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## Considerations for Measuring the Impact of Policy-Relevant Research

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# Considerations for Measuring the Impact of Policy-Relevant Research

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## Introduction

Philanthropy, and the research and analysis it supports, has an important role to play in informing policy and making government more effective. Indeed, the gold standard for many researchers and the funders who support them is the ability to produce research findings that inform policymaking or contribute to policy change. Yet all too often, foundations and other research funders struggle to understand whether and how their investments have affected policy, a challenge that is compounded by time lags between research output and recognized impact, a lack of clear standards for impact measurement, and the simple fact that many factors beyond research influence policy decisions.

Even the most esteemed foundations are not immune to this challenge. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is the largest philanthropy in the United States dedicated solely to health. In 2014, it announced a new vision to build a national “culture of health” — a culture in which everyone in America has the opportunity to lead a healthier life (RWJF, 2017). One critical component to this vision is the belief that good health is promoted through access to high-quality health care and affordable health insurance coverage. Over several decades, the RWJF has invested in numerous programs and projects to identify gaps in health insurance coverage and support enrollment in health insurance across the country.

In 2015, the RWJF asked AcademyHealth, a leading national organization for health services and policy research, to conduct a pilot project focused on a subset of the foundation’s research

## Key Points

- Philanthropy, and the research and analysis it supports, has an important role to play in informing policy and making government more effective. Yet all too often, foundations and other research funders struggle to understand whether and how their investments have affected policy.
- This article highlights the findings of an 18-month pilot project conducted by AcademyHealth to help the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation better understand the impact of a subset of the foundation’s research grants, across investment types, on health insurance coverage and health reform, and to help inform how the foundation may more systematically track and measure the impact of the research it funds.
- This pilot was unique in that it sought to formulate practical recommendations for how foundation staff might collect, organize, and interpret key measures of policy impact on an ongoing basis, particularly when working with limited time and resources. This article focuses on insights that may be of interest to other foundations seeking to measure the policy impact of their research investments.

investments on health insurance coverage and health reform. Specifically, the purpose of the pilot was twofold: (1) to help the RWJF better understand the impact of a subset of grants across investment types, and 2) to help inform how the foundation may more systematically track and measure the impact of the research it

funds. Like many other foundations, the RWJF conducts regular program evaluations, but this pilot was unique in that it sought to formulate practical recommendations for how foundation staff might collect, organize, and interpret key measures of policy impact on an ongoing basis, particularly when working with limited time and resources.

In this article we highlight findings from the 18-month pilot project, with particular attention to insights that may be of interest to other foundations. While the focus of the AcademyHealth pilot and this article is on the impact of health-focused research investments, we think many of the observations will be relevant to policy-oriented research investments across sectors. We begin with a brief discussion of research-impact assessment, a growing area of work that seeks to use rigorous methodological approaches to understand the impact of research findings within academia and on society. We then turn to the AcademyHealth pilot, its context, and the types of research projects included. Next, we reflect on our findings and observations from the pilot project — specifically, the effectiveness of various impact-tracking tools and grant-monitoring processes to support impact-assessment activities. Finally, drawing on lessons from the pilot project, we present considerations for an impact-measurement strategy that may be adopted by other foundations seeking to understand the policy impact of their research investments.

### Assessing Research Impact

Philanthropy, whether it supports research and analysis or programs and services, is mission-driven. To ensure investments are aligned with their mission and vision, foundations have increasingly employed strategic or outcome-oriented philanthropy, which involves clearly defined goals, evidenced-based approaches, and formal assessments of success and effectiveness (Brest, 2012). Multiple formal evaluation approaches exist to measure the effectiveness of a foundation's investments, including formative evaluation to assess program development or delivery; summative evaluation to assess program effectiveness; process evaluation to

determine if the program was implemented as intended; outcome evaluation to assess short- or long-term changes in outcomes, behaviors, and practices as a result of the program; and impact evaluation to capture long-term changes, such as policy changes, resulting from the program (University of Minnesota, 2017).

Yet, standalone evaluations are of little benefit to foundations unless the results of the evaluations are used to inform future foundation investments or program decisions. Carol H. Weiss (1998) describes the broader applications for evaluation use, including instrumental use to inform decision-making about investments and programs; use for conceptual purposes, which can provide program staff with a better understanding of the program's strengths and weaknesses; use for mobilization, which can affirm the need for specific changes to a program; and use for influence or enlightenment, where evaluation findings contribute to a larger body of evidence or knowledge base.

Research-impact assessment, the focus of this article and the AcademyHealth pilot project, falls within the impact subset of evaluation. Foundations and other research funders may be motivated to evaluate the impact of their research investments for a number of reasons. Molly Morgan Jones and Jonathan Grant (2013) presented a framework for these motivations, which they termed the four "A's": advocacy, accountability, analysis, and allocation. As governments and other research funders grapple with challenging fiscal environments and competing priorities, research-impact assessment can serve to advocate, or "make the case," for research funding and help to establish research as a priority. Related to advocacy, limited research funding requires researchers and funders to demonstrate accountability for investments, particularly for public dollars but increasingly for private dollars as well. Foundations may conduct an analysis to better understand what investments worked and under what circumstances. This type of assessment can showcase the policy impact from research and can help to demonstrate the pathways from research investment to impact. This analysis can

ultimately inform how a foundation or government allocates research dollars and contribute to research-strategy development and management decisions.

The approach a funder takes to assessing research impact is closely tied to the purpose or goals of the particular research investment under consideration, whether that is advancing scientific knowledge on a topic, informing public policy, or improving health outcomes. There are several traditional techniques for assessing research impact, including bibliometric or citation analysis, document reviews, interviews, and surveys, each with its own strengths and weaknesses (Jones & Grant, 2013).

Regardless of the technique used, numerous challenges can make research-impact assessment difficult. These challenges are not new and are well documented. A notable challenge is the time lag between research investment and research impact. Evidence suggests that it may take 17 years, on average, to translate research findings into policy and practice (Slote Morris, 2011). Even research productivity measures, like citations or product output, can take multiple years to materialize. It often takes several years from the receipt of a research grant to publication of findings, and multiple years may elapse following publication before meaningful citations are accrued. Further, a grantee's reporting period often coincides with its grant period, and, as such, important impacts that may result many years following the conclusion of a study are not routinely captured.

Another important challenge is measuring the attribution and contribution of research to a particular outcome. The ability to directly attribute an outcome to a specific research investment is the gold standard of research-impact assessment, but is incredibly difficult to achieve. Establishing that a research investment has contributed to a particular outcome is only slightly less challenging. Attribution and contribution pose a particular challenge for measuring the impact of research investments on policy and decision-making, the focus of the AcademyHealth pilot project, since policymaking is a complex

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process often informed by a body of evidence — rather than a single study — and many other streams of information (Penfield, Baker, Scoble, & Wykes, 2014).

Despite the limitations of research-productivity measures, these are some of the measures researchers rely on for promotion and tenure at their institutions and for reporting impact back to their funders. Given the limitations of these measures, many funders, largely outside of the U.S., have adopted frameworks and methodological approaches that require researchers to report not only research outputs but also the broader impact of their funded work. One prominent example is the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF), which asks higher education institutions to submit both traditional measures of research output and case studies demonstrating the impact of their research

*[T]he AcademyHealth pilot sought to introduce both foundation staff and researchers to practical methods and tools for more systematically capturing data on research impact, with a particular focus on measures that indicate impact of research on policy and policy decision-making. [T]he goal was to develop a process for how foundation staff might collect, organize, and interpret key measures of policy impact on an ongoing basis.*

beyond academia (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2016).

Building on the REF among other frameworks, the AcademyHealth pilot sought to introduce both foundation staff and researchers to practical methods and tools for more systematically capturing data on research impact, with a particular focus on measures that indicate impact of research on policy and policy decision-making. The pilot project was not intended to be a formal impact evaluation nor to take the place of comprehensive program evaluations. Rather, the goal was to develop a process for how foundation staff might collect, organize, and interpret key measures of policy impact on an ongoing basis. These measures are intended to complement qualitative data collection and other evaluation activities underway.

## RWJF's Investments in Health Insurance Coverage and the Pilot Project

For the RWJF and other health-focused foundations, the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010 created both a tremendous opportunity and an important challenge: the need to generate evidence with the rigor required to be credible and the timeliness needed to inform policy discussions and keep pace with the rapidly evolving policy landscape. In response to this challenge, the foundation supported a range of research projects intended to help policymakers and other decision-makers understand and respond to issues around ACA implementation. These research investments included:

- investigator-initiated research studies and policy analyses to evaluate provisions of the law, identify potential refinements, and inform implementation;
- survey research to help policymakers and stakeholders understand consumers' attitudes toward and experiences with insurance under the ACA; and
- data set creation, analysis, and dissemination to bring new data to bear on emerging policy issues.

While these diverse investment types converge upon a shared goal — to inform policies that improve access to affordable health insurance coverage — the methods, products, audiences, and reach of these grantees and their activities vary greatly.

The grants examined as part of the pilot included six projects completed prior to the start of the pilot. For these grants, AcademyHealth developed case studies that drew on several sources of data: semistructured telephone interviews with each of the principal investigators/project leads; review of relevant grant products, reports, and available web and/or media analytics; and interviews with policymakers and other end users of the grantees' work. Each finished case study summarized the results of these data collection

efforts to describe how, when, and why grants were or were not impactful.

While the research investment types included in the AcademyHealth pilot had different aims, methods, and intended audiences, each investment type made an important contribution to health policy. In different ways, findings from included grants helped inform policymaking within state and federal government and within health care delivery systems. They also provided evidence that was used by intermediary organizations to inform policy discussions, including advocacy organizations, stakeholder groups, and the media. Taken together, the research produced by this portfolio of grantees was cited in at least 24 policy documents, including a Supreme Court decision, numerous amicus briefs, and several reports to Congress; mentioned or used by at least 13 policymakers or end users; mentioned in more than 500 media stories; and viewed or downloaded over 30,000 times.

For five active grants included in the pilot project, AcademyHealth tested a set of tracking tools to help inform a practical approach for gathering impact metrics while a grant is underway. These tools were intended to capture indicators of impact, including grantee mentions in traditional and social media; citations in policy documents, grantee publications, and alternative article-level metrics (e.g., blog posts mentioning published work); and peer-reviewed citations of published work. Eight specific tools were implemented in the pilot project:

1. Researchfish, an online platform for grantee reporting that records and attributes research outputs, outcomes, and impact to a specific grant;
2. Cision, an online media-monitoring software that enables manual and automated searches;
3. Google News/Alerts, an online search engine that allows for manual and automated searches of media and other online mentions;

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4. CQ (Congressional Quarterly) Press Library, a database of policy documents (e.g., legislation, testimony, congressional reports) that allows for manual and automated searches of grantee citations in public and private policy documents;
5. PubMed, a biomedical literature database that allows for manual and automated searches for grantee publications;
6. Altmetric Bookmarklet, a free, online plug-in that provides alternative article-level metrics for select publications;
7. Google Scholar, an online, scholarly literature database that shows citation counts for publications via a manual search; and

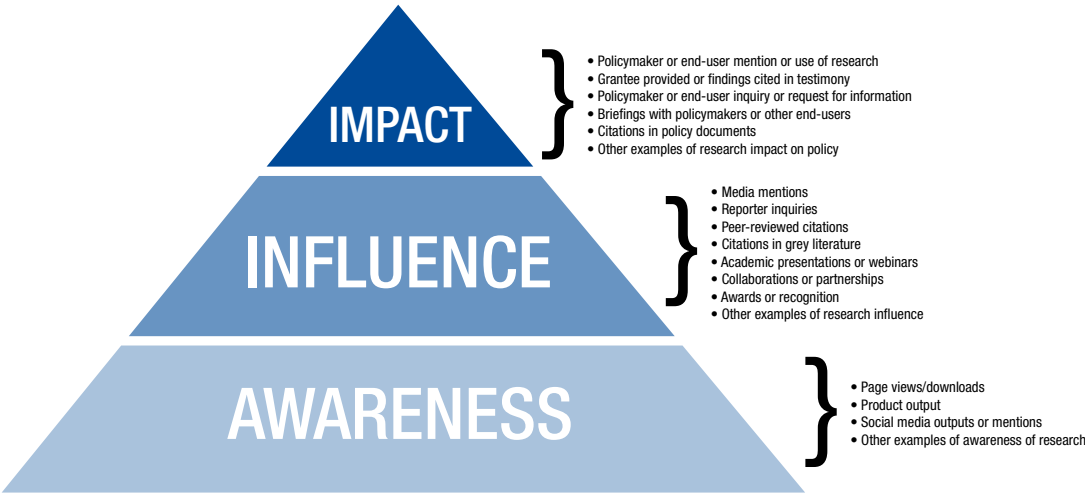


**TABLE 1** Pilot Project Impact-Monitoring Tools

Tool	Purpose	Process	Example	Availability	When to Use
<b>Researchfish</b>	Research outputs and outcomes reporting	Grantees are notified quarterly to update their profiles with outputs and outcomes associated with their grant.	A grantee reported briefing policymakers on study findings.	Subscription fee	Implement at the beginning of a research study and maintain through the grant period and a designated post-grant monitoring period.*
<b>Cision</b>	Media monitoring	Automatic alerts are set up for the full names of each principal investigator; staff manually reviews results for relevant impacts.	A grantee was quoted in an article in <i>The New York Times</i> .	Subscription fee	Implement at the beginning of a research study and maintain through the grant period and a designated post-grant monitoring period.*
<b>Google Alerts</b>	Media/online monitoring	Automatic alerts are set up for the full names of each principal investigator; staff manually reviews results for relevant impacts.	A grantee was quoted in an article in <i>The New York Times</i> .	Free	Implement at the beginning of a research study and maintain through the grant period and a designated post-grant monitoring period.*
<b>CQ (Congressional Quarterly) Press Library</b>	Mentions in policy documents	Automatic alerts are set up for the full names of each principal investigator; staff manually reviews results for relevant impacts.	A grantee was cited in a report from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.	Subscription fee	Implement at the beginning of a research study and maintain through the grant period and a designated post-grant monitoring period.*
<b>PubMed</b>	Publications	Automatic alerts are set up for the full names of each principal investigator; staff manually reviews results for relevant impacts.	A grantee published a paper in <i>Health Affairs</i> .	Free	Implement at the beginning of a research study and maintain through the grant period and a designated post-grant monitoring period.*
<b>Altmetric Bookmarklet</b>	Alternative, article-level metrics	Automatic alerts are set up for a grantee's publication; staff records relevant results.	A grantee publication was mentioned by six news outlets, three blogs, 106 tweets, and two Facebook pages.	Free	Implement for grantee publications as they are produced.
<b>Google Scholar</b>	Scholarly literature database, citations	Staff manually searches using the title of a grantee publication and records the "cited by" number provided; automatic alerts can also be set up.	A grantee publication had eight citing articles.	Free	Implement for publications as they are produced; search at regular intervals for a designated post-grant monitoring period.
<b>Science-Metrix</b>	Bibliometrics and citation analysis	Staff contracts with a survey research firm to conduct citation analysis of identified publications.	A grantee publication was cited by 50 peer-reviewed publications in journals, with a relative impact factor of 1.65.	Contract-based	Implement at the conclusion of a research study; best if performed at least two years after the conclusion of a portfolio/release of associated publications.

\*Implementing online tracking tools at the beginning of a research study ensures that no relevant mentions of the grantee and/or study are missed; however, the search results are likely to be most relevant and indicative of impact toward the end of the grant period, when the researcher has findings or has published.

**FIGURE 1** A Pyramid Approach to Measuring Policy Impact



8. Science-Metrix, an international research evaluation firm that performs citation analysis and other services.

Most of these tools enable real-time tracking of grantees and their research products, with the exception of the citation analysis performed by Science-Metrix and the citation count derived from Google Scholar, which are retrospective in nature. (See Table 1.) We have named the specific tools included in the pilot project to give foundation staff an idea of the types of tools available to support grant monitoring and impact tracking, but this list is not exhaustive and the inclusion of these particular tools in the pilot project is not intended to be an endorsement of any one tool.

This component of the pilot sought to determine the accuracy and feasibility of a range of tracking tools for concurrent grant monitoring, complemented by direct and regular outreach to active grantees to solicit any recent examples of impact. To the extent possible, AcademyHealth also applied the tracking tools to the six grants included in the retrospective analysis to better understand the tools’ effectiveness in capturing impact metrics from years past.

**Organizing and Interpreting Impact Measures: The Metrics Menu**

The specific charge of the AcademyHealth pilot project was to develop a tool and process for more systematically capturing the impact of the RWJF’s research investments. Drawing from both the case study development and the testing of online tracking tools, AcademyHealth developed a grant monitoring tool — the Metrics Menu — to organize different types of impact data according to three different strata we identified as important indicators of research impact (See Figure 1.)

In the case of the AcademyHealth pilot project, the RWJF was particularly interested in the impact of its research investments on health policy and health policy decision-making. As many foundation staff are likely aware, process and productivity measures such as page views or product output are often the easiest to assess, but do not capture the full impact of a research investment. To address this limitation, we attempted to identify indicators of policy impact and classify them into three broad strata: awareness measures, influence measures, and impact measures. Taken



**TABLE 2** Policy Impact Metrics and Sources for Data Collection

Strata	Metric	Source
Awareness	Website page views and downloads	Grantee-reported web analytics
	Grantee product output	Count of grantee deliverables
Influence	Media mentions	Media-monitoring software (e.g., Cision); Google Alerts
	Citations in peer-reviewed literature	Google Scholar; citation analysis (e.g., Science-Metrix)
Impact	Citations in policy documents	CQ Press Library alerts/searches; manual review of citations in relevant policy documents (e.g., legislation, testimony); grantee-reported testimony
	Policymaker request for information	Grantee-reported exchange

together, they cover a range of indicators of research's impact on policy, providing research funders and their grantees with examples of the types of metrics they might collect to inform their research-impact assessment activities.

We defined awareness measures as those that capture the visibility of a product or suite of products from a grant. Although not policy impact per se, metrics like website page views or publication downloads help to highlight grant products or projects that garner above-average attention and awareness, which may signal potential policy impact. These measures are often readily accessible to foundation staff or easily obtained from the grantee.

The influence measures move a step beyond awareness to capture important interactions between grantees and potential end users of their work that could result in policy impact. For example, grantees in the AcademyHealth pilot reported spending significant time talking with reporters, either specifically about study findings or about a broader policy issue relevant to their grant. These conversations sometimes led to mentions in media stories, but not always. In cases where a grantee was not subsequently cited in a story, these conversations brokered

important relationships between researchers and members of the media and helped to establish RWJF-funded researchers as go-to resources for future stories.

Finally, impact measures indicate use of funded research in policy and policy decision-making. Possible indicators of impact range from citation of a research article or other grant product in a policy document (e.g., legislation, regulations, court decisions, testimony) to a policymaker contacting an expert researcher to inform ongoing decision-making. In the course of the pilot project, we observed numerous occasions in which in-person interaction with a policymaker was an effective means of informing policy decisions. When a policymaker directly reaches out to a researcher, this signifies he or she views the researcher as a trusted expert in the topic area. These direct and personal interactions are considered "productive interactions" and are examples of social impact (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011).

## Findings

AcademyHealth's experience documenting the impact of a subset of RWJF grantees offers valuable insights for other foundations seeking a practical approach for routinely collecting indicators of the policy impact of their research

investments. The AcademyHealth process is neither a large-scale program evaluation nor a full research-impact assessment, and, as such, it necessarily lacks some of the rigor and comprehensiveness associated with these types of efforts. What it does offer, however, is a way for foundation staff to more systematically identify, collect, and organize different types of data that, together, can more closely approximate a research investment's actual policy impact. In this section, we reflect on the effectiveness of our impact measurement strategies, including the pros and cons of the methods we tested.

### *Understanding the Benefits and Limitations of Tracking Tools*

Impact-measurement tools, including those implemented in the AcademyHealth pilot, aim to capture a broad range of research outputs and outcomes, from publications and citations to mentions in the press and other policy-relevant sources. They also vary in terms of their ease of use, cost, and the “signal to noise” ratio of the search results. As such, each tool has distinct advantages and disadvantages. Implementing standard search strategies (e.g., using the principal investigator's full name) across a range of tools increases the consistency of the grant monitoring and is more comprehensive than individual, one-off, or irregular attempts to identify examples of research use and impact. However, the time and energy required to process search results depends on several factors. For example, the uniqueness of the principal investigator's name can significantly affect the “signal to noise” ratio and require greater staff time to parse irrelevant results. Although automatic alerts address this issue to some extent, more staff time may be required to monitor prolific grantees who work on multiple grants, produce many products, and generate evidence within a defined content area, which can complicate attributing search results to specific foundation-funded grants.

AcademyHealth tested most of the tracking tools both retrospectively as well as in concurrent grant monitoring. On the whole, we found that using these tools to identify the impact of completed grants was more labor-intensive and potentially less accurate than using the tools to help

*[R]egardless of the tool used, impact tracking and measurement is imperfect. Media stories and policy documents sometimes refer to bodies of work in general, and/or do not reference the author or study title by name, making it difficult for a tool or manual search to identify. Even detailed searches do not capture everything, and relevant items can be missed.*

inform concurrent monitoring, in which search results can be assessed and recorded in near real time. Also, the pilot tested tools that require a subscription fee as well as those that are publicly available. There is a tradeoff between paid versus free tools, but based on our experience, in many cases the tradeoff is minimal. Most of the impact tracking that was the focus of our pilot could be accomplished using the publicly available tools, although the paid tools can provide more nuanced or detailed results in some instances.

Finally, regardless of the tool used, impact tracking and measurement is imperfect. Media stories and policy documents sometimes refer to bodies of work in general, and/or do not reference the author or study title by name, making it difficult for a tool or manual search to identify. Even detailed searches do not capture everything, and relevant items can be missed. Further, quantitative measures alone fail to capture the full impact of a grant, as they cannot assess who is downloading and reading a brief or the quality of the news outlet citing a study's findings. This underscores the importance of gathering qualitative information from grantees and from research

*[M]any salient examples of policy impact may be informal or unplanned, including a telephone call or hallway conversation between a researcher and a policymaker or journalist. These important examples of impact cannot be captured by web-based tracking tools and stand to be lost in the absence of regular communication with the grantee.*

end users, through direct outreach or interviews, to provide context for the impact of a research study and supplement the quantitative measures.

#### *Eliciting Information From Grantees*

In the pilot project, we tested two strategies for gathering qualitative information from RWJF grantees: regular and direct outreach to active grantees and semistructured interviews with grantees whose projects had concluded. Both strategies are effective for eliciting detailed, narrative information from grantees to enhance the quantitative measures described above. Direct grantee outreach in real time has the primary advantage of prompting grantees to provide examples of research impact as those examples occur. For example, in our experience, many salient examples of policy impact may be informal or unplanned, including a telephone call or hallway conversation between a researcher and a policymaker or journalist. These important examples of impact cannot be captured by web-based tracking tools and stand to be lost in the absence of regular communication with the grantee. It is important to note, however, that given the time lag between the conduct of a research study and the study's impact, active

grantees may not have significant information to share during their study period.

Conversely, retrospective qualitative analysis, such as the interviews we conducted with past grantees and the users of their work, yields significantly more detailed results, but at a significant cost to staff time. For example, our interviews revealed that several grantees gave presentations at conferences that helped them connect with eventual end users of their work, information we would not have gained had we asked grantees to simply report the number of presentations given. However, the process of eliciting this information from grantees and confirming it with the research users they identified required time and other resources from project staff that may not be available to foundations and other funders.

#### *Making Sense of Impact Metrics*

The Metrics Menu developed through the AcademyHealth pilot is intended to be a tool used by researchers and foundation staff to organize impact metrics captured from web-based tracking tools and/or qualitative data collection. It organizes these metrics into awareness, influence, and impact measures to help researchers and their funders track the myriad ways research findings may reach a policymaker, some of which are more direct than others. (See Table 2.) While we view the Metrics Menu as a useful tool for helping researchers and their funders organize and interpret impact data, we recognize that simply listing counts across different metrics types does not provide a full picture of whether, why, and how a research grant had impact. Rather, the Metrics Menu is most valuable when paired with a narrative account that provides additional qualitative information and helps corroborate and contextualize the data captured in the menu. More broadly, we recognize that even this detailed, two-step approach cannot conclusively determine whether or not a researcher or research study has had an impact on policy. However, we believe this process still has value as a practical approach for uncovering and explaining examples of impact that research funders may not capture otherwise.

## Discussion

Drawing from our reflections on the effectiveness of the pilot project, this section lays out several key considerations for foundations in developing and implementing an impact measurement strategy. In particular, we recommend foundations consider the following key questions as they develop or refine their own measurement strategies.

### *What: Defining Outcomes of Interest*

Foundations and other research funders may be interested in many different types of research impact, such as advancing knowledge, informing policy, or making a broader contribution to society. For any funder interested in assessing research impact, an important first step is identifying the type of impact of greatest interest and the types of metrics that can approximate that impact.

Our primary outcome of interest in the pilot project was the impact of research investments on policymaking, and, as such, we developed three strata of measures that may indicate policy impact. Other foundations may also want to consider stratifying the information they collect from grantees and other sources to provide a more accurate picture of the contribution of a particular study. For example, we found that grants with a documented impact on policy (e.g., grant products cited in policy documents like court decisions, legislation, regulations, or testimony) often achieved considerable visibility (as measured by page views and downloads). Foundations seeking to determine which products or projects generated the greatest awareness could consider asking grantees to submit grant-related products and associated web analytics on a regular basis. A regular review of these web analytics might suggest particular products or projects to monitor more closely for policy impact.

### *When: Timing for Impact Monitoring*

The pilot project also suggested important considerations for the timing of impact monitoring. Many of the RWJF grantees noted there is often a lag between the conclusion of a research study

*For any funder interested in assessing research impact, an important first step is identifying the type of impact of greatest interest and the types of metrics that can approximate that impact.*

and the public release of study findings. Further, the conclusion of a study and/or release of study findings may not coincide with a “policy window” — a time when findings are relevant to current policy discussions (Kingdon, 1993). Certain types of projects may have a longer lag time than others: For example, researchers who rely on traditional dissemination vehicles, like peer-reviewed publications, often experience longer timelines, as it may take many months or even years to have a paper reviewed, accepted, and published. The time lag between release of study findings and their application to policy decisions suggests foundations may want to follow up with a grantee for a period of multiple years after the grant concludes. Real-time monitoring of an active grantee is important to ensure the grantee adheres to the project schedule, but foundations interested in gaining a more comprehensive view of the policy impact of their investments should consider monitoring projects beyond the conclusion of the formal grant period.

### *How: Choosing an Impact-Monitoring Approach*

A broad range of tools exist to support grant monitoring and impact tracking, but as has been stated, these tools should be paired with qualitative data. Foundation staff could consider a range of options to couple quantitative metrics with narrative information. In monitoring active grants, the AcademyHealth pilot coupled use of the tracking tools with regular and direct outreach to grantees. For concluded projects, AcademyHealth staff conducted semistructured telephone interviews with grantees and end users

*[O]nline tracking tools present an opportunity to more systematically capture examples of research impact, and they can sometimes provide important evidence of the visibility, influence, and impact of funded research. That said, these measures must be paired with qualitative data to better understand not only the impact of research investments, but the impact pathway as well.*

of their work. The purpose of the telephone interviews and the direct grantee outreach was to capture examples of policy impact that the tools would miss, such as conversations with policymakers or journalists. Regardless of the specific tools or processes implemented, foundations should incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data collection into their impact-measurement strategy.

#### *Who: Engaging Dedicated Grant Monitors to Systematically Track Grantees*

Given the complexity of research-impact tracking, the resources required, and the level of effort involved, RWJF grantees in the AcademyHealth pilot project indicated they would need resources and support to perform this level of tracking and reporting. Given this feedback, we recommend identifying a designated grant monitor to conduct impact tracking. Depending on the size of the portfolio, this could be the grant's project officer or manager within the foundation. Alternatively, if a foundation wishes to assess a larger portfolio or multiple portfolios,

a foundation could engage an external organization to monitor the projects during the grant period and for a period following the conclusion of a research study.

Identifying a designated grant monitor or monitoring organization that is responsible for research-impact tracking has several advantages. First, it enables consistent measurement across a portfolio of projects. The monitor can ensure that the same alerts and strategies are applied to each grantee so that the data are collected systematically and reported consistently. Second, a designated monitor reduces the burden and reporting requirements for grantees. That said, grantees will still need to work closely with the monitor to report examples of grant impact that cannot otherwise be captured by tracking tools or systematic searching.

#### **Conclusion**

Systematically measuring the impact of research on policy is a long-standing challenge for many organizations, and this pilot confirms there is no silver bullet. However, the AcademyHealth pilot project for the RWJF proved useful in several respects. Chiefly, the pilot succeeded in its goal of helping the foundation better understand the impact of different types of research investments, particularly for less traditional research investments whose findings did not end up in the peer-reviewed literature. The project also provided useful insights into the RWJF's target audiences. Like many organizations, the foundation has a range of audiences for its work, some big and some small, with varying levels of influence that may not correspond to size — for example, certain policy audiences may be small in number but highly influential. In the case of the RWJF pilot, conversations with research users about how and why a project was impactful also turned up important insights about where key audiences go for information and why they view that information as trustworthy or useful.

Importantly, the AcademyHealth pilot project also provides useful information for other foundations as they consider practical ways to collect, organize, and interpret key measures of policy impact on an ongoing basis, keeping in mind



that this process does not take the place of large-scale program evaluations. Among our lessons learned, online tracking tools present an opportunity to more systematically capture examples of research impact, and they can sometimes provide important evidence of the visibility, influence, and impact of funded research. That said, these measures must be paired with qualitative data to better understand not only the impact of research investments, but the impact pathway as well. Another key takeaway is that the grantee is often the best source of information about the impact of his or her work. By enlisting the assistance of a designated grant monitor, or perhaps an external monitoring organization, foundations can partner with grantees to collect key indicators of impact both while a grant is underway and after the project concludes. It is our hope that the lessons learned in this pilot project prove useful for other foundations seeking to support impactful research and systematically assess their success in this regard.

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