education, as well as other child and youth policy areas. She was also frustrated that research was not sufficiently useful to and used in policy and practice. For

In addition to these questions, WTG observed a lack of funding models to sustain such partnerships over the long term. And although an increasing number of education funders began supporting partnerships, questions remained about how to scale them to meet the needs of school districts and states across the country.

### **Kindred spirits among research funders**

A mutual colleague, recognizing that we had each been asking similar questions about what it means to meaningfully improve the use and usefulness of research, connected the two of us. We had set out separately in our respective sectors to change the conversation about what it means to support research that is useful as well as used, and we recognized each other as kindred spirits.

In comparing our grantmaking approaches, we discovered that we shared a keen interest in democratizing the research process by including more perspectives when defining what research gets done and how it is used. We both sought to identify the conditions that led to use

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Pew, the journey toward engaged research originated in on-the-ground observations about what worked to facilitate evidence use. In contrast, WTG's interest in engaged research in the form of research-practice partnerships grew out of the foundation's support of scholarship on the use of research evidence in policy and practice. Research on research use across diverse sectors and policy settings indicated that relationships between researchers and users were critical for fostering the use of findings in practice and policy. The "use problem" was not one of information deficits that could be solved simply by new dissemination or communication strategies. When researchers and practitioners collaborated to develop research agendas, the resulting work was more useful to practitioners and more likely to be trusted and used in decisionmaking.

Embedded within these findings were a host of new puzzles. Research-practice partnerships are promising strategies, but what does it take for them to be successful? How can the success of partnership work be measured? Researchers, practitioners, and funders were all asking these questions. Researchers and practitioners wanted answers that would help them improve their work. Funders wanted to improve their funding support process and understand whether that funding was successful.

of research findings for the purpose of fine-tuning our investment strategies as funders. Even more critically, we witnessed the same systemic barriers to engaged research across our policy sectors. In particular, we struggled with a misalignment between academic incentives and the objectives of engaged research. Academic tenure and reward systems tended to prioritize scientific publications and grants, rather than sustained engagement with policymakers and communities. And we both observed a lack of funding and trained workforce to support engaged research.

Recognizing similarities in our goals and in the systemic barriers we had identified, we began co-convening colleagues and grantees across sectors (environment, education, and social services) to bridge our efforts. We also looked for funders in other policy sectors who were similarly investing in engaged research. In early 2019, Pew and WTG commissioned a survey of more than 20 foundations that support improvements in the production and use of research as a core strategy in their grant portfolios. The results revealed funders around the world, working in many diverse sectors, who were eager to promote researcher-user engagement.

The two of us then took a next step toward building

our network and gathered some of these same public and private funders at the offices of the Wellcome Trust in London in December 2019 to identify concrete ways to work together. As this diverse group of nearly two dozen funders talked, a clearer articulation of our vision emerged. It became apparent that engaged research is a viable way to democratize the research process by including current and potential stakeholders who could have a say about what research gets done and how it's used. This inclusiveness yields what science and technology scholar Helga Nowotny calls “socially robust knowledge.” Such knowledge includes and values the expertise of stakeholders beyond researchers in its production, and it is tested and validated in settings outside the laboratory.

However, to push the changes necessary to realize the promise of such engaged research, we recognized that like-minded funders would need to join forces.

### **Leveraging expertise and demand across sectors and around the world**

With this shared vision in mind, in 2020, Pew and WTG established the Transforming Evidence Funders Network (TEFN). Through TEFN, more than 30 public and private funding programs spanning a wide range of issue areas, geographies, and sectors work together with the ambitious vision of expanding engaged research and evidence use around the world. The network serves as an ecosystem of funders that can collectively build on effective practices, link pockets of momentum, and coordinate action.

TEFN started with what its members knew best: grantmaking practices to support engaged research. By drawing on their experiences as funders, TEFN participants began identifying characteristics of strong proposals for engaged research. Funders across sectors have found that successful engaged research requires non-research partners to meaningfully participate in the process. This goes well beyond an initial consultation to encompass relationship-building between partners. Strong proposals for engaged research also provide a credible assessment of the policy or practice relevance of the proposals, not just their scientific value. Further, the experiences of many funders point to the need for expert intermediaries to facilitate engaged research.

TEFN is compiling grantmaking practices that support these needs. These include sufficient time for partners to engage before a research question is defined; support and funding for non-research partners' engagement in the work; a schedule of regular engagement between partners; inclusion of practitioners in review panels; and when possible, an expert intermediary to facilitate projects, translate knowledge, and manage power dynamics.

TEFN members also strategized about how they can collectively move the needle on broader challenges in

expanding engaged research. Specifically, the group saw opportunities to create wider change in three ways. First, by supporting scholarship on how policymakers and practitioners use evidence to more effectively guide future efforts. Second, by investing in the infrastructure and workforce needed to coproduce research for use in policy or practice. And finally, by finding ways to reshape academic reward systems to support engaged research.

***Building the evidence base for evidence use.*** TEFN participants want to support the development and growth of a rigorous and coordinated scholarship base that can guide understanding of how to improve research use, including through research-practice partnerships. To accomplish this, partners in the network need to increase understanding of what it takes for research and other forms of evidence to be routinely used by government, communities, and other practitioners. Because too many initiatives lack scholarship about when and how practitioners use evidence, those efforts are rooted in hunches about what it takes to “make a difference” and tend to focus on one-way communication or dissemination models.

To create a coherent evidence base, TEFN is developing a shared research agenda to help align its partners' knowledge-building efforts. The network is also exploring the creation of a global network of hubs devoted to research on research use that can connect what is learned across policy sectors, countries, and disciplines. TEFN partners have already provided seed funding for a sister learning and action network, the Transforming Evidence Network (TEN). While TEFN brings together funders, TEN encompasses a broader community of evidence stakeholders across countries and policy sectors. This network enables learning across academic disciplines and practice areas. It also serves as a much-needed professional home for scholars of research use, boundary spanners, and other intermediaries engaged in the practice of research use.

***Building the infrastructure for engaged research.*** To enable engaged research, TEFN participants have identified advantages in supporting research-practice partnerships (known by a variety of terms, e.g., coproduction in sustainability) and the infrastructure necessary to sustain them. This support includes identifying the institutional and funding configurations needed to build and sustain partnerships, increasing funding to support effective partnerships, and strengthening the capacity of organizations—research institutions, governments, and others—to foster and manage partnerships.

A key component of expanding research-practice partnerships is building capacity for expert intermediaries, or boundary spanners, including boundary organizations. Bringing partners together around a common goal requires integrating knowledge across research disciplines, policy issues, and practice needs. It also requires a dedication

to building relationships while negotiating competing interests and power dynamics. But the experts and organizations that do this work often lack neat job descriptions or clearly identified roles. Even more challenging is that they lack sustainable funding and clear career pathways.

As a start, TEFN participants are considering how to include dedicated support for boundary spanning in their grantmaking. Lenfest and WTG have both developed resources about boundary spanning that are guiding those efforts. TEFN participants have also prioritized solidifying boundary spanner professional identities and networks through the Transforming Evidence Network.

**Developing incentives for engaged research.** Reshaping academic incentives and norms to reward societally relevant research is one of the biggest challenges. Academic promotion and tenure still rely heavily on peer-reviewed publications and other metrics that don't readily accommodate the outputs of engaged research. Moreover, even with a long-standing cooperative extension system within US public universities, engaged research is often

schools of international affairs, initially launched as part of its "Rigor and Relevance Initiative." This program encourages interaction among policymakers, faculty, and students and is working to reshape incentives in tenure and promotion to support faculty engagement in policy work.

Academia is a globally connected enterprise, and without coordinated action to transform academic norms and incentives across disciplines and geographies, change will be limited. Thus, TEFN is also exploring ways to coordinate efforts to create widespread change across colleges, universities, and other parts of the research ecosystem, such as academic publishing, around the world.

### A call to action

The opportunity has now arrived to position science to be of service to the rest of society: engaging researchers in true partnerships with governments, civil society, citizen movements, and other community organizations. To achieve this requires funders, scientists, and institutions to engage with unfamiliar sectors, disciplines, and geographies. We believe that funders should be instigating the deep

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considered less desirable or rigorous than "curiosity-driven" science. Such challenges can disincentivize academic participation in engaged research. An unsupportive academic reward system can also perpetuate inequities. Many engaged research efforts are conducted by women or scholars of color, who already experience bias in their disciplines. Younger scholars find it difficult to participate in engaged research for fear of not receiving tenure. Researchers driven to conduct engaged research anyway often do so in addition to other work more prized by the academy.

Reshaping research incentives has emerged as a strong shared priority within TEFN. Several participants were investing in incentive grants that encourage universities to support engaged research even before TEFN was created. For example, the Institutional Challenge Grant Program—supported by the William T. Grant Foundation, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the American Institutes for Research—has led institutions such as the University of California, Berkeley to issue guidance about how to credit non-peer-reviewed products of engaged scholarship as scholarly contributions rather than community service. The Carnegie Corporation of New York funds a "Bridging the Gap" grant competition for

and sustained institutional changes required to meet this ambitious charge.

The Transforming Evidence Funders Network provides a way for funders to link arms in marching toward a common vision, that of a future where science and the rest of society are in regular and meaningful dialogue to meet the challenges of our times. As the world navigates its way through climate change, pandemics, and the many other wicked problems of the twenty-first century, engaged research is a promising new way to do science.

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