



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 studies of this topic will increase our understanding of how to improve the production and subsequent use of research for and in policy and practice.

For the next several years, we anticipate supporting a group of 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, communication studies, 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 12, 2009**. Selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposals, which will be due by **October 6, 2009**. Funding decisions will be made at the Board of Trustees meeting in June 2010, and awards will be made available shortly thereafter.

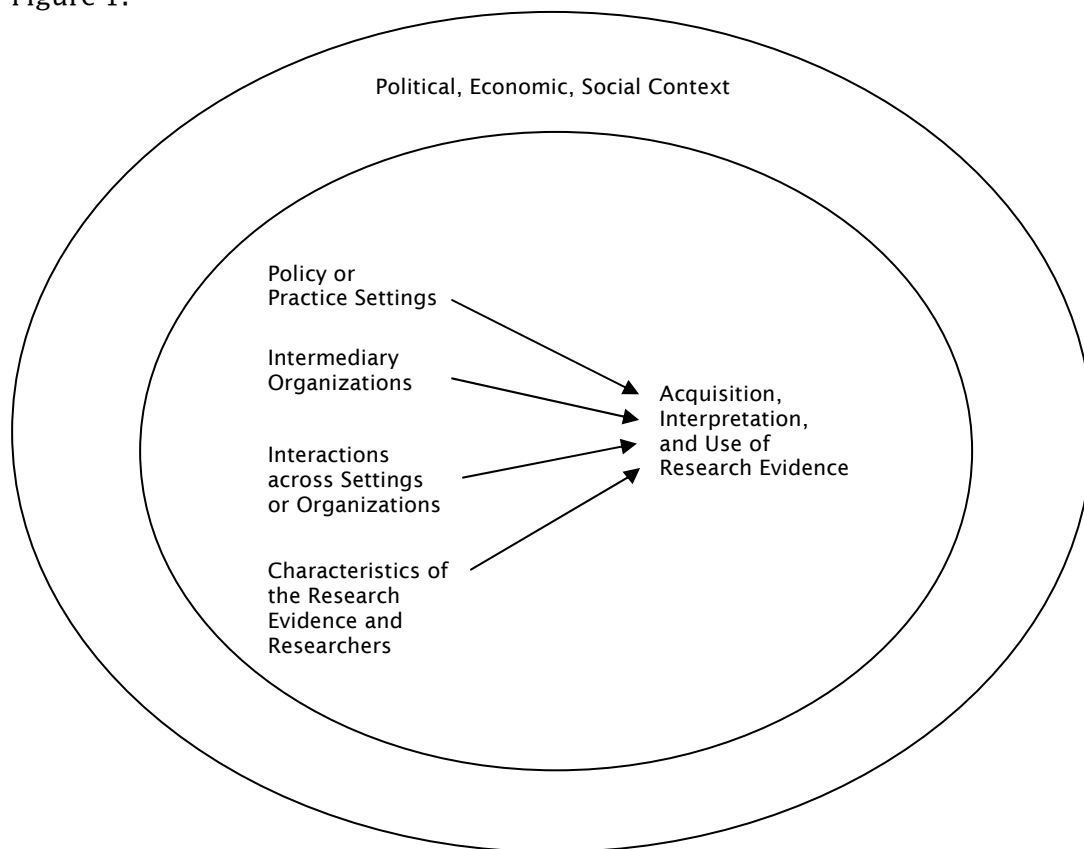
Background for the RFP

Through this RFP, the Foundation will support 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 could include education, justice, child welfare, health, family support, employment, and youth programs.

We define *research evidence* as empirical findings derived from systematic research methods and analyses. This includes descriptive studies, intervention or evaluation studies, meta-analyses, and cost-effectiveness studies done by researchers working within or outside policy or practice organizations. It includes studies addressing various types of research questions and using different types of research designs and methods.

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. For example, we are interested in how the nature of a practice setting—its size, organization, mission, culture, staff, and norms—affects how its staff acquires, interprets, and uses research evidence. We are also interested in how the political, economic, or social contexts in which organizations operate affect their acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence.

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. These processes could include how policy ideas, organizational protocols, and interventions influenced by research evidence are diffused to other settings and individuals via social networks; how research evidence is translated and altered through social interaction; and how research evidence is used in organizational decision-making.

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. In cases in which users initiate the acquisition, we are interested in the strategies and sources they employ. Acquisition may also be initiated by others, and policymakers and practitioners may not be cognizant of the research bases for the products, tools, or policy ideas that come into their hands.
- How do policymakers and practitioners *interpret or make sense of* research evidence? This includes understanding how research evidence is interpreted along with other sources of information (e.g., management information data, administrative records, 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, validity, 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 *make use of* research evidence? What role does research evidence play in policy or practice work? Carol 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.

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

In order to better predict and understand the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence, we encourage studying how policy and practice settings, intermediary organizations, interactions between settings and organizations, and the broader contexts in which they are embedded influence the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence. Studies of research acquisition, interpretation, and use should be grounded in a broader understanding of policy and practice work (i.e., the demands and incentives of policy and practice work, the forces that impel and impede change, the role of

intermediaries, etc.). For example, better understanding if and how research evidence influences policy ideas may require understanding the role of advocacy groups, legislative service agencies, and the broader political and economic contexts in which they operate. Better understanding how school districts acquire and use research evidence in making decisions may require an understanding of basic 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 factors. Below, we discuss several important factors. Investigators should feel free to suggest others.

- What aspects of policy and practice settings affect their acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence?¹ Policy and practice settings include, but are not limited to, legislatures, courts, school district central offices, and federal, state, and local agencies. We are particularly interested in understanding the organizational and institutional processes and conditions that affect research acquisition, interpretation, and use, which can account for variation across organizations and institutions. 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, systems data), and structure (e.g., connections 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 package 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 and include advocacy groups, professional associations, think tanks, government and non-government 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 interactions among policy settings, practice settings, and intermediary organizations affect the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence? Studies might examine how communication, relationships, or social networks across organizations or institutions affect research use. 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 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

¹ 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) whose roles include determining if and how research evidence gets used by the frontline practitioners (e.g., teachers, social workers) who interact directly with youth.

acquisition, interpretation, and use? Studies might examine how political, economic, and social contexts affect research use. This includes understanding how a high-stakes accountability environment affects school districts' use of research evidence and how state economies and budgets affect social service agencies' acquisition of information about and adoption of evidence-based programs.

- How do characteristics of research and researchers affect the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence? Studies might examine how characteristics of the research (e.g., scientific rigor, topics studied, experimental versus non-experimental designs), how it is communicated, who produces it, and the scope and nature of interactions between researchers and policymakers or practitioners (e.g., collaboration in the design of research, communication about the research while it is conducted, etc.) affect the use of research evidence.

Requirements for Proposals

1. **Theoretical and Empirical Rationale.** Applications should demonstrate a mastery of relevant theory and empirical findings. They should also include a convincing rationale for how the study would contribute to postulating, refining, or testing theory of what influences the acquisition, interpretation, and use of research evidence in policy or practice. Theory-building can take multiple forms, including updating or expanding existing theories of research acquisition and use, drawing on theories in related areas such as diffusion of innovations or the sociology of knowledge, developing grounded theory from planned examination of multiple cases, and subjecting theoretical notions developed from small-sample case study work to broader testing.
2. **Research Questions or Hypotheses.** Applications should include a clear statement of the research questions or hypotheses under study. We recognize that the focus of this RFP is an underdeveloped area of research. Therefore, it is appropriate to propose studies that would lead to "grounded theory." In such cases, we still require a priori, answerable research questions.
3. **Research Design, Methods, and Analysis Plan.** Applicants should propose rigorous research designs, methods, and analysis plans that will provide strong empirical evidence on the research questions or hypotheses.

We encourage applicants to develop sampling plans guided by their theoretical or conceptual models. Sampling plans should provide variation on some theoretically meaningful characteristics. 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 theoretically meaningful characteristics like urbanness or population-served. The sample could include organizations that are high and low in capacity, but we encourage applicants to include organizations that represent the average.

We also encourage applicants to consider multiple modes of data collection and analysis, including social network analyses, ethnographic fieldwork, and organizational assessment. Informant interviews and document reviews may be useful for assessing organizations' material and financial resources and the allocation of those resources. Because we assume research evidence is interpreted and integrated with other information, a combination of interviews, observation, and document reviews could provide useful analysis of how research evidence is interpreted and how those

interpretations are incorporated into practitioners' working knowledge and codified in documents and other communications.

Because we are interested in the processes of research acquisition, interpretation, and use, we encourage applicants to consider collecting data at multiple time points 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.

We will support measurement development work when the constructs are of theoretical significance and sufficiently understood to move to measurement development work and the measure has likely utility for future studies.

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 and policymakers or practitioners who understand the policy or practice setting under study and can help shape the research questions and methods. We also value teams that can draw upon theories, methods, and content expertise from various disciplines.
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. And, the 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 affecting youth. Capacity-building includes 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 use it to improve policy and practice that affect youth.

To date, we have supported a number of activities that may be helpful to applicants. 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 and other relevant work for understanding the use of research evidence in policy and practice. The paper is available to download at http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/usr_doc/Davies_paper_final.pdf. Applicants may also find useful an annotated bibliography of relevant theory and empirical work in the United States, available on our website at http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/usr_doc/Annotated_Bibliography_for_Use_of_Evidence_1-8-09.doc. Our initial thinking is described in our 2007 *Annual Report* essay, which can be downloaded at http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/info-url_nocat3026/info-url_nocat_show.htm?doc_id=687619, and will be further elaborated in a forthcoming *Annual Report* essay (available on our website in April 2009).

We expect to develop future capacity-building efforts around funded studies by bringing project teams together in regular meetings to learn from each other and from other experts.

Illustrative Examples

Below are a few illustrative examples of work that would fit our interests. The examples are not intended as templates, and our interests are not limited to these types of studies.

- Are social networks and practical considerations more influential and more commonly used to learn about the effectiveness of new curricula than formal information sources? A team is interested in understanding the strategies school districts use to acquire research evidence and other information regarding curricula. They expect that decision-makers rely more on their interactions with colleagues in similar roles in other districts than they do on formal information sources such as the What Works Clearinghouse. They also hypothesize that district decision-making is more heavily influenced by information about a curriculum's cost and ease of implementation than research evidence on its effects. They propose to test and refine these ideas by examining a number of cases during the past two years in which districts changed reading curricula. They will conduct interviews with district personnel, participant observations of meetings, social network analyses, and content analyses of various documents.
- What affects the success of research-practice partnerships in getting research evidence used? The team proposes to study three research institutions and their partnerships with public agencies to examine how the relationships between researchers and agencies, research capacity within agencies, and the broader political and economic conditions under which the partnerships operate influence use of various types of research evidence. They plan to conduct participant observation, document analysis, and interviews.
- What affects how research evidence is used in agencies' adoption of a new program? A team is conducting an experimental trial using Dissemination and Implementation research funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The experimental trial will test the impact of on-site coaching on the implementation of a new approach to family reunification in the child welfare system. The team wants to supplement the trial with William T. Grant Foundation funding to study the type of research evidence (if any) that is important to agencies' initial decisions to adopt the program. They also want to understand how research evidence is used and discussed in shaping agency decisions as the NIH trial unfolds, and how local circumstances influence research use. They propose to observe meetings and conversations involving program adoption; conduct semi-structured interviews with agency leaders, program administrators, and meeting participants; and analyze budgets, meeting proceedings, and local newspaper articles pertaining to the agencies.
- Do tight economic times lead to more attention paid to the effectiveness of social reforms? Political discourse suggests that difficult economic times make research evidence on the effectiveness of social programs more important. A team samples and examines the debates regarding expansion of the SCHIP program within several states during the years 2002 to 2008, capitalizing on the variation in state budgets during the period.

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." Grants are made to organizations or institutions, not individuals. The Foundation only funds projects which include a Primary Investigator who is a full-time employee of the organization applying. 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 (LOI) are due **May 12, 2009**. The LOI functions as a mini-proposal and should demonstrate promise for meeting all Funding Criteria. Foundation staff will review all LOIs and invite a small group of finalists to submit full proposals. Invited full proposals are due **October 6, 2009**. 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>. 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 2009**."
 - 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** for the Principal Investigator only.
 - **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 2009");
 - **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 **one** file that contains the narrative and curricula vitae.

- **Narrative** (five pages). All pages of the application should use a 12-point font. Margins should be at least 1 inch on all sides. Documents should be single-spaced. It should describe details of the project, including:
 - a. **Major questions** guiding this work;
 - b. **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;
 - c. **Specific research questions and/or hypotheses** to be addressed or tested;
 - d. **Research design and methods** including sampling plan and data collection and processing procedures; and
 - e. **Data analysis plan** for addressing research questions and/or hypotheses.
- **Curricula Vitae**. One-page vita for each Principal and Co-Principal Investigator. (Please upload all the vitae as a single document.)

Applicants will receive a confirmation email after submission of this application.