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Pathways to Advancing Aging Policy-Relevant Research in Academic Settings

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Abstract

Policy-level changes have a significant influence on the health and well-being of aging populations. Yet there is often a gap between scientific knowledge and policy action. Although previous research has identified barriers and facilitators to effective knowledge translation, little attention has been given to the role of academic institutions in knowledge generation. This exploratory focus group study examines barriers and pathways to developing and maintaining an aging policy-relevant research agenda in academic settings, and additional challenges associated with minority group membership in this pursuit. Participants were personally committed to conducting policy-relevant research despite institutional barriers such as fewer funding opportunities and less value attributed to their research, particularly in the context of tenure and promotion. Although many viewed their research as an opportunity to make a difference, especially for underserved older adult populations, a number of minority group participants expressed that their policy research interests were marginalized. Participants offer individual and institutional-level strategies for addressing barriers, including collaborating with community members and colleagues and engaging mentors within and outside of their academic institutions. Reframing the valuation of policy research through the diversification of funding and publishing opportunities can better support scholars engaged in aging policy-relevant research.

Keywords

aging policy; higher education; research in aging; aging and diversity; career advancement; faculty evaluations; mentoring; focus groups

INTRODUCTION

The process of affecting public policy typically requires more than the production of rigorous and widely accepted academic research. Numerous conceptual models have been developed to explain the gaps between the translation of knowledge produced by academic researchers and the decisions made by policy makers (Bowen & Zwi, 2005; Lavis, Robertson, Woodside, McLeod, Abelson, & the Knowledge Transfer Study Group, 2003; Mitchell, Fisher, Hastings, Silverman, & Wallen, 2010; Tabak, Khoong, Chambers, & Brownson, 2012). Although an evidence base and process for knowledge translation is emerging, it is not yet sufficient (Feldman, Nadash, & Gursen, 2001; Mitton, Adair, McKenzie, Patten, & Perry, 2007; Shea, 2011).

Several authors outlining knowledge transfer exchange models, or simply focusing on improving communication between researchers and policy makers, identify that one reason for the gap is the lack of timely, relevant, and easily accessible data that can be used for decision making at the state or federal level (Green, Glasgow, Atkins, & Stange, 2009; Pollack, Samuels, Frattaroli, & Gielen, 2010; Sorian & Baugh, 2002). The concept of a “knowledge broker” (Gagnon, 2011; Shea, 2011) or a “connector” (Vingilis et al., 2003) emerged over a decade ago to help close the gaps between researchers and policy makers. These intermediaries assist users of research to identify their needs, and producers of research to package their findings for maximum impact.

To date, little attention has been given to the role of academic institutions in the production and translation of evidence to inform policies for a population that is aging and ethnically diverse. This concern is especially relevant to schools or departments engaged in geriatric or gerontology education and research, whose faculty are responsible for training the next generation of health professionals, scholars, and others to advance gerontology in all aspects of practice and policy. Focusing on knowledge generated by academic institutions is important because they are typically viewed as an objective and credible source of data by policy makers (Mirvis, 2009). Yet the culture of academic institutions may contribute to the gap between demand and production of policy (or “policy-relevant”) research,¹ if research activities that yield valuable results to better understand and address the needs of an older adult population are overlooked, not supported, or actively discouraged through tenure and promotion practices.

Tenure and promotion at research-intensive colleges and universities are based on three core activities: research, teaching, and service. Of the three, research is typically weighted most heavily when assessing the academic viability of junior faculty, that is, assistant and associate professors (Balogun, Sloan, & Germain, 2007; Whicker, Kromenfeld, & Strickland, 1993). Historically and at most research-intensive institutions today, certain types of research are more highly valued in obtaining tenure and promotion (Boardman & Ponomariov, 2007). Studies examining the valuation of different types of research within the academic promotion and tenure system suggest that nontraditional research methods that extend research activities into public realms such as communities are often not well

¹The term *policy research* as used throughout the manuscript is intended to be inclusive of the concept “policy-relevant” research.

supported or rewarded (Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005). For example, community-based participatory research (CBPR)—or research that builds community-academic partnerships to engage community members throughout the research process—is more time-consuming, and study findings are more difficult to publish in high-impact journals than traditional research (Kennedy, Vogel, Goldberg-Freeman, Kass, & Farfel, 2009).

Traditional academic values and practices may inadvertently discourage research that contributes directly to policy or program changes, often the research with the greatest real-world impact for individuals and communities. Furthermore, the impact of applied policy research is not adequately measured by the criteria employed for conventional academic research, which tends to attribute the highest value to the number of peer-reviewed articles published in high-impact journals (Hovland, 2007). Except where policy research embodies the main thrust of a faculty's discipline, such as in health administration, a research agenda that is undertaken to inform public policy may be viewed as tangential by those who make tenure and promotion decisions (Green, 2008).

There is recent and growing interest in “engaged universities” that bridge the gap between academic institutions and the communities in which they are situated by promoting activities that use the knowledge generated by academics to identify and address social problems and advance positive change (Checkoway, 2013; Wilkinson, 2014). This form of academic and civic engagement is viewed as beneficial for scholars, students, and communities alike, and proponents are recommending that traditional tenure and promotion practices be reconsidered and revised to recognize and reward these engagement activities (Checkoway, 2013; O'Meara, 2010).

Pursuing a research agenda that is viewed as nontraditional or that has political implications may be especially risky for early-career faculty and may be further complicated for faculty of color (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Fenelon, 2003; Stanley, 2006). Institutional barriers contribute to documented minority group disparities in attaining promotions and achieving tenure (Dooris & Guidos, 2006; Fang, Moy, Colburn, & Hurley, 2000; Nunez-Smith et al., 2012). Minority faculty often do not feel well supported by the universities or departments that have recruited them. In the absence of adequate efforts to provide mentorship or encourage retention, minority faculty and women are more likely to perceive that the tenure process is unfair and to be more discouraged and less satisfied than their White male colleagues (Jackson, 2004; Price et al., 2005). Attention to the experiences of faculty of color is important in a nation that is becoming increasingly diverse and yet has a dearth of minority group faculty representation in research-intensive academic institutions. The cumulative effects of a lack of minority faculty representation, and a shortage of research on minority aging policy, raise concerns in the face of a rapidly diversifying and aging population.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this exploratory study were (1) to identify barriers academics face in pursuing a policy research agenda while seeking tenure and promotion, (2) to document pathways to advancing a policy research agenda, including participant recommendations to

overcoming barriers, and (3) to explore the additional challenges associated with minority group membership. We focus on the contributory role of academic institutions and practices that foster or discourage policy research. We define *policy research* as studies intended to inform the development, implementation, and/or analysis of public policy but exclude advocacy (i.e., the act of persuading individuals to support or oppose a specific policy).

DESIGN AND METHOD

Sample

This research was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of California, Los Angeles, and informed consent was obtained from all study participants. Prospective participants were purposefully recruited using e-mail lists comprised of 720 members of three professional organizations that have defined interests in aging and health policy and/or minority aging research: (1) The National Institute on Aging, Resource Centers on Minority Aging Research (RCMAR) lists of Gerontological Society of America (GSA) conference attendees who registered for the RCMAR preconference workshops at the annual GSA meeting of 2008, 2009, 2010 or 2011, or RCMAR's 2013 Annual Investigator Meeting; (2) The GSA Task Force on Minority Issues in Gerontology; and (3) The Health and Aging Policy Fellows Program (HAPF) participants from 2008 to 2012. To be considered for inclusion, study participants had to have an academic appointment, tenure-track or tenured, at a college or university in the United States, and an interest or engagement in aging policy research. Because the e-mail lists did not provide information about the member's current position, tenure status, and institutional affiliation, it is likely that some invitees did not respond because they were ineligible. Without knowledge of how many of the 720 email list members fit our criteria for inclusion, we are unable to calculate an accurate response rate. Respondents who were eligible were invited to participate in a one-time focus group discussion on the topic of conducting policy research in academic settings.

A total of 24 eligible respondents participated in this focus group study (Table 1). With the exception of one, all participants held appointments at research-intensive universities and were currently engaged in policy-relevant research. The majority of participants were female ($n = 22$) and two thirds ($n = 16$) were members of minority groups. Two thirds ($n = 16$) of participants were not tenured; among those with tenure ($n = 8$), five were senior and three were midcareer faculty members. A range of disciplines was represented with the highest frequencies found in social work, nursing, and medicine. Participants were from across the United States with the East Coast, West Coast, Midwest, and South, and urban and rural areas represented.

Data Collection and Analysis

Six focus groups were conducted by telephone or in-person with an average of four participants per group. Standards for focus group size vary, with recommendations ranging from four to 12 participants (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1997). We planned to conduct five focus groups; however, because two groups fell below the desired attendance rate, we added

a sixth focus group to ensure that we reached a reasonable point of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 1983; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Focus groups were, on average, one hour in duration. We developed and administered a focus group interview guide that included questions about participants' engagement in policy research, and about barriers and facilitators to conducting policy research. Primary conceptual domains remained constant across focus groups (Table 2).

Focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed. Each transcript was independently reviewed and coded by at least two members of our research team. The first set of coded transcripts was reviewed by the research team, and an emerging list of codes was refined and approved through a process of group discussion and agreement. The independent coders then conducted a second review of the transcripts using the revised code list. This iterative process was repeated with all subsequent focus group data. We used a constructivist grounded theory approach, employing an analytical process of constant comparison to identify recurring patterns, trends, and emerging themes within and across focus groups (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A constructivist approach recognizes the interactive nature of data collection and analysis and acknowledges its effect on knowledge generation (Charmaz, 2006). Recurring themes identified across independently conducted focus groups were reviewed by the research team until it was agreed that a point of theoretical saturation had been reached, and data collection was halted after the sixth focus group. Illustrative quotes representing the diverse range of the most salient themes are presented below.

RESULTS

Barriers to Advancing Aging Policy Research

Focus group participants discussed barriers to conducting policy research and, for some, the additional challenges of minority group membership, or having a policy research agenda focused on disparities experienced by minority and underserved populations. The most consistent challenges raised in the focus groups include the length of time it takes to conduct policy research; lower value placed on policy research, compared to other types of research such as basic science, especially in the context of tenure and promotion; and limited funding and institutional resources.

Extra Time Is Required

Participants explained that to conduct policy research extra time is often required when compared with more traditional modes of research; this was especially the case for those who involved themselves in the policy process. At the front end of the research project, this extra effort included developing relationships with stakeholders such as policy makers and community members to identify relevant policy issues related to the academic's line of research that matched community needs and ideally offered a "window of opportunity" for policy action,

I will have made those relationships so that we can start studying those health policies as they relate to aging-related disparities among African American and

Latino elders. But I do find that it takes a lot of my time. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

At the back end of the policy research process, academics need additional time to translate the original research into an accessible format for community stakeholders, policy makers, and other decision makers who can act on the findings.

Reminds me a little bit of doing CBPR [Community-Based Participatory Research]. We spend a lot of time and energy and effort ... but then the output of it is not enough to meet tenure. So it makes me wonder if we need to think about the tenure standards we have, and whether for policy research, rather than a 6–7 year window, do we need a longer window.... So it makes me question about the expectations for junior faculty doing policy research in the amount of time people get for doing it. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Policy Research Is Often Devalued

Participants shared perceptions that policy research is less valued in their institutions when compared with other research agendas. Others agreed that engagement in policy research is often greeted with skepticism and may even be actively discouraged in academia, especially if it is perceived as being too close to advocacy. Some alluded to a commonly held view that policy research is not as rigorous, is not “real science,”

There are people at my university who do feel—as someone else just said—that it is not as valid. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

One participant pointed out an exception to the devaluation of policy research by academic institutions, noting that receptiveness depends on the discipline. In health services research, for example, it was suggested that policy projects are the only ones considered worth doing, and that making the policy case is an essential component of grant proposals. Another participant at an urban university that prioritized community engagement felt that policy research aligned with the institutional mission:

We have a Dean and I think that position of the Dean has been very important in terms of providing support, and just setting the stage and acknowledging or legitimizing the value of this work. I don't know if we get any more money to do it but at least it's viewed as an essential part of the school's mission when it comes to working with vulnerable populations. (Tenured senior career academic)

A number of minority group participants expressed that their specific topic of research was not valued, or was marginalized, by their institutions or by their colleagues:

In general the department thinks that policy research, at least in the area that I'm interested in—health promotion among Black Americans—is not important. And so probably, I'm sure that has a lot to do with my discouragement and with being less enthusiastic than I was when I first came here. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

I think that some places may tend to see the minority faculty as those who tend to do that kind of research and, of course, they don't give you the support you need ...

so you struggle on your own. Because the research is really for you, for “you people” to do it in your own group. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Policy Research not Seen as a Productive Pathway to Tenure

Focus group participants spoke about a lack of support for conducting policy research, especially for those not yet tenured. Some expressed that this deficit was largely at an institutional level:

And I think it's exactly what you [another participant] said, it's not *a person* not supporting it. I think it's really *a culture* that doesn't support or reward, I guess, this kind of work in a way that is valued by the university ... that this kind of work doesn't constitute an activity that will lead to tenure. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Beyond not being supported, some spoke of being actively discouraged by the academic leaders and mentors in their respective institutions:

The very first grant proposal that I had was for a policy project. And I remember coming from my desk one day and I had a note from one of our deans, to really reconsider and that, you know, we really need to talk about this. This is going to take you on a path away from research and science. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

A commonly held sentiment among focus group participants was that policy research is not rewarded in the tenure and promotion process:

There's language ... in our literature that explains the promotion process: that you need to be able to establish a national reputation.... I suspect that some of the things that I've done that have been more related to policy endeavors might help tick that box. But if the other boxes about grants and papers are not sufficiently ticked, nobody's going to care if there's a checkmark in my national reputation box. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Early- and midcareer participants shared stories of being discouraged after reading their departmental reviews. One midcareer participant, finding only a couple of sentences dedicated to her policy work, even though it appeared to support the school's mission, realized, “it is obviously not going to give me any extra feathers in my cap to be engaging in this policy work.”

Another frequently raised concern was the lack of merit given many policy research products:.

You still need your refereed journal articles; that is still something you have to do. And the other stuff may just seem like gravy and maybe that's not the right way to look at it but at least that's where our university is right now. You can have all your technical reports and so forth, but if don't have the refereed articles, that's not going to get you tenure. (Tenured senior career academic)

Limited Funding and Institutional Resources

Some participants observed that if policy research received outside funding, it was viewed as more acceptable for tenure and promotion. However, policy research was seen as particularly difficult to fund, especially from federal sources. Many participants observed that federal funding is perceived to be the gold standard in their institutions and more likely to be rewarded in the tenure and promotion process,

Getting external funding is critical and that seems to be difficult with policy research. (Tenured senior career academic)

I know some of my colleagues who are heavily involved with doing health policy research and really don't get NIH funding. They have done well: they have foundation funding, they have other kinds of funding. But from a university viewpoint, NIH funding is valued, you might say, at a higher level usually than other types of funding. (Tenured senior career academic)

Some participants also noted that their institutions lacked the infrastructure to support the broader dissemination of policy products.

... my institution is supportive of that kind of work, but they don't have the capacity right now to do anything with the report. Like, if I wanted to make a report, there is no machinery or mechanism to broadcast or share work with the public or policymakers. (Tenured senior career academic)

Facilitators to Advancing Aging Policy Research

Focus group participants were asked about resources and strategies to better support and facilitate the capacity of researchers in academic institutions to implement a policy research agenda and increase the production of aging policy research. They discussed individual- and institutional-level facilitators, including personal commitment and rewards, collaborations with community members and colleagues, support from mentors, and revaluing policy research and products in academic institutions.

Personal Commitment and Rewards

Engagement in the policy process was often facilitated by the researcher's personal commitment and dedication to the issue at hand, including the applied nature of the research, the excitement generated from being part of the policy process, and the anticipation that the policy work would actually make a difference in people's lives:

You cannot do policy work alone, you have to do it with people. So I find myself feeling more connected with like-minded people, working toward some common goal. So that's really exciting, even if we're not at the end point where we've got "the policy" passed. (Tenured mid-career academic)

A strong desire to use research to affect change was expressed by many:

I think that it is a way to go about changing the way things are ... we take a lot of pride, making policy recommendations from data ... to advance the way things are examined. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Participants also described some of the more tangible and external rewards they associated with doing policy research:

Policy research can give you and your work increased recognition and visibility in the University, a lot of press, a platform to be involved in the legislative process, [to be] pulled into the policy arena. (Tenured senior career academic)

Collaboration With Community Members and Colleagues

The community-based nature of policy research was often the impetus for engagement with the policy process:

Especially when policy issues come from the community instead of from a researcher I think they can potentially have longer effects. And you really feel that you are working with community, not alone, to make sure that we're on the right track to creating good policy. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

One participant offered a specific example of policy change stemming from research conducted in partnership with a long-term care provider in the community:

We really came together by working together and taking what we found in the research and using that as evidence to change policy in the nursing home to change quality of life for the nursing home and the residents. And I feel like that really opened up a huge door in long-term care because that spread ... to the rest of the state. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Some minority group participants felt that being a member of the community being studied provided entrée and facilitated the research process. Others expressed that their racial or ethnic identity gave them enhanced sensitivity to the issues at hand and helped to advance their analysis:

I think that for a particular issue, if the scholar is from the group affected it gives them a bit more status and little more clout when talking about it. So when someone ... talks about access to care problems in rural areas and trouble in rural health for older adults from underrepresented minority groups—because he's the son of farmworkers and grew up there—he has better credibility than if I had done the same research project and was talking from the same science. So I think there's this kind of group representation that if the issue is an issue for that group, it can play in the favor maybe of the minority scholar. But in general I think what trumps all that [minority group membership] are really good study results, terrific communication skills, compassion for the problem and the right social network. (Tenured senior career academic)

The advantages (and necessity) of being collaborative with colleagues in one's policy research work was cited by many as a way to gain support and advance one's research agenda:

I think one of the reasons that they've (i.e., colleagues successfully engaged in policy research) been so successful is because they really have developed a team. And they've worked so closely together. But I think that team, having the network

of people interested in the same things you are, is a support system and also because it really does take collaborative relationships to sometimes have a successful career in policy but in any kind of research. (Tenured senior career academic)

The recognized value of collaborative team work extended beyond one's own institution and community, as several participants spoke of the virtues of being part of national and/or cross-institutional networks that support and promote scholars engaged in doing policy research:

I really benefitted from the mentorship at the RCMAR group.... I think you really have to stick with it ... It might be hard to find the people but once you align yourself with the right group of people, it might just take you all through your career and I can see myself working with those people until whenever. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Support From Mentors

Participants often brought up the importance of the support they receive from mentors, inside and outside of their institutions. The value of engaging a mentor with policy experience was discussed.

I have a mentor that has been a mentor for me since I was a master's student ... and I think she really took a chance, after that incident (the mentee was discouraged from doing a policy project), to go to her colleagues and say, "I'm mentoring her and I think this is good and she has my full support and I will be with her through this experience to ensure that she gets the proper training." So that has always been a really strong support system for me. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Perhaps a more realistic thing at my institution would be to create more of an across college mentorship program that focuses on conducting policy research. Right now we have something similar for tenure-track professors of color who want to get publications out, but maybe one that would be similar for conducting policy research. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

The specific roles and responsibilities of policy mentors were also discussed, and included both advice for moving a policy research agenda forward and some pitfalls to avoid:

I had some really good mentorship from somebody in my school who helped me articulate my research in a way that—to use C's word—kind of sold what I was doing, so I think that was really helpful. And articulated it in such a way that I could include it in my tenure preparation materials so that it does gain more credit, so to speak. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Having an outside mentor may be safer for some, as it circumvents risk-taking within one's home department or institution.

I actually have an informal mentor who I just happened to meet at a conference. So I often use this mentor once or twice a year, just to bounce ideas off of him ... he's not involved in anything I do, so he can kind of give me an outsider's point of view

or more objective point of view and I've always found that very helpful. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Revaluation (or the “Reframing”) of Policy Research and Products

Many participants had to “make the case” for doing policy research. They had to reframe their agenda and take extra steps to justify their work:

So I really had to have a conversation about where this (i.e., a proposed policy fellowship)] actually could take me in terms of building a national network with people doing similar work, who I can partner with in the future and really expand outside of my institution to grow, and look at issues from a different perspective and look at issues that cannot *just* be solved by science but that can really be solved by various levels of intervention. And policy to me is a kind of an intervention. So, it was fine.... And it was respected, my decision was respected. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

Showing this kind of research does have impact and that impact is something that we can be part of right away. And that is different perhaps from more traditional science work. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

There were also many suggestions to revalue the policy “product,” to make it count in tenure and promotion decisions:

I think just the fact that the publication is the gold standard ... peer reviewed publication. Recognizing that in the policy world there are other ways to write and publish with white papers or policy briefs, so just recognizing that those are legitimate venues for engaging in policy work that should be valued in some way. I know that we have our standards in academia but it would be nice if those other venues were recognized and given a certain weight. (Tenure-track early-career academic)

DISCUSSION

The call for evidence-based public policy is widespread, with policy makers, public agencies, and community stakeholders all interested in data to inform the policy process. Much of the research on bringing evidence to policy making assumes that timely, relevant, and easily accessible data exists, and that the most important gap is connecting academic researchers with policy makers. However, the results from this study suggest that the production of policy research may be stymied in the early stages of an academic career. We found that many early-career academics encounter institutional barriers that make it difficult to pursue research agendas that have a goal of informing public policy stakeholders and development.

The current study identified barriers and facilitators as part of pathways in academic settings to advancing aging policy research. Although the extant literature has considered structural and organizational barriers and facilitators to knowledge translation (Grimshaw, Eccles, Lavis, Hill, & Squires, 2012), to the best of our knowledge, no studies have gone further upstream to specifically consider the role of academic institutions in supporting or

discouraging the production of aging policy-relevant research. Additionally, our findings present potential solutions for overcoming some of the identified obstacles, based on study participants' experiences and recommendations.

We learned that these study participants encountered a number of barriers to advancing an aging policy research agenda. Similar to other researchers who have identified barriers to the generation and use of knowledge, we found that participants encountered challenges related to their expenditure of time (Grimshaw et al., 2012), the devaluation of policy-relevant research—particularly in the tenure and promotion process (Mirvis, 2009), and limited funding support (Vingilis et al., 2003).

Participants in this study were personally committed to conducting aging policy research despite institutional barriers and offered strategies to support a policy research agenda at research-intensive colleges and universities in the United States. Collaboration with community members and with colleagues was highlighted as an important strategy to facilitate and sustain engagement in the research process. Several other studies support the notion that the success of knowledge generation and use is often contingent upon collaborative relationships established early in the research process (Mirvis, 2009; Vingilis et al., 2003).

For some minority group participants, research conducted with members of their own community facilitated entrée while also enhancing their analysis and interpretation of the findings. Researchers who combine personal knowledge of the community under study with professional knowledge and academic training bring an important dual perspective to community-engaged research. The added value and contribution of this “insider–outsider” perspective has been previously documented (Collins, 1986; Harding, 2007; Minkler, 2005). These concepts are further advanced by critical race theory that asserts that shifting the locus of research to squarely represent the perspective of under-represented populations provides an opportunity to generate new and more relevant knowledge about inequities (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010).

Tenured and tenure-track participants in this study stressed the importance of mentors to help junior faculty navigate institutional practices given their research area and advise them in how to best position their work throughout the promotion process. Some mentoring models described in the literature engage multiple mentors, such as a career mentor to provide guidance on some of the academic advancement concerns raised by our focus group participants, a research mentor to advise on scientific methods and interpretation, and a community mentor to help the junior faculty member connect with their community of interest (Moreno-John et al., 2007; Rodriguez et al., 2013).

Mentors also may assist junior faculty with locating funding and resources for conducting policy research. Funding guidance may be especially important to minority group researchers who are challenged to secure such resources, especially in the form of federal funding. Ironically, though federal opportunities for health disparities research have increased (Kennedy, 2005), there are documented racial disparities in the success rates of researchers who obtain federal research grants. A review of NIH awards issued between

2000 and 2006 found an association between applicant race and ethnicity and the receipt of an RO1 award, indicating that the probability of receiving an RO1 award was 10.4 percentage points less for Black investigators, and 4.2 percentage points less for Asian investigators, when compared with their White peers (Ginther et al., 2011). There are effective mentoring programs that have increased the success rates of early-career underrepresented minority faculty who pursue federal grant funding (Campbell et al., 2013). However, many underrepresented minority faculty do not have access to the mentors or mentoring programs from which they could benefit (Beech et al., 2013).

Similar to the finding that most research-intensive colleges and universities do not attempt to identify and credit the impact of CBPR research (Kennedy et al., 2009), our respondents felt that their work aimed at informing public policy is not appropriately valued. As Green et al. (2009) note, an overemphasis on the traditional modality of the peer review process including review for promotion decisions may constrain the relevance and applicability of the type of data that are ultimately produced. The revaluation of policy research for the purpose of tenure and promotion may be beneficial at the point of entry, to provide justification and support for early-career academics to engage in policy projects, and then again at the end point of the research, to explicitly credit and reward scholars for the value of the “policy” products they create.

Policy-relevant data that are used, for example, to improve public program outreach to limited English speaking populations (Gans et al., 2012), or that motivate state legislation that requires agencies serving older adults to use a better measure of income security than provided by the federal poverty level (Padilla-Frausto & Wallace, 2012), are at best counted as service and not as contributing to new knowledge according to our respondents. Reports, policy briefs, and legislative memos that summarize findings using lay terminology, and that clearly and concisely present the policy implications are labeled “gray literature” and are not counted during the tenure and promotion process in many academic settings, regardless of the rigor of research and peer review that they receive (Nokes et al., 2013). Several researchers have found that such devaluation continues despite existing knowledge of the importance and process of translating academic products into summaries that are more likely to be used by policymakers than the original research findings or publications in scientific journals (Grimshaw et al., 2012; Sorian & Baugh, 2002).

Likewise, many journals and journal editors are concerned with the science that is reported and pay little or no attention to the translation of findings to practice or policy. Green et al. (2009) summarize a meeting of 13 journal editors with a common interest in emphasizing the external validity (or broader relevance) and utility of published research. They note that journals reporting on translation activities and outcomes might become more highly valued and practically relevant if they included practice and policy impact scores as part of their rating criteria. Pathways to increasing support for policy research and its output may require modifying the criteria used for publication in scientific journals and for promotion in academic settings, or perhaps starting new peer-reviewed outlets that can qualify as journal articles but that focus on publishing the types of policy-relevant output needed to translate research to policy.

Study Limitations

Focus group participants in this study were a self-selected convenience group, and therefore the experiences they discussed may not be exhaustive or the most common barriers and pathways to conducting aging policy research. However, our focus groups were comprised of tenure-track or tenured faculty from varied disciplines on aging in institutions around the United States who thus provided a range of experiences on barriers and facilitators and suggested both individual- and institutional-level strategies to assist junior faculty who want their research to be policy relevant. The findings from this exploratory study provide an important starting point for continued investigation of the role of research-intensive academic institutions in generating data to inform public policy. Specifically, our results can inform the development of a large sample survey to investigate the perspectives of others with a vested interest in this topic, including academic administrators and policy makers.

CONCLUSION

Although translating scientific evidence to practice has gained momentum in recent years (Rahman & Applebaum, 2010), similar efforts to translate evidence to policy lag behind (Grimshaw et al., 2012; Tabak et al., 2012). “Knowledge brokers” play a critical role in navigating the persistent divide between research and policy. They are well positioned to close the gaps between differences in language and time frames and find mutually beneficial goals while operating within existing constraints of academic and policy settings. Knowledge brokers build trusted relationships with researchers and policy makers and have the experience and/or training that leads to a deeper understanding of these two cultures. To be effective, knowledge brokers must be given policy-relevant information such as academic research to convey.

Findings from this exploratory study offer new perspectives about the role of academic institutions in supporting the production of aging policy research, especially by early-career tenure-track faculty. The current academic system appears at times to be poorly designed to encourage and foster policy-relevant research, in large part because of the devaluing of policy research and products, and the timelines that do not take into account the longer periods needed to develop community and policy-maker relationships. In the short term, expanding mentoring programs can help academics who are interested in policy research navigate the shoals of the academic career process. Examples include the Health and Aging Policy Fellows program that provides “knowledge broker” skills through specific training in the application of research findings to inform public policy and policymakers, and the RCMAR program that fosters research careers in minority aging with a strong emphasis on bridging academic and community resources. In the longer term, increasing funding for policy research would support the production of additional evidence for policy as well as demonstrate the value of that work to academic institutions.

The value that academic institutions place on external funding makes it important that there are resources for policy research (Green & Mercer, 2001). Also important, is the equity with which these funding sources are distributed. Government agencies that focus heavily on policy-relevant or applied research, such as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) have relatively small budgets. And all federal agencies have come under pressure

recently from Congress to ensure that federal funding is not directly used to influence legislation (National Institutes of Health, 2013). Private foundations, such as Robert Wood Johnson, may support policy-relevant research but understandably cannot close the funding gap entirely.

Regardless of funding, research-intensive academic institutions have a vital role to play in supporting aging policy research that informs the effective, efficient, and equitable allocation of public resources and will become increasingly important as the size and needs of an aging population escalate in the coming decades.

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TABLE 1**Participant Characteristics by Tenure Status**

Characteristics	Tenure-Track (<i>n</i> = 16)	Tenured (<i>n</i> = 8)	Total (<i>N</i> = 24)
School/departmental affiliation			
Social Work	4	4	8
Nursing	5	1	6
Medicine	2	2	4
Public Health	2	—	2
Other (i.e., Public Policy, Gerontology, Health Sciences, Human Development)	3	1	4
Gender			
Male	1	1	2
Female	15	7	22
Race/Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic White	2	6	8
African American	6	1	7
Latino/Hispanic	4	—	4
Asian American	2	—	2
Other (i.e., Biracial, Foreign-born Black, Foreign-born White)	2	1	3

TABLE 2

Focus Group Interview Guide Domains

Engagement in policy research and receptiveness of others	
Engagement or interest in policy research	
Reactions of others to your pursuit of policy research	
Facilitators or barriers to conducting policy research	
Institutional/school/departmental facilitators to conducting policy research	
Institutional/school/departmental barriers to conducting policy research	
Benefits or challenges associated with policy research	
Benefits/rewards associated with you/others conducting policy research	
Challenges/pitfalls associated with you/others conducting policy research	
Factors that make faculty successful in conducting policy research at your institution	
Effects of racial/minority group membership	
Role of racial/ethnic identity as a facilitator or barrier to advancing a policy research agenda	
Recommendations to incentivize policy research	
One suggested change that would encourage the conduct of policy research among tenure track faculty at your institution	