

Bridging the Divide

Project Overview

A persistent gap exists between the women's health research and policy advocacy communities. The two communities are united by their commitment to women's health but divided by their different methods and language and by the lack of a connector that facilitates translation and communication between the two in a timely manner. A connecting entity, staffed by people who understand the opportunities and constraints – and speak the languages – of both communities, could **bridge the divide** and improve the impact of each community in advancing their common goals. The Jacobs Institute's Bridging the Divide team seeks to serve in this connecting capacity.

Women's health scientists have conducted rigorous and potentially influential research on many of the women's health issues currently under debate in federal and state policy arenas. Policy advocates, however, often do not have access to those research findings in formats that they can easily understand and use in their advocacy. Some research organizations provide valuable, research-based resources to policymakers, yet these resources may be focused only on the research and analyses conducted within these organizations, leaving a gap for timely, accessible presentation of scientific work conducted by multiple researchers at different organizations.

Just as the work of policymakers and policy advocates will be enhanced by greater awareness and understanding of relevant research, women's health researchers can also benefit from the chance to learn from advocates about current policy priorities and strategic opportunities to build support for policies that protect and advance women's health. This connector project to provide researchers with a streamlined and timely way to develop such an understanding will contribute to the agenda for future research, helping scientists to identify areas for exploration that could provide a critical evidence base for anticipated policy efforts.

It is important to note that the goal of this project is not to develop or advance policy strategies per se, but to bring the research community directly to the table to communicate research findings and limitations. From this, the policy and advocacy community will have a stronger understanding of the scientific research, be able to provide feedback on future research needs, and consequently move forward with policy and advocacy approaches appropriate to their goals.

As documents and other materials become available, they will be posted to the Bridging the Divide webpage: <http://publichealth.gwu.edu/projects/jjwh/bridging-divide>.

Phase 1 (2015): Identifying Three Key Topic Areas

The goal of this phase was to identify three topic areas where policy leaders and advocates believe that research findings could inform and assist in policymaking and/or where the complexity of a topic currently inhibits policymakers from moving forward. The Jacob's Institute began consulting key leaders in women's reproductive health policy and research for input on these topics areas in July 2015, and the process continues for each new topic area.

Phase 2 (2015-16): Conducting Activities for Each Topic Area

For each topic area, we plan to conduct a series of activities, which may include: producing a paper on the current research literature and/or barriers to policy change; convening a meeting of key scientists, advocates, and policy-makers; and facilitating a Hill briefing, legislative staff meeting, and/or Agency meeting for researchers, advocates, and policy-makers. Depending on the topic, some of these meetings may be open to the public and press, but others may be closed door discussions to promote candor and strategic thinking.

Topic 1: Medication Abortion

The first Bridging the Divide was medication abortion. For this topic, we wrote a white paper summarizing the state of the research evidence, as well as a shorter "key points" document for policymakers. We also convened two meetings in November 2015 with legislative staff on Capitol Hill – one closed door meeting with Senate staff and one briefing for House staffers in the pro-choice caucus.

Topic 2: Long-Acting Reversible Contraception

Based on input from researchers and policy-makers, the second Bridging the Divide topic is long-acting reversible contraception (LARC). For this topic, we have begun drafting another paper to summarize the current research and policy issues. We will also convene meetings with expert researchers in the area and policy-makers whose work includes LARC issues. Activities will take place in May 2016.

Topic 3: TBD

To identify the next topic, we will once again seek input from key leaders in the field to determine where opportunities exist to improve the effectiveness of research and policy advocacy efforts by bringing together key actors from both communities.

Research Methods Education Program

In addition to delving deeply into three topic areas, we also conducted a short educational program on the basic elements of research methods for non-scientific policy staff and advocates. The goal of this program was to provide participants with the ability to read the scientific literature more critically and to understand the strengths and limitations of different types of research. GW faculty led these sessions and covered topics such as quantitative and qualitative analysis, program evaluation, and economics of healthcare. The content and case study material used in these programs was specific to women's reproductive health and policy. The first research methods education program took place in December 2015, and a second program is planned to take place in late 2016.