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Research and Engagement Opportunities for Applying Science to Public Policy

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In 1997, a task force of faculty and administrators from across the five campuses of the University of Nebraska determined that NU “should do more to make public policy expertise and resources available to Nebraskans” and recommended the creation of a university-wide policy center to assist Nebraska’s policymakers (“Recommendations for a University-Wide Public Policy Center,” July 1, 1997). In January 1998, the University’s Board of Regents formally established the Public Policy Center (PPC) as a unit to assist policymakers on a wide range of public policy issues.

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center (website at <http://ppc.nebraska.edu/>) functions as an outreach and engagement unit of the University that serves the state and communities in Nebraska, as well as the nation, by providing information to policymakers that allows them to make better strategic decisions about policy options. The center conducts original research as well as mining information from the existing literature. In addition to directly assisting policymakers, the Center also serves a brokering function, that links policymakers with the vast expertise that exists at a large, public (and in this case, land-grant) university.

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center in Action

The Center has operated as a generalist unit. In other words, we have not focused only on topical areas such as behavioral health services, fairness in the justice system, or health and human services information technology (all three of which are current areas of focus). Rather, we have worked on a diverse array of issues, including business/economics/ taxes, persons with disabilities, education, food and society, governmental administration, natural resources, and rural community and economic development (see http://ppc.unl.edu/program_areas/by_category.html). We are actively engaged in 15-20 projects (not including brokered projects that are being conducted by other NU faculty and staff). The Center employs about 40 people (half students) and has a budget of approximately \$3 million (approximately \$175,000 is an appropriation from the University, the rest comes from external grants and contracts). We are a unique policy center among those across the nation in that we purposely serve all three branches of government. The advisory board is composed of the Governor, the Chair of the Legislature’s Executive Board, the State Court Administrator, and the provosts from each of the five NU campuses.

Over the years, the Public Policy Center has created a bridge between the university community and policymakers. Policymakers are inundated with information. A major challenge is to make sure that the data we believe policymakers should rely on are, in fact, considered by the policymaker. One way to do that is to make sure policymakers know and trust the source, so that they are receptive to the content of the message. The Public Policy Center tries to establish relationships with policymakers so that we can encourage them to seriously consider scientific information along with other considerations that are taken into account when complex policy choices are made. We have personal relationships with leadership from state agencies, Congressional offices, local officials, and other key individuals. Of course, more

than relationships, the key to creating a successful bridge between the University and policymakers is to provide information that is based in evidence and is easy to use by policymakers. We recognize, however, that good information alone is insufficient to ensure that it will get to and be utilized by policymakers.

Another challenge involves science itself. Scientists disagree on the meaning or weight of scientific evidence, the nuances of such information, and so on. Simply because one scientist or Center advocates a position does not mean that a policymaker will necessarily follow the advice, nor should they. As the saying goes, “One scientist’s gold is another’s junk.” Moreover, we scientists change our minds about information, which is a strength of the scientific enterprise but can be confusing for policymakers who must make a point-in-time judgment. For example, a recent analysis by Dr. Ioannidis of biomedical clinical studies originally published in highly regarded medical journals between 1990-2003 and cited by others more than 1,000 times, found that nearly 1/3 of the studies were either contradicted or modified by subsequent studies (John P. A. Ioannidis, “Contradicted and Initially Stronger Effects in Highly Cited Clinical Research,” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 294:218–228 [2005]). It is important to be clear about the fact that science is a dynamic, not static, enterprise, and it is also important to be prepared to help a policymaker deal with the fact of changing scientific evidence.

Although it is true that there are changes to scientific evidence even within short periods of time, as well as other limits to scientific information (imperfect methodologies, inadequately framed questions, difficulties in accessing appropriate samples, etc.), it is nonetheless a highly valuable tool to shape policy. Academia has a special role to play in ensuring that quality scientific information is presented understandably and effectively to policymakers. It is in this realm that the Public Policy Center has operated. We have capitalized on the opportunity and interest to provide academic information to policymakers.

There have been several instances in which the Public Policy Center has had major impacts on policy decisions in the state of

Nebraska. Four examples are presented here. The impacts the Center has had on national policies and practices will not be dealt with because of space considerations.

Selected Projects: Making a Difference in Nebraska

I. Child Support Payments & Disbursements

One of the first major projects on which the Public Policy Center worked was the Nebraska Child Support Collection and Disbursement System Implementation Project. In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the welfare reform bill, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). At the last moment, state child support enforcement activities administered under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act were targeted, and states were required to establish a central unit for receipt and disbursement of child support.

At the time, the system was not doing its job of making sure that children were being financially supported by noncustodial parents. For example, as of 1989, 62% of custodial parents in the United States did not receive the child support their children were due, according to a 1994 Urban Institute report (Teresa A. Myers, “State Child Support Programs: Necessity Inspires Ingenuity,” National Conference of State Legislatures State Legislative Report, 23(20), November 1998; available from <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/csslr.htm>). Centralization seemed like a reasonable response to remedy some of the deficiencies of the system. Title IV of PRWORA was designed to increase collection of child support dollars from non-custodial parents and to improve enforcement of child support orders through streamlined child support collections, increase paternity establishments and child support orders, strengthen penalties for delinquent payments, and provide incentives for payment of child support orders.

In response to the federal mandate, in 1997 the Nebraska Legislature began to grapple with the issue of centralization. Initial

discussions made it clear there would not be a change without a political struggle. In general, there was satisfaction with the current child support collection and disbursement system, along with concerns about a federally mandated program that was believed not to be suited to the needs of Nebraskans. An anecdote, recounted frequently, told about the time a single mother went to a district court clerk on Christmas Eve to check whether her child support payment had been finally sent as promised by her ex-husband. Although illegal, the sympathetic clerk gave the single mother her payment, and the family's Christmas was saved. This was the type of service that would be eliminated in an impersonal, centralized receipt/disbursement system. A Governor's Child Support Collection Task Force concluded that through the creation of a State Disbursement Unit (SDU), the customer service provided by district court clerks would be lost.

Customer service might be lost, but so too would federal funding to the state to run its child support system if it failed to introduce a centralized system by October 1, 1999. The loss of funds would be in excess of \$70 million. In June 1999, the Public Policy Center was asked by the Speaker and Executive Board of the Nebraska Legislature to help figure out how Nebraska might preserve existing strengths and reduce or eliminate weakness in its child support customer service system, while complying with the federal mandate to develop a SDU. We needed to complete the effort by the end of the summer.

The Center invested all its resources into conducting the child support research and engagement project. Relevant laws were examined and policies analyzed. A Policy Center graduate assistant examined the academic business literature regarding best practices for customer service for guidance and ideas. In addition, senior staff researched stakeholder consensus techniques. A stakeholder engagement procedure was suggested to and adopted by the policy partners. The partners included key representatives from the legislature, the Governor's office, the Court Administrator's office, the Court Clerk's association, and so on. The Policy Center used public participatory techniques to get input from

state stakeholders (e.g., judges, prosecuting and defense attorneys, custodial and noncustodial parents, large and small business employers, etc.). At the same time, Center staff members consulted with experts, staff, and officials from outside Nebraska. From these various sources, the Center identified options along with some specific recommendations (http://ppc.nebraska.edu/publications/documents/child_support_report.pdf). Ultimately, a large set of stakeholders agreed on the directions that should be taken to move to a centralized system. The legislature unanimously passed a bill to allow the state to move to a centralized system for receiving and dispersing support payments. The Center's background information and stakeholder facilitation and engagement helped craft and design the current system of child support payments that continues today. Nebraska lost no federal money.

II. Minority & Justice

The Nebraska Supreme Court and the Nebraska State Bar Association established the Minority and Justice Task Force (MJTF) in 2001. Its purpose was to identify actual or perceived racial and ethnic bias and discrimination in the Nebraska justice system and make recommendations to the Supreme Court on how to address these inequities. The MJTF's wide purview included issues such as potential bias in criminal prosecution, sentencing, court personnel hiring, law school admissions, and other related issues over four comprehensive areas of the system of justice: access to the courts, personnel and employment practices in the courts, the legal profession in the state of Nebraska, and criminal and juvenile court processes.

The Public Policy Center was brought in to a) oversee the research that was needed to identify and document problems, b) bring in academic resources to contribute to the MJTF (e.g., faculty and students from criminal justice, history, law, political science, psychology, sociology, etc.), and c) coordinate and administer the MJTF itself. Thus, the Center found itself at the center of

a legal community-academic community alliance examining how best to address inequalities and prioritize and implement changes needed to the system.

One of the first important issues that the MJTF analyzed was representation on juries. We learned minorities lamented that jurors did not “look like them.” Several factors were identified that contributed to the exclusion of racial and ethnic minority participation on juries, including how jury pool lists are compiled, juror qualification guidelines, counties that have not periodically updated their jury pool lists, and payment for jury service. Ultimately, changes were made to the state’s statutes requiring regular updating of jury pool lists and allowing for collection of demographic data to monitor whether minorities are being summoned to serve on jury pools at a rate consistent with their numbers in the community.

The Supreme Court and State Bar Association established an on-going Implementation Committee (MJIC) to follow the Task Force. The Public Policy Center continues to be the key research partner and continues to administer the project as part of a state-bar-university partnership. Approximately a dozen state supreme courts have undertaken similar projects approaching this scale, but Nebraska now stands as one of the premier leaders in the nation for minority justice reform. (The Minority and Justice Force Final Report is available from http://ppc.nebraska.edu/publications/documents/mjtf_final_report.pdf, and the Progress Report for the Implementation Committee is available from http://ppc.nebraska.edu/program_areas/documents/mjtf/2004%20Progress%20Report.pdf.)

III. Behavioral Health

The Public Policy Center has been working closely with the state on improving and reforming its mental health and substance abuse service systems. The Center initiated a partnership among the Behavioral Health Division of the Nebraska De-

partment of Health and Human Services, Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska, behavioral health providers, and consumer advocacy groups that resulted in a federal grant application in 2002 to the Compassion Capital Fund (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families) to fund an effort called Nebraskans Expanding Behavioral Health Access through Networking Delivery Systems (NEBHANDS <http://www.nebhands.nebraska.edu>).

NEBHANDS—through the \$3.3 million, three-year grant award—provides technical assistance, resources, and a forum for statewide collaboration and policy development, with the goal of creating accessible behavioral healthcare for underserved and poorly served Nebraskans by integrating faith-based and community-based organizations into the state’s service system. In particular, the people we are trying to reach are African-Americans, Sudanese, Vietnamese, other ethnic minority groups, lower income individuals and families, and rural residents who are underserved or not being effectively served by our current mental health system.

We were one of 21 faith-based initiatives funded through the Bush Administration’s controversial faith-based initiative. NEBHANDS has worked with over 100 organizations across the state, and it has involved thousands of providers, consumers, families, and policymakers. Promising networks of care have been created in a predominantly African-American, North Omaha area, and in a seven-county area in south-central Nebraska where the focus is on early childhood mental health.

Our interests in improving the state’s behavioral health system have led the Public Policy Center to become involved in working with the state’s infrastructure to respond to disasters (<http://www.disastermh.nebraska.edu/>). In May 2004, a tornado ripped through the small rural town of Hallam, Nebraska, population 330. The Center had already been working with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services to create an All-Hazards Disaster Behavioral Health Response and Recovery

Plan for the State. This included fostering links between mental health and substance abuse resources and public health systems, healthcare networks, emergency management, faith-based organizations and first responder groups.

After the tornado touched down, the Public Policy Center put the framework of the Recovery Plan into practice. Center staff immediately lent aid to people in crisis and thereafter submitted, on behalf of the state, a Federal Emergency Management Agency Crisis Counseling Program (FEMA-CCP) application. For the first time in Nebraska's history, the state received a FEMA-CCP grant for crisis intervention and management. A year later, Nebraska received a no-cost extension for the FEMA-CCP grant from the federal government thanks to the diligent documentation of the continuing need for these services throughout the state. Some of the emotional issues reemerged as Nebraska went into its 2005 tornado season and severe storm activity started once again.

Clergy throughout the area came to Hallam in 2004 to help many of the victims in their recovery. Center staff learned from first responders that clergy were as likely to be a problem as they were to be of help. As a consequence, the Public Policy Center and its partner, Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska, created and then implemented a "disaster pastor" program that certified clergy to be part of the first responder team during disaster situations.

IV. Water Sciences

The Water Resources Research Initiative at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln was discussed previously in a Merrill Advanced Study Center Report (Prem Paul, "Engaging Faculty in Leading Collaborative Research," Merrill Advanced Study Center Report: Riding the Momentum of Research: Leadership Challenges in Public Research Universities, 108 (2004); available at http://merrill.ku.edu/publications/2004whitepaper/P_Paul.html). The PPC has joined that effort, working to develop rural community collaborations and to make available water scientists who can help communities identify options for compliance with the

EPA's implementation of the Safe Water Drinking Act. The Act requires a decrease in the amount of arsenic in drinking water from 50 parts per billion to 10 parts per billion, effective Jan. 1, 2006. Congress passed the Act because of a concern that arsenic in drinking water results in severe health problems. More than 80 public water systems in Nebraska, primarily in small communities, are affected by the lower arsenic standard. Compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act will strain the resources of small Nebraska communities (costs are estimated by Nebraska Health and Human services to be over \$120 million) and have an adverse impact on rural sustainability.

The Center's key role involved facilitation and coordination. Water scientists and others (e.g., rural sociologists, extension faculty) provided substantive expertise as part of the University effort. The Center and its partners convinced two communities in the same watershed to collaborate on the process. The argument was that any solution would benefit from two community expenditures/investments rather than each one going at it alone. In addition, the community decision-making process that the Center established for arsenic abatement issues also provided an excellent opportunity to simultaneously identify community and/or economic development possibilities for the two communities involved in the project. We wanted to see if we could turn the "lemon" of the federal mandate to reduce arsenic levels into the "lemonade" of exploring joint community opportunities. (See generally http://ppc.nebraska.edu/program_areas/documents/WaterProject.htm.)

The results are positive so far. The communities agreed on a common solution approach, and they are collaborating on economic development ideas. The targeted communities have also worked with a Rural Sociology class from UNL and senior level undergraduates from the Civil Engineering Department (capstone Design Class) research engineering options related to arsenic abatement options. An NGO partner, The Groundwater Foundation, is supplying additional educational expertise about water matters. Another entity, the Midwest Assistance Program, provides water related technical assistance in development and support.

Nebraska's Public Radio station provided media expertise and coverage so that issues and approaches might inform other communities (see http://mynptv.org/ne_connects/water_quality/).

Conclusion

Since 1998, the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center has been enriching public policy efforts by facilitating, developing and making available objective research. Center faculty and staff have undertaken the investigation of public policy issues and topics of importance to Nebraskans by coordinating policy research, linking policymakers with experts throughout the University system, raising the visibility of public policy-related research activities, and facilitating access to public policy research and expertise. The Center links faculty expertise in academic areas to specific problems for the purpose of extending outreach, education, and services to policymakers. The Center capitalizes on the expertise of faculty, staff, and students at the University of Nebraska who are engaged in activities that have the potential for improved public policy formation. We also look for opportunities to partner with other state and national institutions that have an interest in public policy. The Center brings a proactive focus to identification and research on emerging policy issues and establishing networks among researchers, educators, and policymakers.