
EVIDENCE TO ACTION

NOVEMBER 2021

A Policy Perspective from Three States

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Graduation rates for higher education students have lagged for decades. Recognizing the important role that higher education plays in economic mobility, states and postsecondary institutions across the country have committed to reforming policy and practice to better support college students' success.¹ These reforms are particularly important for students who come from communities that are more likely to be underrepresented in college, such as students from families with low incomes and students of color, to address the structural barriers that drive long-standing disparities in achievement.²

Over the past 15 years, innovative and rigorous research has identified and evaluated effective practices to support students' success in college. This research has produced a growing body of evidence for strategies proven to address the critical barriers to attaining a postsecondary credential or degree. These strategies include reforms to instruction, financial aid, advising and nonacademic support systems, and career and technical education.³

Additionally, states' and institutions' increasing adoption of evidence-based policy-making represents a major shift toward prioritizing and integrating research findings and data in higher education policy decisions. Further, the federal government has expressed a renewed and increased interest in investing in higher education, as demonstrated, for example, by the funding allocated for colleges in the American Rescue Plan to retain and support students affected by disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Similarly, momentum has gathered behind the proposed investments in evidence-based student success strategies (known as the College Completion Fund) in the American Families Plan.⁵ However, fundamental misalignments remain between the domains of research and policy despite this increased attention, limiting the influence that data and research have on policy and practice.

The Evidence to Action project (2019–2021), led by MDRC and the [State Higher Education Executive Officers Association \(SHEEO\)](#) and supported by Arnold Ventures, initiated a body of work designed to disentangle the barriers that exist between research and state-level higher education policy and partnered with state higher education agencies



to develop solutions. As the final step in the Evidence to Action project, this brief proposes promising strategies found to address the factors that state-level postsecondary leaders have observed to have the most impact on evidence-based policymaking in higher education. This brief also provides recommendations and resources for state- and system-level decision-makers advocating for greater investment in evidence-based policymaking as well as for researchers and intermediary organizations hoping to produce relevant research that they can translate into policy.

EVIDENCE TO ACTION PROJECT OVERVIEW

For the Evidence to Action project, MDRC and SHEEO partnered with four agencies across three states: the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE), the Montana Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE), the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), and the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). The research team interviewed staff within these agencies and other key decision-makers in higher education across Indiana, Montana, and Virginia to understand how research and data were used—or not used—to identify policy priorities, inform policy design and adoption, and implement and later refine policy within the domains relevant to those states (for example, financial aid, developmental education, and career and technical education). Afterward, the research team summarized the findings in state-specific memos and convened the four state agencies to discuss common themes and emerging opportunities.

The states of Indiana, Montana, and Virginia were selected to take part in the project because of their broad relevance for other states: They represent diverse policymaking contexts and experiences, stemming from the size and demographics of their populations, their cultures, their dominant political ideologies, and their higher education governance structures. Each agency's approach to using research and data to inform policymaking is driven by these contexts: For instance, postsecondary institutions within the Montana University System and VCCS receive state funding through their respective system offices, which serves as an additional avenue for OCHE and VCCS to influence how those colleges operate. Additionally, each state agency has invested funding, resources, and support systems for institutions to improve the integration of data and research with policymaking—for example, each agency has developed robust systems and policies to collect and analyze data from across the state. Findings from experiences and perspectives shared by the state postsecondary leaders who participated in Evidence to Action inform recommendations in this brief.

WHY IS EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING IMPORTANT?

A state's values and priorities for higher education may be defined by its culture, economic development goals, available resources, and other factors. Well-designed research plays an important role in supporting its priorities as well: It provides insight into the systemic and structural barriers that impede students' progress through postsecondary education, highlights possible solutions to overcome those barriers, and minimizes the biases that may be introduced by relying on personal

experience alone. Rigorous research, particularly experimental studies like randomized controlled trials, builds confidence in the effectiveness of promising policies and practices and also contributes to an overall evidence base built on the strategies proven to support college students' success. Additionally, descriptive data collected and analyzed locally, qualitative research, and cost studies are other resources decision-makers can use to determine whether a strategy meets the needs of their communities and to secure the appropriate funding and resource investments required for implementation. Assessing whether and how to use research to inform policy can be difficult: For a tool kit on assessing the quality of research and leveraging the different types of research that inform policymaking, see the first of the two supplements to this brief, "[How Do I Assess the Value and Quality of Research?](#)"

Data and research are instrumental in addressing the unique needs of different communities and increasing equity in postsecondary education. Disaggregating and analyzing outcomes data by relevant populations and characteristics (such as socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and gender) can identify disparities in access or achievement. Qualitative research—in the form of interviews, focus groups, and observations—can enable students, colleges, community members, and other stakeholders to share their experiences and perceptions of the systemic or structural barriers hindering students' progress in education. And finally, including subgroups within the analysis of more rigorous studies can help answer questions about which strategies do and do not work for various populations of interest.

Many organizations have proposed frameworks for evidence-based policymaking to support policymakers' increased interest in the use of data and research.⁶ Using these frameworks and interview findings, the Evidence to Action research team synthesized five foundational activities that are integral to evidence-based policymaking in postsecondary education:

- 1** Bring together a diverse and inclusive group of stakeholders to develop a shared vision and goals.⁷
- 2** Build or expand the policies, systems, and practices needed to collect, analyze, and communicate institutional or state data.
- 3** Increase the capacity for stakeholders within the organization or across the state to use research and data.
- 4** Create processes that center continuous improvement, assessment, and data-informed revision as policies are implemented.
- 5** Incentivize further research by aligning it with the relevant policy levers in postsecondary education, such as budgeting or legislation.

For more information about the critical actions required to support evidence-based policymaking, see the second supplement to this brief, "[Foundational Activities for Evidence-Based Policymaking in Postsecondary Education.](#)"

FACTORS AFFECTING THE USE OF RESEARCH IN POLICYMAKING

Despite the increased interest in evidence-based policymaking, fundamental challenges remain in using data and research to inform policy. Based on analyses of these barriers and discussions with the state agency partners in Indiana, Montana, and Virginia, the Evidence to Action research team identified the four most significant yet actionable barriers and promising strategies to address these barriers.⁸

Barrier 1: Key decision-makers tend to have limited time and energy for engaging with research. Policymaking often takes place in a fast-paced environment, limiting stakeholders' time to engage with it or to digest research related to their policy goals. The volume and complexity of the available research literature also creates difficulties. Additionally, many interview participants voiced that they or their colleagues have limited expertise or comfort with interpreting data or research studies and with assessing research studies' quality or usefulness for the state.

Promising Solutions: Box 1 summarizes promising solutions to address Barrier 1. Representatives from SCHEV and OCHE recommended planning ahead and setting clear priorities. When stakeholders agree to shared goals before policy opportunities emerge, they have more time to find and use relevant research to inform policy ideas.

BOX 1

PROMISING SOLUTIONS TO FACILITATE POLICYMAKERS' ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH

- Develop a learning agenda that includes priorities and key research questions, and partner with researchers as needed to answer those questions.
- Hire and designate staff with research expertise to prioritize using research and data to inform policymaking.
- Provide training and professional development in research literacy for key stakeholders.
- Use interns, graduate fellows, and local researchers to help assess the applicability and relevance of research and conduct analyses with internal data.
- Formalize the use of research and data in policymaking.
- Researchers:* Make research findings more accessible.

As one interview participant suggested:

[Other policymakers] will have one really good idea in one meeting, and then they get another really good idea and try to put that into place. Maybe because we are so small, we've been really disciplined in moving forward policies that really matter, and committing to

them. . . . We hit pause [each] summer and open up the dialogue about the most important areas. And then [we determine] the most important elements that we need to focus on in each and every one of our conversations throughout the year.

As noted in Box 1, hiring or training staff members can increase your organization's collective capacity to engage with research. However, when resources are limited, graduate fellows or academic researchers can, for example, scan and summarize research that aligns with the state's priorities.

Barrier 2: The research is not necessarily credible or persuasive to some audiences. Many interview participants emphasized that they found anecdotes and ideology to be far more convincing than data or research, and, further, some policymakers (particularly lawmakers) outright distrusted the research or researchers. One interview participant remarked:

From a personal standpoint and talking to my peers in other states, the research is helpful, but sometimes when the research meets the state legislature or the outside world, it's not always as useful as we'd like it to be. Because I can put the best data in front of legislators and if they don't like it from a policy or personal standpoint, I have to find another way around.

Maintaining credibility is especially difficult with changing or part-time legislators or when the research and data clash with the popular political or ideological positions. The lengthy time periods sometimes required to conduct and share research further diminish the ability to be responsive to current policy priorities.

Interview participants also highlighted policymakers' strong preference for descriptive data generated within the state over rigorous evaluations conducted elsewhere—when research is only based on external studies, it is often challenging for policymakers to determine whether a program or policy would also be beneficial in their own communities. This challenge was especially salient for interview participants in Montana, where many institutions and communities face unique challenges related to being rural, isolated, and resource constrained, but stakeholders across Indiana and Virginia echoed this concern.

Promising Solutions: See Box 2 for a summary of promising solutions to Barrier 2. Investment in relationship-building opportunities between researchers and important decision-makers and stakeholders across the state seems to be key for increasing the perceived credibility of research.⁹ For example, interview participants discussed the importance of building connections with individual lawmakers, particularly across political lines, who can in turn advocate for the use of research and data. Furthermore, creating synergy between narratives and research—such as by using research to affirm the personal narratives of individual students and, in turn, having students tell their own stories related to the research—is a way to use the persuasive power of anecdotes and personal experiences to support research and to have research support the real-life experiences of students.

Additionally, policymakers can use state or local data and research in tandem with research from outside the state to investigate policy ideas and inform policy implementation. For example, insti-

BOX 2

PROMISING SOLUTIONS TO INCREASE THE CREDIBILITY OF RESEARCH

- Facilitate opportunities for relationship building between researchers and state stakeholders.
- Identify advocates within the legislature to promote the use of research.
- Use outcomes data, focus groups, and small-scale experiments to determine the applicability and appropriateness of promising innovations from outside the state.
- Develop systems and practices to incentivize local research and experimentation.
- Partner with local academics and third-party research organizations to leverage state data and external research.
- Researchers:* be more responsive to state and organizational culture, ideology, and priorities.

tution- or system-level outcomes data can be used to determine whether innovation is appropriate for the state, and can create a more compelling case for stakeholders who would otherwise distrust the research. VCCS used such a strategy in looking to external research to inform its priorities in strengthening academic advising and then using advising data from the community colleges to successfully advocate for additional funding. Further, the state can support local analyses and experimentation by the development of systems and practices to incentivize research.

The state agencies involved in Evidence to Action have also partnered with external organizations to evaluate policies and programs, which generated rigorous evidence easily applicable to their states. According to interview participants, some research partners have also provided support in translating research into policy design and implementation. An example of this type of partnership is CHE's and Ivy Tech Community College's engagement with MDRC's [Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success \(SUCCESS\)](#) initiative, to implement and sustain comprehensive student support programs.¹⁰

Barrier 3: Adopting or scaling evidence-based reforms can be costly or otherwise resource intensive. Across all states, interview participants stated that the high cost and demand for resources is one of the biggest barriers to adopting some prominent reforms backed by rigorous research, such as comprehensive student support systems. Additionally, beyond cost, a college president shared that his college exhausts significant nonmonetary resources on fundamental challenges outside the institution's control—for instance, a significant proportion of students face extreme poverty and the surrounding community has few support services—leaving his institution with little appetite to engage in education policy reforms. Finally, many postsecondary institutions do not have the personnel necessary to implement reforms. As representatives from VCCS shared, a large proportion of postsecondary institutions' staff and faculty are employed part time and have very limited time and energy to engage with innovation or reforms.

Promising Solutions: Postsecondary institutions require increased investment and resources to incentivize the adoption of rigorously evaluated practice and reform informed by data. (See Box 3.) Representatives from SCHEV emphasized the need to provide funding to accompany policy and reform whenever possible, rather than placing unfunded or unpaid burdens on institutions and staff already operating with constrained resources. An example of such funding is OCHE’s use of left-over funding to support state colleges’ pilots of rigorously evaluated interventions; one of these pilots is the Montana University System’s Montana 10, a comprehensive support program inspired by the proven-effective Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), originally designed and implemented by the City University of New York (CUNY).¹¹

BOX 3

PROMISING SOLUTIONS TO SUPPORT INSTITUTIONS OPERATING WITH CONSTRAINED RESOURCES

- Increase investments in evidence-based success initiatives.
- Provide funding to reduce burdens associated with reform.
- Identify creative solutions to incentivize innovation and building evidence.

Barrier 4: States and postsecondary institutions lack guidance for implementing evidence-based reforms and for making the necessary adaptations. Additionally, interview participants highlighted the difficulty of building coalitions to set state-level implementation standards and the challenges associated with balancing state- and system-wide mandates with local autonomy. State standards can support effective statewide implementation: They can support adherence to rigorously tested models, facilitate cross-college training and professional development for the institutions and their staff members, and simplify the monitoring of institutions’ implementation for continuous improvement. Without the assessment of institutions’ progress and success with policy implementation, it is more difficult for the state to routinely use prior experiences to inform new initiatives.

Increasing the tension, institutions also require flexibility to adapt policies to their communities’ needs or to facilitate implementation given their available resources and personnel, and the research rarely provides enough guidance to inform these decisions without reducing the intervention’s impact. For example, interview participants representing institutions serving particular populations of students—such as Tribal Colleges and Universities (operated by federally recognized American Indian tribes),¹² rural institutions, and extremely underresourced institutions—were uncertain whether reforms evaluated in more urban or better-resourced contexts were relevant for their communities or “doable” for their institutions. This lack of clarity, guidance, and support in policy implementation can further exacerbate feelings of “initiative fatigue” held by student-facing college faculty and staff as they become overwhelmed by multiple large-scale reforms within a short time period.

Promising Solutions: Box 4 summarizes promising solutions to make evidence-based reform more actionable. Conducting pilot testing, small-scale experimentation, and mentorship practices before widespread adoption can provide valuable information about the promise of an innovation to meet local needs, strengthen stakeholders' support for a reform, and generate guidance for later adopters. For example, VCCS piloted a developmental education reform by creating cohorts of colleges and setting up mentorship pairs between colleges belonging to earlier cohorts and colleges in later cohorts. Additionally, CHE demonstrates the promise of developing systems for continuous improvement: For instance, the commission regularly assesses the effectiveness of its financial aid and workforce programs by analyzing student outcomes over time or against a comparison group, produces publicly available reports, and uses the findings from these studies to make program improvements. Finally, the interview participants emphasized the importance of streamlining and centralizing key functions (as OCHE did by centralizing some key institutional research functions across the Montana University System) to minimize the burden for the colleges.

BOX 4

PROMISING SOLUTIONS TO MAKE EVIDENCE-BASED REFORM MORE ACTIONABLE

- Conduct pilot testing and experimentation before widespread adoption.
- Centralize the key functions at the state level to minimize the burden on institutions.
- Create standards for implementation and provide institutions with professional development and support for executing them.
- Gather and integrate feedback from stakeholders to improve existing reforms.
- Analyze and reflect on implementation data and early outcomes for the purposes of continuous improvement.
- Evaluate existing and new policies and practices to inform developing work.
- Researchers:* develop more guidance for implementation and adaptation to maintain the elements critical for success while allowing for needed flexibility.

Overall, two overarching practices emerge from these promising strategies that can be used to support the use of research and data in policymaking:

- **Set up long-term partnerships and networks among researchers and policymakers:** Maintaining such alliances allows researchers to stay updated on relevant policy priorities and state policymakers to stay aware of emerging opportunities and lessons learned from other states. Studies have found that the use of research is best supported when researchers and policymakers create personal connections.¹³ VCCS demonstrates the promise of this practice. For example, the VCCS office has strong relationships with researchers, which has helped the community colleges remain

deeply engaged in developmental education innovation for over a decade. The other Evidence to Action state agency partners also rely heavily on peer networks and personal connections to stay informed of national conversations taking place in postsecondary education.

- **Formalize the use of research and data in policymaking systems.** Embedding the expectations and support for the use of research and data in policymaking systems makes their use routine for informing policymaking, rather than relying on individuals' energy or research literacy.¹⁴ It also allows states to proactively align their state priorities with available research and data, as is the case with CHE's annual review and evaluation of the state's workforce-related programs.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

For researchers, the interview findings highlighted some other important lessons to consider for state-level engagement in higher education:

- **Researchers must take a culturally responsive and strength-based approach to partnerships with states.** Interview data suggest that there are often cultural misunderstandings between researchers and policymakers that dampen trust in the researchers or research. Researchers' investment in relationships that honor and build on the experiences and strengths of important stakeholders in postsecondary education—including policymakers, institution leaders, student-facing college faculty and staff, and students—will ensure that the research they conduct is grounded in the states' priorities for higher education and accounts for the constraints within the state's policymaking context, as well as increase the credibility granted to the researchers and research findings across the state.
- **Research findings—and their intended next steps—should be easily accessible and digestible.** Given state leaders' constrained time and comfort with research, interview participants emphasized the importance of researchers highlighting the primary findings and providing attractive visuals. It is also important that they identify the major constraints and considerations for interpreting the research findings, identify the remaining open questions that still require further study, and clearly articulate the intended next steps for policymakers. As one interview participant explained, "With policymakers, the simpler and shorter, the better. Something that's easy to read and understand is important. Relaying personal stories is important, too—[it] helps drive things home. The research is important if it can be clear and readable."
- **There is still a gap between research and actionable guidance.** It is essential that rigorous studies are accompanied by implementation research, which uses qualitative and quantitative studies to understand how an intervention was implemented, the elements that seem critical for success, and recommendations to improve future operations. Additionally, intermediaries invested in translating research into practice can provide guidance for states and institutions interested in adapting interventions to meet their population's needs and facilitate easier implementation that is responsive to the institutional context without compromising effectiveness.

MOVING FORWARD

Similar to many other states, systems, and postsecondary institutions, the Evidence to Action state higher education agency partners identified several priority areas for increasing the accessibility and value of postsecondary education for their constituents: developmental education, career and technical education, academic advising and coaching, and more. Leveraging research, particularly the evidence generated by rigorous studies, to support work in these priority areas and incentivizing further contributions to the evidence base in these areas are instrumental in advancing students' success in postsecondary education. Additionally, the possible resources available through the American Rescue Plan and the College Completion Fund (proposed in the American Families Plan) could provide a critical opportunity for states to implement programs with the strongest evidence base that would otherwise seem too costly or resource intensive. These opportunities reinforce the urgency of providing more guidance and support for states and institutions seeking to implement evidence-based practice.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Evidence to Action team sincerely thanks our colleagues from the Indiana Commission for Higher Education, the Montana Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, and the Virginia Community College System for their partnership and support of Evidence to Action, particularly for bringing their policymaking expertise and candor to this work. We also gratefully acknowledge the support and guidance of Arnold Ventures, particularly our colleagues Chase Sackett and Kelly McManus. Finally, we thank Leigh Parise, Robert Ivry, Richard Kazis, Carolyn Hill, Alice Tufel, and Jason Lee for their review and guidance; Jana Weinstein for editing; and Ann Kottner for preparing this brief for publication.

The Authors

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

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