November 2, 2017

**Mobilizing Research for Policy Impact**

Organized by: Sasha Wood, New Brunswick Social Policy Research Network and David Phipps, York University

Speakers: Marcelo Bravo, Liu Institute for Global Issues; Cathy Malcolm Edwards, Managing Director, 1125@Carleton, Carleton University; Rodney Ghali, Assistant Secretary of the Innovation Hub, Privy Council Office; Bill MacKenzie, Director of Strategic Partnerships, New Brunswick Social Policy Research Network; Matthew McKean, Associate Director of Education, Conference Board of Canada; Nick Scott, Executive Director, Open Government and Innovation, Government of New Brunswick

Moderator: Dr. Robert Haché, Vice-President Research and Innovation, York University

**Takeaways and recommendations**

**Why we need social policy research networks and knowledge mobilization hubs**

* The problems facing society and government are increasingly complex. “Quick fix” solutions often address symptoms but not causes, and may even add to the complexity of future issues.
* No one person, or one government, can solve these complex problems. Instead, you need diverse teams with a variety of perspectives to generate the evidence that supports evidence-informed solutions.
* It is helpful to have a neutral third party that facilitates these connections.
* The New Brunswick Social Policy Research Network (NBSPRN) is one such convener. It brings together civil society, informed citizens, policy makers and researchers to have these broader conversations. They also keep an eye on the evolving landscape to ensure the relevancy of their focus/advice, and work with researchers to help them build partnerships.
* NBSPRN wants to develop a policy “skunkworks” for government. Designed to innovate quickly with minimal with minimal management constraints, skunkworks support innovation in policy, take more risks and allow policymakers to do things they cannot in the usual policy process. The structure also brings in a greater diversity of perspectives.

**Increasing evidence-based policy development**

* Government needs to be explicit and clear about its challenges so organizations like NBSPRN can connect them with the right people. Take the time to frame the challenge in a way that is useful and achievable.
* Policymakers are busy and have a lot of pressure; evidence therefore has to be presented to them in an organized, clear and understandable way.
* The process needs knowledge brokers who can successful navigate between academia and different partners who understand all the sides.
* Knowledge mobilization hubs seek to be these brokers, which also provide a one-stop hub for people wanting to partner with academia.
* The current climate presents an opportunity for the federal government to accelerate these partnership models so they are widely institutionalized.

**Advice for knowledge mobilization hubs**

* Previously-existing relationships are essential for meaningful connections and discussions on policy issues.
* An ad-hoc or transactional approach to relationship building is often ineffective. Instead, focus on a systematic approach that builds an ecosystem, facilitates timely connections and allows for long-term, sustained relationships between individuals and between institutions.
* Any stakeholders should be involved in the problem from the beginning so they are invested in the knowledge translation and the outcomes.
* It is essential to bring diversity and ‘unusual suspects’ to the table when designing solutions for social impact, designing policy or creating a research project. This networked approach ensures a broader systems-level view that is more likely to create an effective and relevant solution.
* It is important to consider what projects are not suitable for academics; a successful input requires them to have time and space to do credible job.
* Maintain a stable of academics that are on call for projects, particularly short term ones. Ensure you know their strengths and interests.
* To stay relevant when governments change, policymakers should focus on specific projects and provide rigorous, fearless advice. You are a public servant. Do not tie yourself to the political machine.

**Breaking down the silos**

* More effort is needed to break down the silos between industry, academia and government, as well as cross-sectorial and cross-departmental in academia and in government.
* Ensure everyone understands the values that other sectors/departments bring, as well as their different tools, languages and relative strengths.
* Look for alignment – get people engaged with and working on a common problem.
* Have one person at the table who is open about the challenges different parties face in working together.

**Developing skills for knowledge mobilization**

* True impact requires people with the social, communications and knowledge mobilization skills to translate research into results. This includes experience in building strong partnerships and tailoring solutions to meet he needs of different groups.
* Knowledge mobilization hubs and institutions need to develop capacity skills in knowledge mobilization for students and faculty.
* Within faculties where there is less support for knowledge translation, institutions should identify the few who are interested and support them with training and professional development.
* Job-ready graduates need 21st skills for employability (as defined by the World Economic Forum), including: empathy, ability to look at and address complex problems, and capacity for leadership.

**Grad students and knowledge mobilization**

* Don’t only focus on the academic “superstars.” The evidence indicates that grad students play a crucial role in knowledge mobilization and more is needed to support and recognize this.
* Knowledge mobilization is a valuable and employable skill.
* Institutions should create space for students to acquire knowledge mobilization skills, as well as incentives and structures that support this activity.
* Students need opportunities to act as knowledge brokers independent of their research.

**The changing face of knowledge mobilization**

* The evolution of technology is enabling researchers and policymakers to get data directly from citizens instead of going through elaborate and time-intensive processes which accelerate the process for gathering, synthesizing and processing information.
* It is important to have trusted relationships/partnerships already developed so that policymakers can get advice quickly when a policy crisis arises. (e.g. something blowing up on Twitter)
* While academia needs to adapt to provide decisions makers with a quality analysis in a short-term cycle, it should not be at the expense of the long-term focus.