THE EVIDENCE FORUMS

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Forum on the Role of Higher Education in Solving Social Problems

Stanford Impact Labs-White House event focused on how universities can build a culture of solutions-oriented public service

By Jeremy Weinstein and Sarah Jane Staats, Stanford Impact Labs

Event Background and Synopsis

The U.S. government is focused on increasing equity of opportunity, resources, and outcomes for everyone in America. This cannot be done without cutting-edge science and research from universities and colleges. This is the challenge the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy's Alondra Nelson and a group of university, government, and nonprofit leaders set out to tackle in a December 2022 Evidence Forum co-hosted by the White House and Stanford Impact Labs.

The event was part of the White House Year of Evidence for Action's series of Evidence Forums the White House Office of Science and Technology and Office of Management and Budget co-hosted with nonprofit and academic organizations to "mobilize research-based evidence that can make life healthier, safer, more equitable, and more prosperous for the American public."
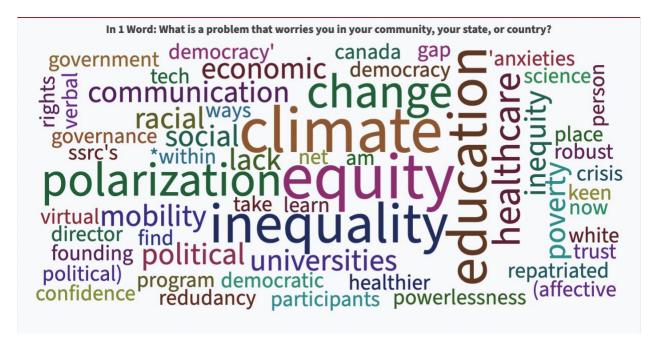
At a time when democratic institutions are struggling to address the most consequential issues in our country, more people than ever are questioning whether universities are having a positive effect on society, said Stanford Impact Labs' founder and faculty director Jeremy Weinstein. This is what's at stake, he said, and why new university-wide research models for the social sciences that prioritize, fund, and support partnership with the public and social sector at the outset (like those at Stanford, the University of Michigan, and the University of Chicago) are needed "to marry science and practice to understand the problems around us and solve them."

What will it take to make progress? Investment in highly motivated researchers and professional staff, support for new partnerships with government and community-based organizations, and champions at all levels of higher education to create a culture of service to the communities in which they live and work.

Key Insights

The panel's conversation focused on a set of familiar challenges, such as: how to align faculty incentives with social service; the need to dedicate sufficient resources; the importance of working across siloed academic departments; and the lack of experience among researchers working with government and community-based organizations.

The discussion highlighted that the best examples of universities driving innovation are in life science and engineering (for example, COVID vaccines and new AI possibilities) where innovation happens because of serious, long-term investment and years of the university, government, and private sector learning to work together to make progress. There is appetite and demand, the audience indicated in an online poll, to put best-in-class research to work with government and community partners to tackle poverty, polarization, climate change, racial inequality, and disparities in healthcare and education.

Vox Future Perfect Editor Bryan Walsh, who moderated the conversation, pressed speakers to identify practical steps universities, government, and funders can take to "actually make a difference in these enormous problems that we face." Answers focused on ways universities and colleagues can attract and invest in the right people; support new partnerships and scale solutions; and build a culture of public impact.

1. **Facilitate people having 'a foot in both camps'.** Each speaker had worked in more than one sector—in academia, in government, as funders, and in nonprofit community and advocacy organizations. Having experience across these sectors, they said, helped them see gaps and opportunities to bridge gaps between science and practice.

   Colleges and universities can:
   - **Make it easier to find the right people**. Arthur Lupia, executive director of the University of Michigan's Bold Challenges initiative and a former program director at the National Science Foundation indicated this could include using university resources – such as search tools and dashboards -- to highlight and include faculty members' non-

academic experiences and issue-specific efforts so people outside the university can find researchers and staff with the right skills and experience.

- **Give faculty time off from teaching, extend the tenure clock, or relieve them from some academic service responsibilities.** Social Science Research Council (SSRC) President [Anna Harvey](#) said that permitting more time for faculty to build trusted relationships with policymakers could lead to faculty doing "societally relevant work."
- **Design and fund more professional details, fellowships, and exchange programs** between universities, government agencies, and community organizations. These could be [scholars-in-service opportunities](#), [Presidential Innovation Fellowships](#), or assignments supported by the [intergovernmental personnel act](#) (IPAs). Christina Ciocca Eller, for example, helped to build the White House Year of Evidence for Action while [on leave from Harvard's sociology department](#), working as the Assistant Director for Evidence and Policy at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.
- **Prioritize a set of social problems the university or college will focus on and measure faculty contributions and progress.** Arthur Lupia said one could imagine university leaders agreeing "to take on problems a, b, and c" and then evaluating faculty (and university) contributions to solving those challenges.

2. **Provide professional support—and funding—to build partnerships and scale solutions.** Building partnerships between university and non-university partners takes time, professional skills, and resources. Anna Harvey pointed to Michael Kremer's [research](#) about the impact of USAID's Development Innovation Ventures saying investing in partnership isn't just a good thing to do, it's directly related to scaling insights and promising interventions.

   Steps that would help catalyze the process across campuses:
   - **Expanded infrastructure for smaller colleges and universities.** [Shelly Ver Ploeg,](#) who leads the U.S. Department of Agriculture's [Research and Innovation Development Grants Program (RIDGE)](#) said their grants are open to all academics and support younger and minority scholars. She noted, however, that smaller higher education institutions often lack the infrastructure or staff to help faculty apply for, and receive, government funding. That needs to change in order for researchers with the best insights and experience to contribute to social problem solving, regardless of the size and resources of their institution.
   - **Provide resources for project management, collaboration (including in-person sessions), communications channels and training, and dedicated staff who can respond to specific needs and priorities of government or other partners.** These resources are necessary for specific problem-focused work, but also for building long-term relationships that create new opportunities for rapid response and impact. [Lisa Morrison Butler](#), Executive Vice President and Chief Impact Officer at Results for America and former Commissioner of Chicago's Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), applauded the University of Chicago for supporting the head of the [Inclusive Economy Lab (part of Urban Labs)](#) to sit on a continuum of care board focused

on homelessness. Developing a relationship over many meetings allowed them to respond quickly and collaboratively —with government and university resources—to the immediate impacts of COVID on homelessness in Chicago.

- **Plan for turnover.** Lisa Morrison Butler also pointed to the need for university initiatives serving government clients to anticipate that academic and policy timelines are frequently misaligned. Because government projects will often outlast research fellowships, a lab or project working in service of a government client can optimize outcomes for all by planning on the slower pace within government structures in tandem with the inevitable turnover that happens as research fellowships end and begin. By taking this into account (as Lisa Morrison Butler witnessed first-hand Harvard Kennedy School's [Government Performance Lab](#) do for Chicago's DFSS), universities can "show up for the government partners you hope to serve."

- **Capture and share stories along the way about the partnership, problem, challenges, and progress.** These efforts, while often overlooked at the outset, are vital for building momentum and interest. Three great examples: the "[innovator interview](#)" from Harvard Kennedy School's Government Performance Lab with Lisa Morrison Butler; Results for America's [Moneyball for Government](#) initiative; and the November op-ed from Results for America's [Michele Jolin](#) and Lisa Morrison Butler saying "[boring" won the 2022 midterm elections](#).

3. **Create a public service mindset.** Catalyzing a generative public service mindset at universities and colleges includes more than just translating research when it's done. It means thinking and acting in collaboration with the government to serve communities most affected by persistent social problems.

- It's about **working with policymakers from the very beginning**, said SSRC's Anna Harvey. You must start with the questions that are most pressing for policymakers and what they need.

- You need **dedicated staff to point people to respond to the needs and timelines of government partners,** said Lisa Morrison Butler.

- And solutions-oriented initiatives anchored at universities have to be about "the people on the other side of every action we take," said Arthur Lupia. We must act with **integrity and accountability** as we work with communities to tackle these challenges.

Future Directions and Opportunities

The event closed with a sense of hope that universities can take practical steps that will, as Stanford Impact Labs' Jeremy Weinstein noted, "actually make a difference in the enormous social problems that we face." He called the moment an "inflection point" for the social sciences.

[Alondra Nelson](#) said "the stars are beginning to align" in favor of impact-oriented collaboration between government *and* academic institutions. "President Biden cares deeply about prioritizing science, data, and research evidence to inform policy and practice," she noted. "Advancing equity sits at the core of this priority" – and the ecosystem for effectively realizing this vision is actively evolving. Still needed,

said Christina Ciocca Eller, is a "broad tent approach" across universities and government and with more community partners and private philanthropy.

You can watch the full recording of the event here.