THE WHITE HOUSE

THE EVIDENCE FORUMS

Looking Back & Reaching Forward: Taking Stock of The Evidence Ecosystem Today & Tomorrow

Penn State's Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative-White House event capped off the Year of Evidence with an eye to the future

By *Michael Donovan & Max Crowley, Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative*

Event Background and Synopsis

The final "Evidence Forum" was held in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House campus on February 22nd, 2023. The Forum's speakers explored evidence-building and the use of scientific evidence in government settings, with a particular focus on addressing issues of equity across the evidence ecosystem — the global web of those who generate, mobilize and use scientific evidence. This half-day event, titled "Looking Back & Reaching Forward: Taking Stock of The Evidence Ecosystem Today & Tomorrow", served as a retrospective on the White House Year of Evidence for Action's series of eleven Evidence Forums held throughout 2022 and a forward looking event considering the future of the evidence space. This forum was an opportunity to reflect on and celebrate the contributions and efforts from across the country and around the world. Importantly, this forum focused on future opportunities to deepen relationships and forward progress in this field.

The Evidence Forums

- White House Summit on Evidence for Action (April 7, 2022)
- Pew Charitable Trusts (June 30, 2022)
- Results for America (August 1, 2022)
- Urban Institute (August 18, 2022)
- Federation of American Scientists (October 7, 2022)
- The Data Foundation (October 18, 2022)
- UIC IRRPP & CTBA (October 26, 2022)
- OMB/Georgetown University - President's Management Agenda Learning Agenda (PMALA) Roundtable (November 16, 2022)
- Health Effects Institute (December 7, 2022)
- Center for Global Development (December 8, 2022)
- Stanford Impact Labs (December 12, 2022)
- The Policy Lab, Brown University (December 14, 2022)
- Penn State Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative (February 22, 2023)

EVIDENCE FORUM   Looking Back & Reaching Forward: Taking Stock of the Evidence Ecosystem Today & Tomorrow

Timeline of Evidence Forum events

The day's events were co-hosted by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and the Penn State University's Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative (EIC), in collaboration with the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Launched in April 2022 during the White House Summit on Evidence for

Action, the Year of Evidence for Action (YEA) featured the Forums as a centerpiece of activity and focus.

Throughout the day, guided discussion included a focus on implementation within various stakeholder settings, potential barriers and challenges to success, contextual considerations for broadening the evidence tent with an equity-oriented lens, and future goals and directions. The concluding in-person session convened members of the community to highlight successes that can guide the development of best practices as well as galvanize enthusiasm to take these efforts into the future and motivate a "road map" to make that future a reality.

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The audience included over 200 in-person and virtual leaders from the evidence field. The agenda of the Evidence Forum was varied to include direct remarks, guided discussion and question-and-answer sessions, a panel discussion, virtual engagement, and Lightning Talks. The Lightning Talks highlighted sectoral components of the larger whole, including the international context, the federal experience, philanthropic contributions, an equity-centered focus, higher education, and other areas.

Kei Koizumi, Principal Deputy Director for Policy, OSTP delivered welcome remarks that began by celebrating the 10th anniversary of the OSTP Public Access Policy, which promotes that the "scientific evidence that our scientists and engineers generate is more accessible to more of the American people and people around the world." He noted the commitment from President Biden to evidence-based policymaking, including the memorandum signed in his first week in office aimed at restoring trust in government through scientific integrity and evidence-based policymaking, as well as efforts by Congress through the bipartisan Foundations for Evidence-based Policymaking Act of 2018 ("Evidence Act"). He also importantly noted the three priorities of the Year of Evidence for Action, including 1) to share leading practices from federal agencies to generate and use research-backed knowledge to advance better, more equitable outcomes for all Americans; 2) to strengthen existing

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and develop new strategies and structures to promote consistent evidence-based decision making inside the federal government; and 3) to increase connection and collaboration among researchers, knowledge producers, and decision-makers inside and outside of the federal government. Noteworthy progress in these priorities includes the establishment of the Analytics for Equity initiative led by the National Science Foundation in partnership with OSTP and OMB, the OMB-led federal Learning Agenda Questions Dashboard on Evaluation.gov, and the rechartering of the Social and Behavioral Sciences subcommittee under the National Science and Technology Council. Koizumi concluded by noting the need to "accelerate the pace, scale and scope of this work to further institutionalize evidence-based policy and practice."

Diana Epstein, Evidence Team Lead from the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) highlighted a sampling of the important topics and subtopics that were covered throughout the Year of Evidence for Action during the various Evidence Forums. She noted that equity was a "throughline of these conversations", with topics including:
- inclusive stakeholder engagement,
- how state and local governments can use evidence to drive more equitable outcomes,
- measuring and assessing the use of evidence and increasing the use, development, and uptake of evidence in federal agencies,
- new approaches for applying evidence in active real-time decision-making environments,
- reducing racial wealth gaps through effective support for public higher education,
- building evidence to support the President's Management Agenda Learning Agenda (PMALA),
- leveraging air pollution research and advancements in environmental and health policy decisions,
- progress in advancing evidence use in the realm of U.S. foreign aid,
- understanding what universities and colleges can do to spur research that can generate evidence and insights for today's toughest social challenges, and,
- partnership models to strengthen evidence-informed decision-making in the federal government.

Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff thanked participants and placed the agenda of the day into the larger context of the Administration's priorities, noting that, "during his first week in office, President Biden signed a memorandum to restore trust in government and in science." He noted the need to leverage "good science, trustworthy data, and the best-in-class evidence and information to solve real-world problems", with a particular focus on equity and fairness. His visit underscored the importance of the day's events to the larger government mission.

"I appreciate what you're doing to help make America healthier, safer, and stronger. And you see what is going on in the world right now, we need what you're doing more than ever."
- Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff

Panel Session: Looking Back on a Year of Evidence for Action

Epstein led a panel discussion focused on reflections on past forums and events and included remarks from Erica Goldman, David Yokum, and Angela Bednarek:

- **Erica Goldman from the Federation of American Scientists (FAS)** noted the important efforts at FAS including the Day One Project's Evidence for Action Challenge, in collaboration with The Pew Charitable Trusts Evidence Project, which invites the broader science, technology, innovation, and research community to crowdsource ideas rooted in the production, use, and uptake of scientific evidence to improve policy outcomes and decision making across critical societal challenges including health, education and workforce, and climate and clean energy. Goldman discussed Living Evidence reviews and the FAS collaboration with Julian Elliott from Monash University in Australia, among other activities and partnerships.

- **David Yokum from the Policy Lab at Brown University** highlighted the important contributions of the Evidence Forums as a series of complementary events that began to align a diverse community of actors from different sectors with different levels of maturation along a common vision. Similarly, he saw that the specific recommendations and best practices that arose from the Evidence Forums were themselves significant contributions to the field.

- **Angela Bednarek, director of the Evidence Project at The Pew Charitable Trusts,** highlighted the remarkable "window of opportunity" that has manifested to focus on the intersection of evidence, equity, and innovation. She noted that with the activities of the Year of Evidence for Action as well as the establishment of the Directorate for Technology, Innovation, and Partnerships, or TIP, at the National Science Foundation, there is true momentum in this field.

- In response to a second question from Epstein regarding recommendations for the next steps, both Bednarek and Goldman noted the need to continue to convene and connect these communities, to "strengthen the connective tissue", as Goldman noted. The recognition that significant work remains undone but facilitating the intersection between the "federal and non-federal community" can promote positive engagement, such as the expansion and use of agency learning agendas that expressly delineate agency priorities. Yokum also noted that the field also needs to recognize its own limitations by "making sure we're really sophisticated on not only what science can contribute, but what it can't contribute." This, he noted, is "important to making sure that the evidence, when it is available, is as well received into the process as possible."

Lightning Talks: The Future of the Evidence Ecosystem

Max Crowley, director of the Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative and moderator for the day's events, highlighted the opportunities for virtual engagement through polls before transitioning to the first Lightning Talk speaker, **Laura Jana, Industry leader, author, and pediatrician as well as Chief Innovation Officer** at the Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative. **Jana** encouraged researchers and policymakers to learn to speak each other's language for better impact. In her work with businesses, she sees that they recognize the need for "compassionate capitalism" with a focus on their employees, communities, everyone in their supply chain, and ethical practices, especially regarding diversity. "Now is the time for those who have just-in-time research to partner with businesses to help guide strategic planning for the workforce."

Neeli Bendapudi, President of the Pennsylvania State University, highlighted the contributions of higher education to the evidence ecosystem and that Penn State prides itself on being a leader in evidence, in both the teaching and research missions. She encouraged researchers to seek future teaching and research opportunities. "We must look at the whole picture of equity and include community citizen scientists," she said. She stressed accountability for results, community-engaged research, and through the use of metaphor, demonstrated how broad multi-sector approaches are vital and ultimately, humility is key to success.

Finally, she called for researchers and policymakers to "move from evidence to action." "In our research," she said, "we've got to make sure that our findings are robust and do more to engage our communities in our research. We have to create a pipeline of diverse leaders and scientists, people from different backgrounds who will ask different questions. Equity should be a throughline in everything we do."

Jamila Michener, co-director of the Cornell Center for Health Equity at Cornell University, in a moving personal story, urged researchers to consider the experiences of individuals affected by government programs and the profound importance of broad inclusivity in the evidence ecosystem. Doing so will identify the "pain points" of a particular system that need addressing and leveraging individual perspectives can guide the direction of research to help solve problems marginalized Americans face. When we include more people, not fewer, research findings can be transformative and more comprehensive. Michener's remarks on humanizing evidence through understanding lived experiences were a powerful reminder of why this work is so important. She noted that "The knowledge that we can get from tapping into and truly taking into account and incorporating the experiences of the people who are most vulnerable in the face of policy and government intervention who have the most at stake in the face of those things, that has something to offer us, that has something to enrich our evidence ecosystem that very few other things do."

Philip Gaskin, Vice President of Entrepreneurship for the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, said that researchers need to not only study what has worked well in the past but also to look forward at emerging trends. In order to spot trends in the economy and work ahead of the curve, we should study those who are succeeding, those who are trying, those who couldn't get their businesses off the ground, and those who are left out. This broad approach can help make systems-level changes to support entrepreneurs in the coming years. He noted that the role of philanthropy in the evidence ecosystem can include listening to what communities need to better inform research agendas that reflect those needs.

Matt Soldner, Commissioner of the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at the U.S. Department of Education noted that the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 is making a difference by changing conditions on the ground in evidence-based policymaking through cultural shifts inside of agencies and the establishment of Evaluation Officers, Chief Data Officers, and Statistical Officials. However, the capacity for evidence-based policymaking appears to be inconsistent. He called for sufficient resources, multi-

sector collaboration, and seeking new opportunities for privacy, trust, open science, and collaboration. He urged researchers to connect with federal agencies and meet with their Evaluation Officers to move forward this agenda together.
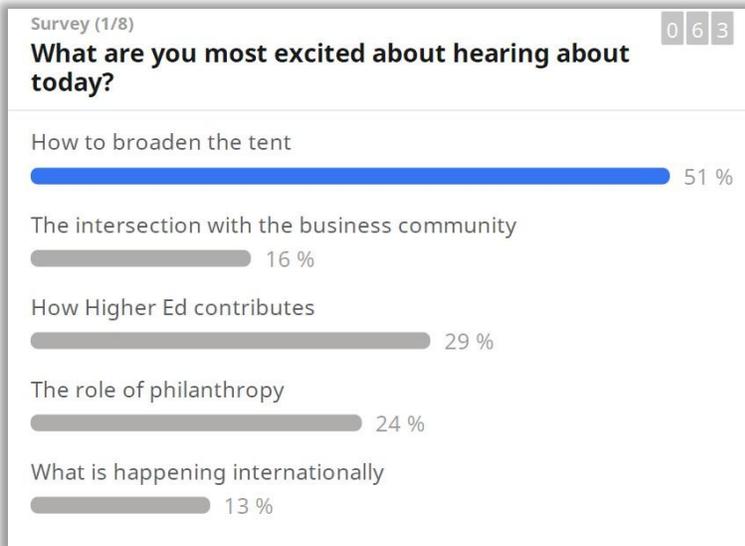
Jennifer Thornhill Verma, Executive Lead at the Global Commission of Evidence to Address Society Challenges, spoke on strengthening domestic evidence-support systems to ensure equity-centered evidence, and she broadened her focus beyond the U.S. to the global evidence environment. She discussed the valuable contributions of the Global Commission on Evidence Report in 2022 as well as the report update in 2023, and she called for a better mix of forms of evidence; not to rely solely on data analytics and evaluation but to utilize modeling, behavioral implementation, qualitative insights, evidence synthesis, technology assessments, and evidence-support units to understand the evidence and to make decisions in an equity-sensitive way. She noted the work yet to be done, indicating that "there's also been a hollowing out of a policy capacity in many countries and a failure to keep up with new developments of evidence use."

Lauren Supplee, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) said we need to more deeply study and understand when, where, why, how, and under what conditions we use research, as well as recognize its varied forms, such as conceptual use, "where research changes the questions someone's asking or the way they think about a problem or process." Researchers need to understand evidence use through the perspective of intended users, and she notes that the challenge of using evidence is really a challenge for human behavior and organizational systems. Incentive structures must be adapted to promote "boundary-spanning" activities to break down silos separating disciplines, sectors, and communities and 'all hands on deck' approaches must be embraced.

"This is not the end but is, in fact, the beginning of new opportunities for the evidence community and the role of science in our society." – Dr. Max Crowley, EIC

A Call-to-Action

Dr. Crowley closed out the event reflecting on the year and the energy in the evidence space to enact meaningful change to strengthen the interconnected web that is the evidence ecosystem. He discussed the importance of rigorously evaluating our efforts to change the incentives and behaviors of individuals and institutions. He shared findings from a recently completed randomized controlled trial of the 116th Congress that provides dynamic supports to Congressional offices to engage directly with researchers about their policy priorities. This study found that these supports, known as the Research-to-Policy Collaboration Model, could significantly increase the Congressional office's value and use of scientific evidence in the policymaking process. Further, a randomized trial of researchers who were assigned to receive the model found that their experience engaging with policymakers resulted in significant improvements in their program of research.

Survey (1/8)
What are you most excited about hearing about today?

How to broaden the tent — 51 %

The intersection with the business community — 16 %

How Higher Ed contributes — 29 %

The role of philanthropy — 24 %

What is happening internationally — 13 %

During the subsequent Q&A section, questioners from the in-person and virtual audiences engaged with the speakers directly. Topics included safeguarding against selective use of evidence without the broad consideration of many sources and a discussion of the bandwidth required to engage in this resource-intensive activity of bridge-spanning, including some inherent incentives and challenging disincentives in the policy and academic contexts. They also discussed the often-lengthy trajectory of policy-relevant, cross-sectoral relationships promoting evidence use.

Throughout the event, the EIC team sought feedback through digital polling. This included questions about where the over 200 attendees felt the field should prioritize focus and resources.

Survey (8/8)
What do you see as the most important next steps for the evidence based community?

- Academic community give credit for collaborations and interdisciplinary research
- Make connections in other spaces Get mor interdisciplinary
- Transformational shifts to ground our work in equity, and especially racial equity.
- Making sure the evidence community understands the realities of the people who actually administer

programs at the state and local levels, the participants, and the variations among them...
- Outreach partners
- Strengthening state data systems so that they can be a tool to support the creation and use of robust, inclusive evidence.

The concluding remarks by Max Crowley and Diana Epstein underscored the value of community, cross-sectoral engagement, and durable relationships. The emphasized the need to formalize organizational structures and systems of support, to integrate domestic evidence ecosystems into the global ecosystem, and the future opportunities to work between disciplines and systems, not just within. Crowley noted the goal of better understanding the science of scientific impact. Finally, Evaluation.gov was lauded as a core resource for agency learning agendas and other information.

Key Insights
The contributions of the speakers and the engagement from the in-person and virtual audiences throughout the day repeatedly reinforced the profound value of relationships. This dovetailed with the cross-sectoral nature of the speakers to highlight the need for a broad-based and diverse coalition of actors to further solidify this emergent community. The convening power of the OSTP and OMB was paramount to coalescing this community, and the establishment of a "throughline of equity" was foundational. Other insights include:

1. *Inclusivity in research*: Participants emphasized the importance of considering the experiences of vulnerable individuals when studying government programs to identify pain

points and improve policies. By incorporating these perspectives, research findings can be more transformative and comprehensive, ultimately benefiting marginalized populations.

2. *Anticipating trends*: The meeting highlighted the need to study both successful and unsuccessful cases to anticipate emerging trends and make systems-level changes to support entrepreneurs and other stakeholders. This broad approach can help researchers work ahead of the curve, identify opportunities, and better inform research agendas that address community needs.

3. *Progress in evidence-based policymaking*: The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 has led to a culture shift within agencies, but inconsistent capacity remains a challenge. Participants called for sufficient resources, multi-sector collaboration, and new opportunities for privacy, trust, open science, and cooperation to address these issues.

4. *Global evidence environment*: The discussions expanded the focus beyond the U.S., highlighting the importance of ensuring equity-centered evidence and addressing the hollowing out of policy capacity in many countries. The Global Evidence Commission Report and its updates were cited as valuable contributions in this regard, promoting the use of various forms of evidence for decision-making.

5. *Diverse forms of evidence*: Participants discussed the value of using a mix of evidence types, such as modeling, behavioral implementation, qualitative insights, and evidence synthesis, for making equity-sensitive decisions. This approach allows policymakers to better understand complex issues and make more informed, equitable decisions.

6. *Understanding evidence use*: The meeting explored the significance of understanding when, where, why, and how research is used, and recognizing the importance of conceptual use in changing the way problems are approached. By studying evidence use through the perspective of intended users, researchers can gain insights into human behavior and organizational systems, improving the overall impact of their work.

7. *Breaking down silos*: The discussions emphasized the need to promote "boundary-spanning" activities and foster collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and communities. By breaking down barriers, interdisciplinary cooperation can lead to more holistic solutions and more effective evidence-based policymaking.

8. *Evaluating efforts*: The importance of rigorously evaluating efforts to change incentives and behaviors that support evidence use was highlighted as crucial to strengthening the evidence ecosystem. For example, how the randomized controlled trial of Research-to-Policy Collaboration Model found it could increase researcher engagement with policy communities and increase the use of scientific evidence in the policymaking process was shared as a case study, underscoring the value of evaluating such efforts.

9. *Addressing challenges*: The meeting touched upon safeguarding against selective use of evidence, engaging in resource-intensive bridge-spanning activities, and promoting cross-sectoral relationships for effective evidence-based policymaking. Recognizing and addressing these challenges helps create a more robust and resilient evidence ecosystem.

10. *Community and collaboration*: The value of building durable relationships, formalizing organizational structures, and integrating domestic evidence ecosystems into the global ecosystem was underscored throughout the event. By fostering a sense of community and emphasizing the need for cross-sectoral engagement, participants aim to advance the science of scientific impact and promote the use of evidence in decision-making.

Future Directions and Opportunities

This area of work is an important priority of the Biden-Harris Administration, as is demonstrated by the inclusion of an entire chapter in the President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2024. Titled, "Building and Using Evidence to Improve Government Effectiveness," the chapter provides a comprehensive examination of the efforts taken to build and use evidence to improve the Federal Government. It highlights critical investments in the FY 24 President's Budget and discusses a range of activities being done by the Federal evaluation community. See also this summary document.

The final Evidence Forum highlights several opportunities to seize the momentum generated by the Year of Evidence for Action.

- Deepening and expanding cross-organizational and cross-sectoral networks through future convenings of the evidence community.
- Developing a central communication hub for sharing relevant activities and events to keep community members apprised of current events.
- Promoting the "matchmaking" of relevant policy questions with subject matter experts who could contribute to answering those questions.
- Promoting relationship building and specific goal co-creation through smaller, sub-community brainstorming sessions between community members, such as philanthropy and higher education, for example.

About the Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative (EIC)

The EIC is a research center and core resource for the science of scientific impact — aiming to improve the relevance, value and use of research evidence to increase societal well-being. The EIC leverages expertise in administrative data, program design and evaluation, and strategies to support the use of scientific evidence to optimize public and private investments. The EIC is a unit of Penn State University's Social Science Research Institute administratively housed by the College of Health and Human Development.