

Evidence-Based State Health Policymaking:

Researcher and Policymaker Perspectives

June 2016

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AcademyHealth

Introduction

In the current environment, states face growing responsibilities for health policy decision making, increasing complexity in the health care system, and heightened expectations for delivering improved quality of care at better value. States have made innumerable policy decisions related to implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and they also have developed Marketplaces, streamlined eligibility systems, and supported innovations in health care payment and delivery. As their responsibilities and influence have expanded, state policymakers have sought out information and analyses in support of essential policy decisions. Aided by substantial federal funding for ACA implementation, states also have been able to enhance in-house data and analytic capacity, and they have contracted with outside vendors for those analytic services, including consulting firms and academically-based researchers. Some states rely on policy intermediaries that serve a bridging and translating function between the research and policy communities.¹

In order to inform AcademyHealth's ongoing support of state researchers and policymakers, we sought to explore the general contours of the state policy landscape through surveys administered to researchers and policymakers. The goal of the project was to gather perceptions of evidence-based health policymaking in the states, to identify potential strategies for generating useful and relevant information that facilitate evidence-based decision making, and to determine how best to support moving that evidence into action.

A general conceptual framework of how knowledge is produced and used in policymaking guided the design of the survey. Our starting assumption was that research knowledge flows between defined groups of evidence users (policymakers) and evidence producers (researchers) and that the groups use the knowledge in various ways. Often the groups encounter barriers to the use of information in policymaking. The barriers may be on either the supply side or the demand side. On the supply side, the lack of relevant and timely research may impede policymaking. On the demand side, state health policy and program staff lack of training and skills in the use of data and research knowledge may hamper decision making.² At the same time, facilitators that expedite the use of evidence may include highly targeted research products and messaging and the engagement of effective third-party intermediaries in a bridging and translating function between evidence producers and evidence users.

We set out to enhance our understanding of the state health policymaking environment in order to gain insight into the strategies that could potentially “create cultural shifts that can facilitate the ongoing use of research knowledge in decision making” at the state level.³

Methods

In August 2014, researchers from AcademyHealth fielded two web-based surveys—one of state government officials and one of researchers working on state policy issues—for the purpose of assessing the role of research in guiding state health policy decision making. We identified potential survey respondents⁴ by drawing from mailing lists developed by AcademyHealth, a not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to improving health and the performance of the health system by supporting the production and use of evidence to inform policy and practice.

The survey sought to collect information about the quality of the evidence base, the level and quality of communication between researchers and policymakers, and strategies that offer the potential to close the gap between research and policy, thereby better aligning the needs and interests of researchers and policymakers. We asked researchers outside state government to describe their research and its relevance to state health policy. More specifically, we asked them about factors that facilitate evidence-informed policymaking in states and inquired about strategies that might help expedite better research and better dissemination of research findings and, ultimately, more evidence-informed policymaking. Similarly, we surveyed state officials for their views on the volume, quality, and timeliness of research and on the factors that might make research more useful for decision making.

Findings

- **Survey respondents.** Respondents to the survey totaled 79 state health policy researchers and 138 policymakers. Universities employed most of the researchers who responded to the survey (63 percent); research or consulting firms employed 16 percent of respondents. Among the policymakers, the majority (88 percent) was employed in the executive branch of state government. Only 6 percent were employed in the legislative branch. We sent surveys to state officials in both the executive and legislative branches, including senior executives as well as mid-level policy and research professionals. Most respondents (69 percent) were mid-level agency staff (program directors and program managers) or lower-level program staff (24 percent); a relatively small proportion (7 percent) comprised high-level state executives (e.g., secretary, deputy secretary, and Medicaid director). The policymaker respondents represented the District of Columbia and 45 states.
- **Producing and using research at different stages of policy development.** We asked researchers to assess the relevance of their research at five stages of the policy development process: (1) understanding the scope and extent of the problem;

(2) developing policy options; (3) implementing reforms; (4) day-to-day program management; and (5) policy and program evaluation.⁵ Some 80 percent of researchers reported that their research was extremely relevant at stage 1 (Figure 1). More than half reported that their research activities were highly relevant at the stage of program or policy evaluation (stage 5). A relatively small percentage reported that their research was highly relevant for purposes of day-to-day program management. Policymakers reported that they always or frequently use evidence to understand the scope of a problem (83 percent), identify policy options (82 percent), assist with policy implementation (80 percent), assist with day-to-day program management (60 percent), and evaluate policy and program performance (71 percent) (Figure 2). The findings suggest a possible gap between the demand for and supply of research evidence in the intermediate stages of policy implementation and program

management, that is, the stages at which policymakers say they use evidence. Researchers, however, are less likely to focus their efforts on those policy development stages.

- Communication channels.**⁶ To assess the communication channels used by researchers and state policymakers, we asked researchers about the strategies they use to communicate their research findings and guide policy development. We asked them to indicate whether they used each of eight communication strategies, including direct outreach to policymakers, traditional publication and media routes, and social media.⁷ Researchers most frequently reported that they pursue direct outreach to state policy decision makers and prefer to publish policy briefs. Only a handful of survey respondents reported that they rely on social media to disseminate research findings (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Researchers’ Assessments of the Relevance of Their Research to Five Stages of Policy Development

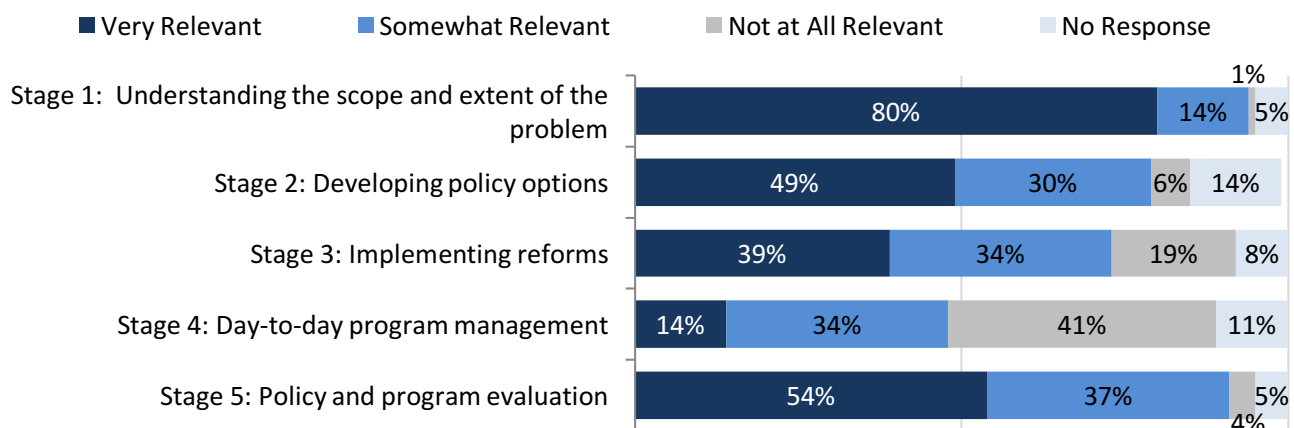


Figure 2. State Users’ Assessments of Their Use of Research Evidence at Five Stages of Policy Development

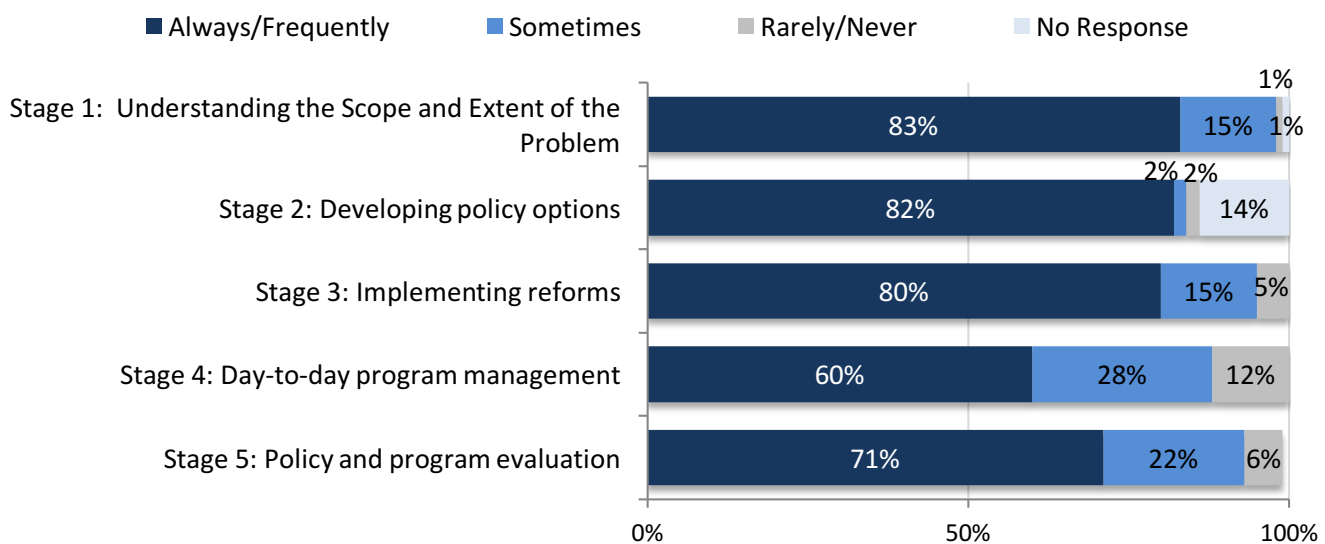
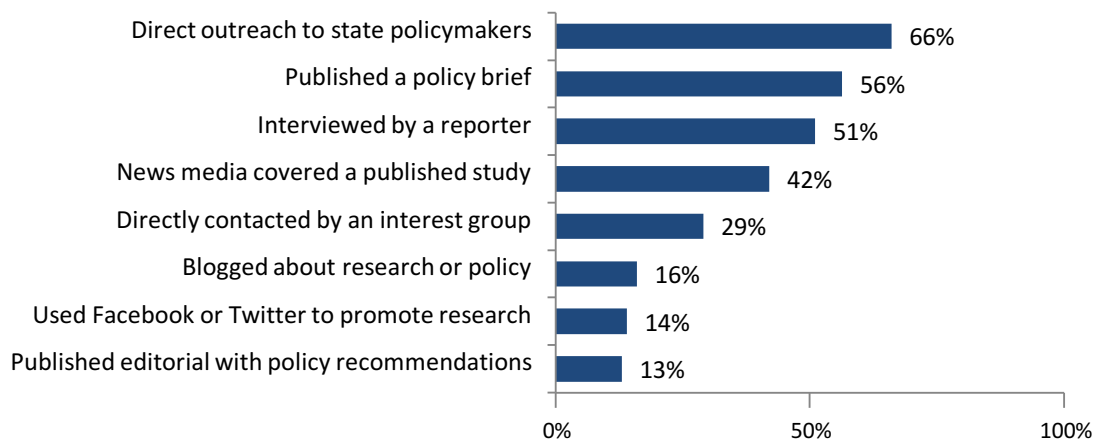
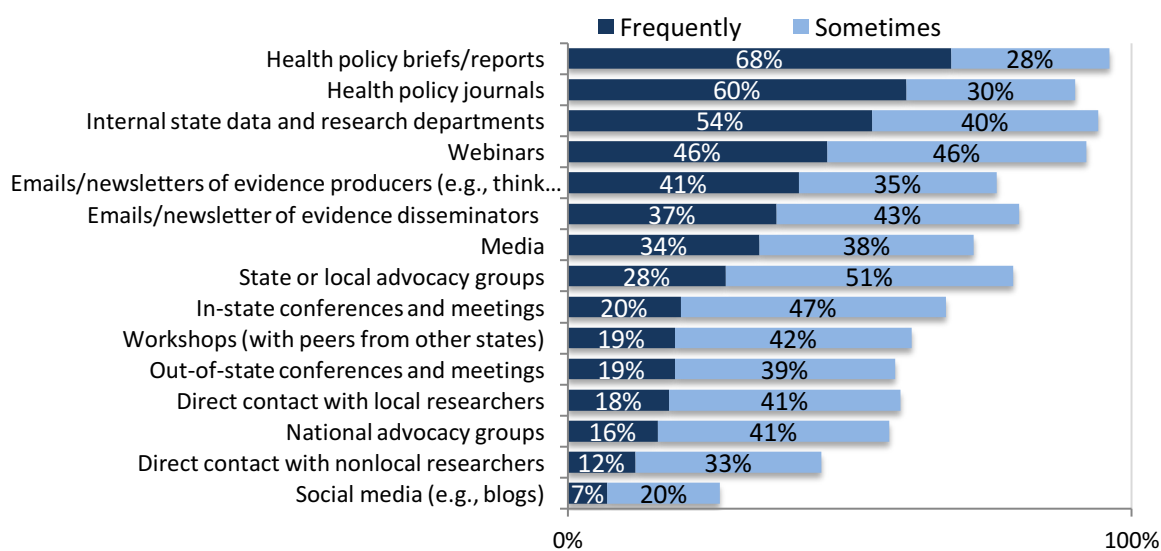


Figure 3. Methods Used by Researchers to Disseminate Findings to Policy Audiences**Figure 4. Sources of and Methods for Obtaining Policy-Relevant Research**

We also asked researchers about their consulting and contract research for state health agencies and whether they have testified before state legislatures. A large percentage (80 percent) reported that they regularly or occasionally consult for state government agencies through either contracted research or technical assistance activities. A much smaller percentage said that they regularly or occasionally testify before a state legislature (35 percent) (data not shown).

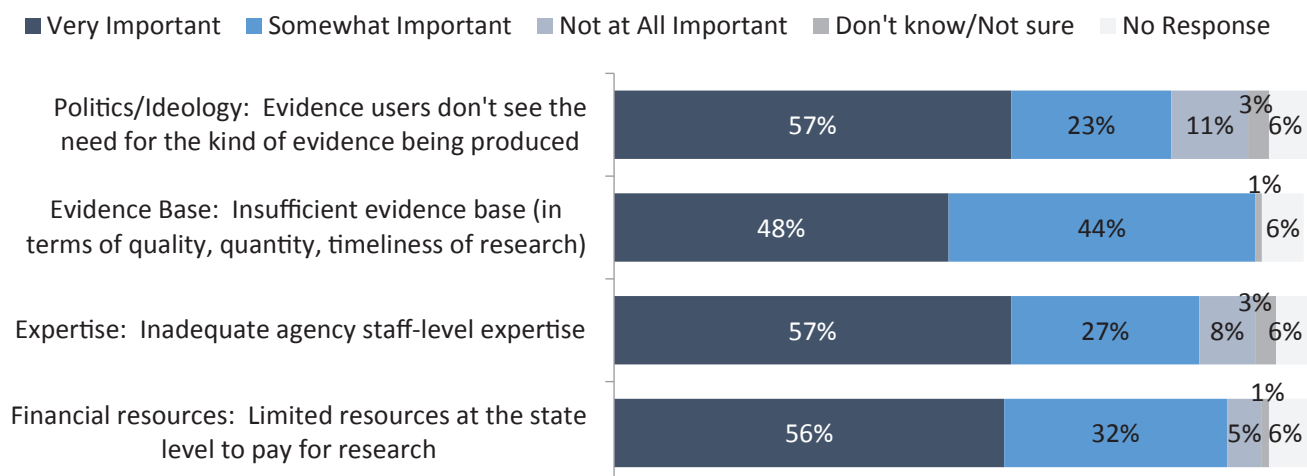
We asked state officials about their relationships with evidence producers and about the sources and methods they use for identifying relevant research. The majority of state officials responding to the survey reported that they had established relationships with researchers, including internal (state agency) policy and research departments (77 percent), university-based researchers in their state (63 percent), nonuniversity-based researchers in their state (56 percent), and researchers outside their state (68 percent).

To assess how evidence users acquire information, we asked respondents to describe the frequency with which they turned to various sources of or methods for receiving information, including

the media, health policy journals, health policy briefs and reports, webinars, out-of-state and in-state conferences, workshops with other state officials, state or local advocacy groups, national advocacy groups, direct contact with researchers, and social media, among others (Figure 4). The majority reported frequent use of traditional sources such as health policy briefs and reports (68 percent), health policy journals (60 percent), and internal data and research departments (54 percent). Just 7 percent of state officials reported that they frequently relied on social media to obtain policy-relevant research. Researchers and policymakers alike depend on traditional modes of dissemination, such as direct outreach as well as policy briefs and journals.

■ **Evidence-based policymaking. Barriers and facilitators.**

Next, we asked researchers about their perceptions of the policymaking process in their state of residence (or the state with which they are most familiar). We inquired about barriers that undermine evidence-based decision making and about factors that facilitate evidence-informed decision making.

Figure 5. Researchers' Perceptions of Barriers to Evidence-Informed Policymaking

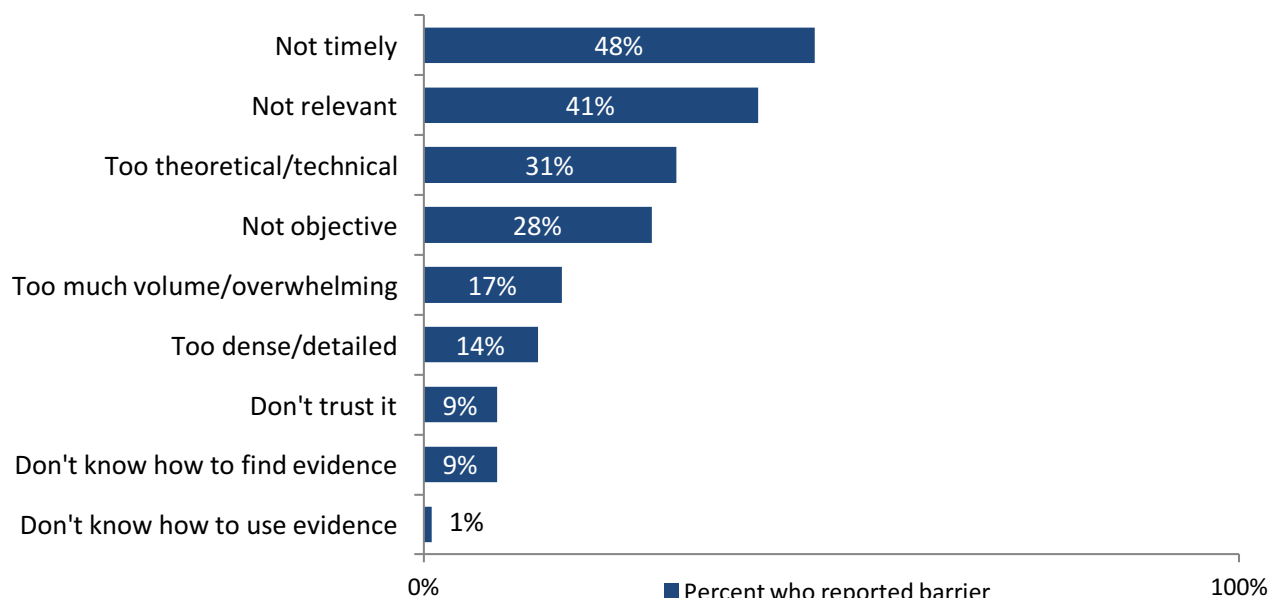
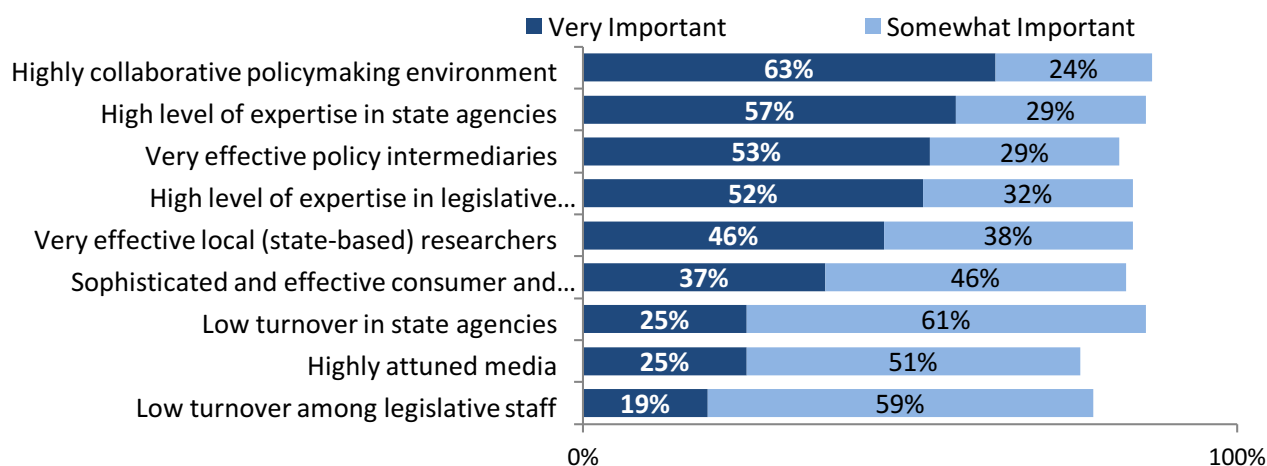
Barriers. We asked researchers for their assessments of the following barriers to evidence-informed decision making in their state: the state's capacity to fund program evaluations and other research; the expertise of state agency staff; the quality of the evidence base; and political barriers. We described the political barriers as follows: "Decision makers don't see the need for the kind of evidence being produced; it does not fit within the ideological framework for program development." Researchers rated all of the above factors as very or somewhat important and, in particular, acknowledged weaknesses in the evidence base for policy decision making, with 92 percent deeming such weaknesses a very important or somewhat important barrier (Figure 5).

We asked evidence producers to assess the willingness and capacity of decision makers in the executive branch and in the legislature to (1) understand and use research; (2) to produce research (in internal policy research offices, for example); and (3) to fund outside researchers at universities or consulting firms. With respect to using and understanding research, evidence producers gave the highest ratings to executive branch decision makers, with 72 percent rating their ability as high or medium. By comparison, researchers gave lower ratings to legislative branch policymakers, with only 55 of respondents rating their ability to use and understand research as high or medium.

We also asked evidence users to rate the importance of certain reasons that might help explain why research evidence is not used — reasons related to the perceived quality and availability of research findings. We identified factors that might account for the failure to use available evidence to inform policy development, and we asked state policy officials to assess the factors' importance. The most frequently cited factors were the lack of timeliness and relevance of research findings (Figure 6).

Facilitators. We also asked researchers and policymakers to assess the importance of potential facilitators of evidence-informed policymaking. In our survey of researchers, we asked about facilitators such as collaboration in the policymaking environment, expertise among state agency staff, expertise in the state legislature, and the presence of effective, third-party policy intermediaries. We also asked about consumer and provider associations, the role of the media, and the importance of staff turnover in executive branch agencies and legislative staff. A majority of researchers cited the following facilitators as very important: a collaborative policy environment, high levels of expertise in the executive and legislative branches, and effective policy intermediaries (Figure 7). Among evidence users, nearly three-quarters cited the expertise of state agency staff as a very important facilitator of evidence-informed policymaking. Evidence users also pointed to the importance of a collaborative policymaking environment and the role of policy intermediaries (Figure 8).

- Strategies.** Finally, we sought to collect evidence producers' and evidence users' perceptions of the usefulness of various strategies to facilitate evidence-based policymaking. We identified nine strategy options: (1) more state funding for internal research within state agencies; (2) more state funding for external research; (3) improvements to data access for external researchers; (4) a "research priorities" network that would bring together external researchers with state government policy and research staff to strategize and identify research priorities; (5) policy analysis repositories that afford evidence users easy access to evidence on current policy topics; (6) policy analysis training for state government researchers and decision makers; (7) media and translation training for researchers; (8) training related to drafting and presenting legislative testimony for researchers; and (9) an outreach network that would bring together researchers with state officials, consumer advocates, providers, and others to share new research findings and discuss their implications for state policy decisions.

Figure 6. Reasons State Agency Staff Reported Not Using Available Evidence**Figure 7. Researchers' Assessments of Factors within Their State That Facilitate Evidence-Informed Policy Decision Making**

Evidence producers reported that several of the above strategies could be very important for improving a state's policy development process. A substantial proportion of researchers said that it would be very important to improve state funding for research (63 percent) and data access (73 percent). A majority of the researchers responding to the survey (62 percent) also reported that it would be very important to convene a research priorities network (Figure 9).

We asked state policymakers to assess the usefulness of a similar set of strategies (though the survey question was worded slightly differently than in the survey sent to researchers). With regard to the strategies that facilitate evidence use, state agency staff

and policy decision makers rated traditional policy briefs and systematic reviews very highly, with 55 percent agreeing that these resources would be very important in improving evidence use and facilitating evidence-informed policymaking. Other strategies and resources that received high rankings included a one-stop online clearinghouse for policy-relevant research and reports on policies and performance of peer states (Figure 10).

Study implications

The survey findings point to strong demand among state policymakers for information and evidence in support of policy development while researchers report that most state policymakers are equipped to use research in policy development. At the same

Figure 7. Researchers' Assessments of Factors within Their State That Facilitate Evidence-Informed Policy Decision Making

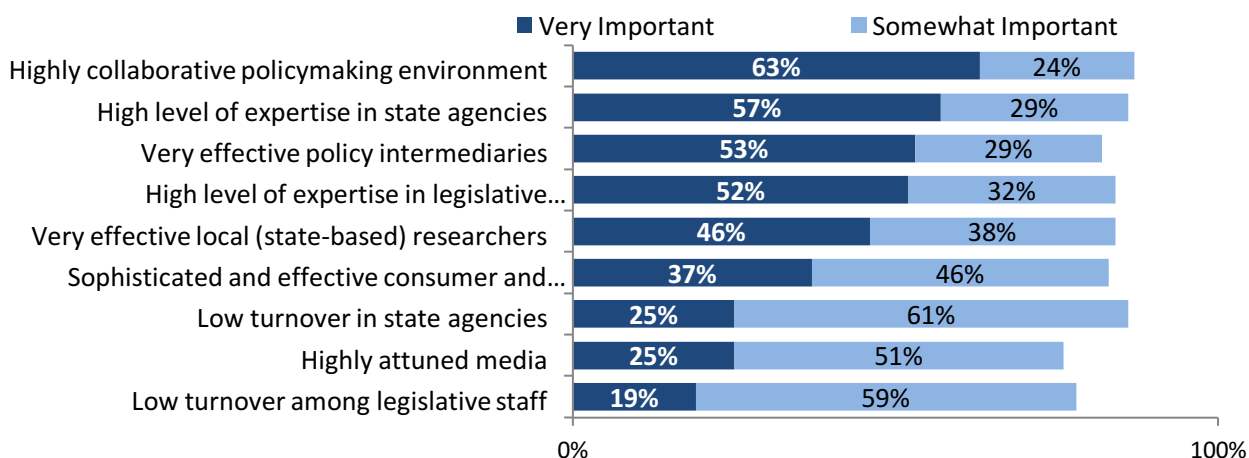
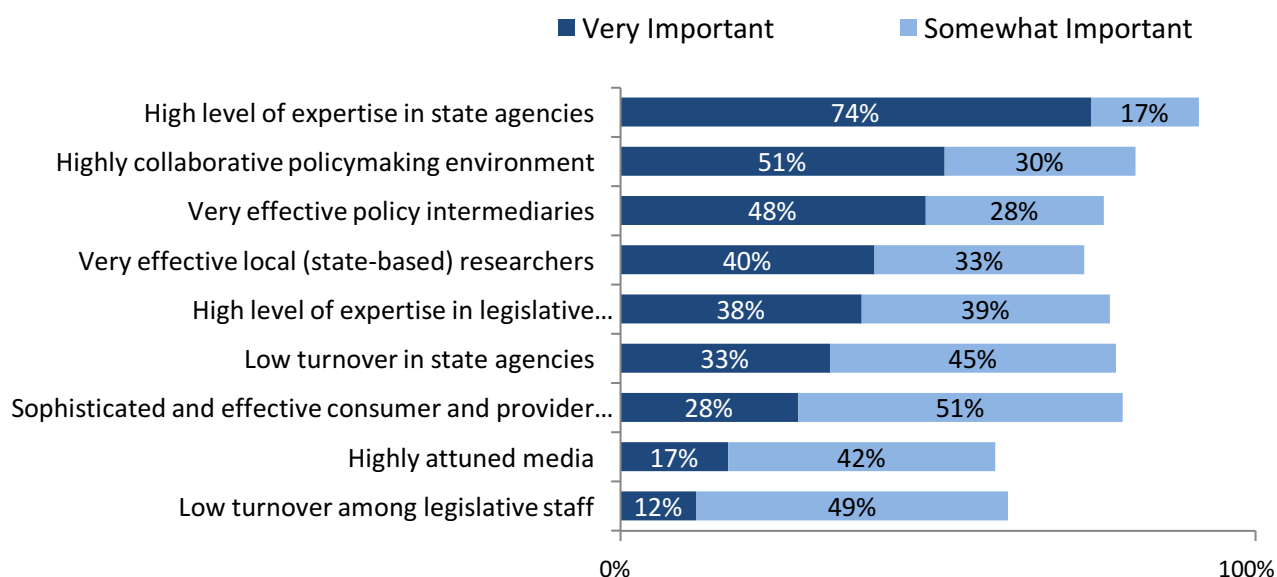


Figure 8. Users' Assessments of Factors within Their State That Facilitate Evidence-Informed Policy Decision Making



time, a variety of barriers, particularly gaps in data and data access and in the quality of the communication between researchers and policymakers, impedes evidence-based policy development. The findings suggest three strategies for improvement:

- **Strengthening state data and analytics.** The survey responses underscore the importance of wide-ranging and relevant state-level data collection in parallel with executive branch agencies' enhanced analytic capability and expertise. Accordingly, one strategy is to promote evidence-based policymaking by helping states strengthen their data infrastructure and analytic capacity to conduct research while generously funding state
- **Maintaining a policy research clearinghouse.** State policymakers and program officials suggested that improved access to information can expedite the use of research in policy development. Central data repositories that are carefully curated and maintained can help state decision makers obtain the evidence they need when they need it. These repositories need to include systematic evidence reviews that policymakers say they

Figure 9. Researchers' Assessments of Options for Improving the State Policy Development Process

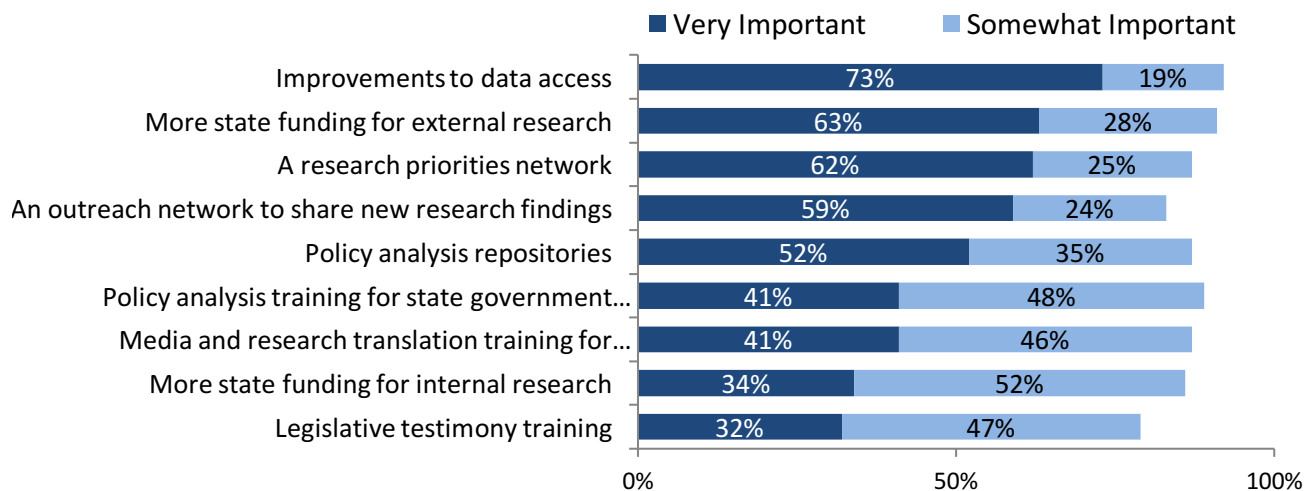
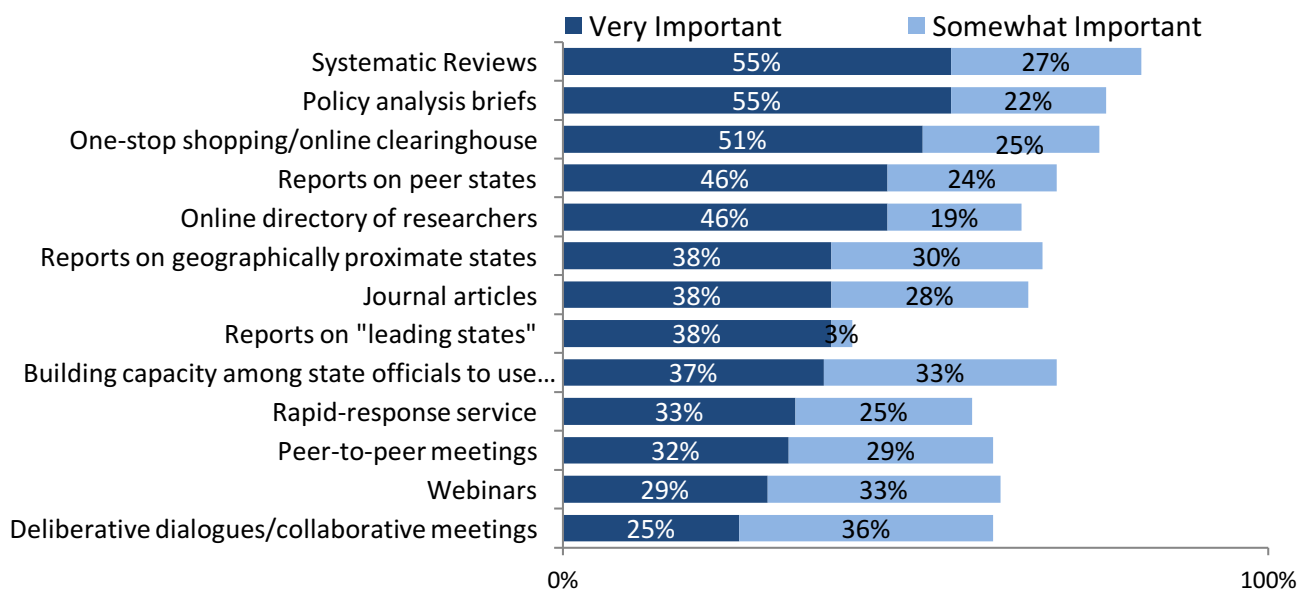


Figure 10. Users' Assessments of Strategies to Improve Evidence Use



need, as well as comparative assessments of state performance across multiple domains. In particular, research repositories must maintain an inventory of briefs that provide context for research findings. Survey respondents were keenly aware that individual studies are most relevant when considered in the context of a body of evidence. To be most effective, however, repositories must devote attention to research translation and to identifying the policy implications of research.

- **Establishing mechanisms for ongoing communication.** Both researchers and policymakers pointed to the need for better communication and collaboration as a prerequisite for generating evidence

that is useful for policy development. Creating opportunities for ongoing collaboration can help researchers understand emerging issues and frame their research strategies. When decision makers come together with evidence producers at the outset of a research project, they can help shape the questions to be asked. For their part, researchers will be better prepared to translate their results into findings comprehensible to policy audiences.

Strategies such as these are not new, but our survey results suggest that they deserve renewed attention and investment. These strategies may help increase the relevance of research and bring evidence to bear more effectively on state policy discussions.

About the Authors

Ellen O'Brien was a Senior Fellow at AcademyHealth from 2014-2015. Enrique Martinez-Vidal is Vice President for State Policy and Technical Assistance at AcademyHealth.

Endnotes

1. AcademyHealth, unpublished case studies. See also Coburn, A. "The Role of Health Services Research in Developing State Health Policy," *Health Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1998, pp.139-51. Available at <http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/17/1/139>.
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3. Lavis, J.N., D. Robertson, J.M. Woodside, C.B. McLeod, J. Abelson, and the Knowledge Transfer Study Group. "How Can Research Organizations More Effectively Transfer Research Knowledge to Decision Makers?" *Milbank Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 2, 2003, pp. 221-48.
4. Using AcademyHealth mailing lists, we identified the names and email addresses of 2,921 state agency officials and 1,575 researchers. We sent the lists of potential survey respondents an email message with a brief description of our project and the goals of the survey and included a link to an electronic survey. A large percentage of the email messages were delivered to in-boxes but went unopened. Of the email messages that were opened, roughly 20 percent of potential survey respondents completed the survey.
5. Meyer, J.A., T.T. Alteras, and K.B. Adams. "Toward More Effective Use of Research in State Health Policymaking." The Commonwealth Fund, December 2006. Available at http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/files/publications/fund-report/2006/dec/toward-more-effective-use-of-research-in-state-policymaking/meyer_towardmoreeffectiveusestatepolicymaking_980-pdf.
6. Sorian R, Baugh T. "Power of Information: Closing the Gap between Research and Policy." *Health Affairs*. 2002;21(2):264-273.
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