The Alignment Problem:
The Case of Civic Tech - Academic
Collaborations in the U.S. Safety Nets

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Plan

Figure 1: Pasteur's Quadrant - Basic Science and Technological Innovation by Stokes (1997). Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasteur%27s$_quadrant$

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  - I'm currently an academic but also used to be a data scientist at Code for America, where I collaborated with academic partners on applied problems.
- **The alignment problem**: balancing the rigor of research and the cost of implementation.

- Academics want sound research design (e.g., randomized controlled trials), high-quality data (e.g., large-scale administrative data), and hence aspire to publish in top journals (research is the primary objective). *Less sensitive* to the cost of implementation.

	High rigor	Low rigor
High cost	Researcher = Happy, Implementer = Hesitant	Researcher = Frustrated, Implementer = Hesitant
Low cost	Researcher = Happy, Implementer = Happy	Researcher = Frustrated, Implementer = Happy

Table 1: Types of researcher and implementer relationships

- Academics want sound research design (e.g., randomized controlled trials), high-quality data (e.g., large-scale administrative data), and hence aspire to publish in top journals (research is the primary objective). *Less sensitive* to the cost of implementation.
- Practitioners want to find an easy and fast way to solve their problems (research is the secondary objective). *Highly sensitive* to the cost of implementation.

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- ▸ Scoping: turning applied problems into well-defined research questions (=hypotheses)

- Safety net programs (social insurance + anti-poverty programs): social security, SNAP[1], Medicare/Medicaid, WIC[2], etc.[3]

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[2]Women, Infant, Children

[3]My wife and I received support from WIC and Medicaid (Medical) when we had our daughter as both graduate students. So, I had personal experience with these programs.

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    - FLOW (you need to follow instructions)

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  - Learning cost (e.g., navigating online forms)
  - Compliance cost (e.g., interview requirements for SNAP)
  - Psychological cost (e.g., waiting anxiously for a case decision)

- ▶ Code for America and Georgetown's Better Government Lab have collaborated to reduce burdens in the U.S. safety net systems and deliver benefits to eligible clients in multiple states and programs (my case: CA, NY, CO, NM).

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- ▶ The key in scoping is balancing between implement costs and potential impacts

- Don't just talk about ideas; write them down and share them with your partners.[4]

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- Write a short document (one- or two-pager) to articulate the potential benefits (learning, decision, and impacts) and implementation costs (which teams and staff need to be involved, how much, and how long).

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- We make plans, but some plans are bound to fail.
- When best options are not available, improvise. Perfect is the enemy of good (your applied partner is far from Reviewer 2).

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    - ▶ Do internal testing and demo(s) (=prototyping). If you redesign a form, do people navigate the form as you intended (i.e., user testing)?
    - ▶ Expect failures and make the implementation plan robust. e.g., were these messages delivered successfully if you message people? Are there any security issues?

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Measurement

- ▶ Measure what matters (Doerr, 2018)
  - ▶ In safety net contexts: people, burden, and benefits
- ▶ Set primary (e.g., direct impacts) and secondary learning objectives (e.g., indirect impacts)
- ▶ Easier metrics do not imply better (or more important) metrics (Muller, 2018).
- ▶ Some impacts have direct monetary values (e.g., dollar amounts), others not (e.g., time saved).

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- Check data quality by consulting with technical and domain experts.

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- Basic structure: stories (qual) + evidence (quant)
- There are different types of deliverables (code/slide deck/working paper, blog posts, etc.) suitable for different audiences (technical, academic, practitioner, policy-maker, etc.).

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- Administrative burden theory is useful to scope applied problems theoretically in policy implementation (safety net is one domain).
- Pay attention to details and ensure that (almost) every stakeholder is aligned at every step.
- Relational is strategic. Transactional relationships don't go a long way.

Comments or questions?
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