

Policy Labs Final Report

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Introduction

Policy labs are an emerging quasi-governmental research mechanism that present a number of opportunities to enhance the goals of evidence-based policy. As a relatively new concept, existing policy labs take a variety of forms in terms of topics studied, stakeholder engagement, funding sources, and methodologies for investigation. Because of the strong potential for policy labs to inform substantive and effective policymaking, many jurisdictions are interested in developing their own labs based on the best practices uncovered by existing labs. This report provides insights into the current body of research about the design and development of policy labs and introduces a set of case studies focusing on attributes of established policy labs in the United States. The attributes from these case studies are condensed into a matrix to provide accessible, at-a-glance information about the characteristics and practices that other jurisdictions may wish to consider in the development of new policy labs. Finally, the report concludes with recommendations for successful implementation of the newly launched partnership between Lane County and the University of Oregon School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement.

Literature Review

History and Definition of Policy Labs

Policy labs have proliferated in developed countries around the world within the past decade in an effort “to address the perceived shortcomings of standard approaches to policy and service design” (McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis, 2018). These labs are focused on innovation through the application of experimental approaches more commonly associated with scientific methodologies in order to test and measure the efficacy of various public and social policies (Williamson, 2015). Many policy labs coordinate efforts between public, private, and academic

entities and work to improve the structure of the network in a “reluctant state” made up of a variety of actors (Williamson, 2015). In the policy lab structure, this network synthesizes elements of think tanks, media, and academia (Williamson, 2015). While conceptually similar, policy labs differ from think tanks in that, “The public policy lab extends the role of the think tank into the domain of R&D, with a particular emphasis on innovative experimental development, design-based approaches, and the production of evidence and data of what works in public service reform” (Williamson, 2015).

What distinguishes most policy labs from other mechanisms of policy generation methodologies is their emphasis on the design process, but beyond this scope the defining characteristics of policy labs are broad and inconsistent (McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis, 2018). Policy labs are commonly called PSI labs, although the “PSI” acronym can refer to either “public sector innovation” (McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis, 2018) or “public and social innovation” (Williamson, 2015). Other terms used to describe similar conceptual arrangements include public policy lab, government innovation lab, and social innovation lab, among numerous others (McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis, 2018; Williamson, 2015). The areas of focus and methodologies employed by policy labs -- regardless of name -- also vary broadly. Some labs focus on citizen engagement and look to crowdsourcing as a potential mechanism for gathering data and improving policy (Williamson, 2015). Others are more experiment-oriented and employ methods like randomized trials and data mining (Williamson, 2015; McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis, 2018).

Relationship to Public Sector

While policy labs take a variety of forms, autonomy is an important consideration for their success. Policy labs function as scientific entities beholden to the results of evidence from

experimentation and data rather than political will (Williamson, 2015). In practice, policy labs function under varying degrees of independence from politics (McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis, 2018). One significant element determining the independence of policy labs is the presence or absence of dedicated funding. When present, dedicated funding ensures that labs have “autonomy to make decisions, to have a flexible structure, and to implement a different work process to develop and test new ideas without being excessively concerned with the risks of failure” (Timeus and Gascó, 2018). The freedom to function outside of the constraints of typical government operations creates a testing ground to find solutions that might not be seriously considered under other circumstances.

Collaboration between sectors and dedicated funding help to ensure that policy labs are able to function without the burden of politicization that impacts much of bureaucratic operations. By employing “precise and rigorous analytical techniques,” policy labs foster a scientific approach (McGann et al., 2018). This type of empirical, evidence-based thinking transcends the fray of politics and allows for testing of new ideas with an emphasis on scientific research principles rather than appeasing political constraints (McGann et al., 2018; Williamson, 2015). Through means of scientific inquiry and dedicated funding, policy labs gain an autonomous functionality that ensures best practices are identified not for their political appeal, but rather for their empirically proven capacity to resolve the issues that arise in public service delivery.

Value of labs

Policy labs afford jurisdictions the flexibility and capacity for innovation that are not often accessible under business-as-usual bureaucratic structures. A key value of this type of innovation is the ability to incorporate technology as it emerges to improve efficiency of service delivery, management of infrastructure, and quality of life for citizens within a jurisdiction

(Cohen, Almira, and Chesbrough, 2016; Riddell, 2014). Timeus and Gascó emphasize that policy labs shift the standard public service model - one that favors “stability and predictability over innovation capacity” - to allow for new ways of thinking and testing ideas (2018).

Policy labs create a platform not only for new approaches to research, they also open the door for co-creation of governing structures with the private sector and citizens as active participants (Cohen, Almira, and Chesbrough, 2016; Selada, Cunha, and Tomaz, 2012). Cohen, Almira, and Chesbrough indicate that a number of public services such as healthcare, transportation, and energy could all benefit from collaboration with external, private entities through policy labs. Furthermore, opening channels for co-production facilitates a reframing of the entrenched philosophies that bureaucracies often struggle with, particularly the idea that, “politically governed organisations can be prone to keep and maintain power, rather than to share it” (Carstensen and Bason, 2012). Collaboration between sectors also corrects for an often-occurring situation wherein the parties who possess data are disconnected from those who most need it in order to implement effective services (Dinesh, 2017). Policy labs help bridge the divide and place the data in a forum where it can be effectively utilized in innovative decision-making.

Challenges/critiques

Despite their capacity to scientifically identify innovative solutions to policy issues, policy labs are not without their disadvantages. As Peter Riddell points out, “the snag is that these initiatives - with their talk of ‘randomised control trials’ and the like - often speak only to policy specialists” (2014). Scientific communication is limited in its accessibility by laypeople and political actors, and “while local community issues may be amenable to analysis without tertiary education in sociology, economics or political science, the methodic practices of design may start to crumble when they are extended to system-wide challenges and understanding the

complicated linkages between the market and the state” (McGann et al., 2018, p. 16). A gap exists between those who collect and analyze data and those who make decisions about the services those data reflect.

In addition to the scientific disconnection, policy labs suffer from the same dilemmas public sector agencies have dealt with for decades such that they are “still essentially navigating blind when it comes to real-time, relevant management information on performance” (Carstensen and Bason, 2012). Timely assessment of the efficacy of implemented policy remains a challenge that policy labs may not be able to rectify. Furthermore, some see policy labs as the latest fad in public management which contributes to a trend of “displacing responsibilities onto ‘a messy patchwork of outsourced providers’” (Williamson, 2015; McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis, 2018).

Case Studies

In order to build on the literature surrounding policy labs and develop a framework for effective policy lab implementation, we reviewed eleven existing policy labs across the United States, listed below in Table 1. Those eleven policy labs ranged in focus from large metropolitan cities to entire states. In this section, we provide examples of how the policy labs we reviewed are both similar and unique. As a framework for our review of all policy labs, we determined the following evaluative criteria: year founded, issues of focus, the office or department out of which the policy lab functioned, funding sources, stakeholders, and “champions” - specific individuals whose advocacy has helped the policy lab gain traction. We also categorized each policy lab by its method of work based on criteria established by McGann, Blomkamp, & Lewis (2018). Methods criteria included categories such evidence-based lab, design-led lab, or mixed method lab.

Issues

Of the policy labs we reviewed, the issues on which they focused demonstrated both variety and uniqueness. All of the labs we reviewed focused on more than one research area. With near unanimity, the labs reported focus on variations of homelessness, poverty, employment, and economic development. Other frequently listed issues shared among the policy labs included crime, policing, criminal justice, and recidivism reduction. Health care, education, and food security appeared as areas of focus for more than one policy lab, though these issues were not among a majority of the policy labs we reviewed.

One policy lab, the McCourt Policy Innovation Lab located in Washington, D.C., focused almost exclusively on issues related to a single neighborhood in the D.C. area. The McCourt lab provides attention to the issues of the Anacostia neighborhood, including a tunnel project, river development, parklands, and a neighborhood shuttle service. Among the labs we reviewed, the McCourt lab was most bound to local concerns. Conversely, the California Policy Lab investigates issues spanning the entire state of California. The California lab operates out of several locations to address a broad range of topics.

Operating Locations

The majority of the policy labs we reviewed were based out of large universities. Of the eleven policy labs we evaluated, seven are university-based. For example, the California Policy Lab is based out of both UC Berkeley and UCLA. The Youth Policy Lab is based out of the University of Michigan, and the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab is based out of the University of Denver. Public-academic partnerships are a logical organizational structure for policy labs because these types of arrangements connect researchers who may conduct experiments on issues of local importance with practitioners who work as policy experts.

Additionally, universities supply a dependable rotation of students who bring enthusiasm and curiosity to projects which could benefit local areas.

Four of the policy labs we reviewed were not directly housed in a university setting. Instead, these labs tended to be based out of the municipal government offices, such as The Lab @ DC, which is based out of the Office of Budget and Performance Management in the City Administrator's Office. The iZone lab is a policy lab focused on education technology and learning models, and it is based out of the New York City Department of Education. These municipalities are heavily populated which seems to provide ample support for sustaining a policy lab without a university partnership. Smaller and mid-size cities likely would not have the resources necessary to support a policy lab independently.

Funding Sources

Among the eleven policy labs we reviewed, seven describe their sources of funding explicitly as philanthropic. Interestingly, of the seven policy labs which list philanthropy as their funding source, five are funded by a single foundation, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. Only one of the eleven policy labs we reviewed listed a funding source which was not philanthropic. The Multnomah Idea Lab is funded by the Department of County Human Services (DCHS). The remaining policy labs we studied did not state or imply a funding source.

Stakeholders

The stakeholders for each policy lab we reviewed were among the most varied categories we discovered in our review. While most policy labs included predictable parties such as the local city or county governments, each policy lab also included unique stakeholders. For example, the UChicago Urban Lab listed a long roster including a children's advocacy center and a variety of city committees or councils. The Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab listed

stakeholders across all three branches of the state government, the Governor's office, General Assembly, and the judicial branch. Despite seven of the eleven policy labs being directly linked to universities, only two - the McCourt Policy Innovation lab near Georgetown and Oregon State Policy Analysis Laboratory in Corvallis - explicitly listed university students as stakeholders in their policy labs. It is likely safe to assume university students work on the projects in policy labs connected to universities.

Recommendations

Our research on policy labs has provided helpful insight to how new, interested parties can set themselves up for success from the beginning. It was apparent that the lack of data and transparency with existing labs hindered us from identifying their processes along with standards of analysis and funding streams. This not only works as a barrier for future labs learning from current strategies, but it also shuts out stakeholders from involvement with the work and successes. Open data and a well-updated, informative website will provide learners and community members with the information they need to stay invested and supportive of the work happening in the community. As the policy lab develops for Lane County and the University of Oregon, it would be appropriate to provide students with explicit roles to which they could contribute as well befitting recognition for the work they doubtless will conduct. Another recommendation that was a common theme in challenges of policy labs is next steps once research is finished. Having clear expectations and protocol with the findings is extremely important and detrimental to their success.

Conclusion

Policy labs and research about them are still in their infancy. Finding examples that match Lane County's demographics, characteristics, and priorities was difficult and called for

pulling pieces from many labs to explore and compare. Themes we found are that policy labs are beneficial and complex and need to be structured to the needs of each individual community. They can have a profound impact and reshape how to engage people that policies are directly affecting, how to better utilizes resources, and how all around make cities better for their citizens.

Table 1

Summary of Policy Lab Case Studies

Policy Lab	Method	Funding Source	Stakeholders	Based out of...	Issues	Champion
California Policy Lab	Evidence-based lab	unstated ("generous support from funders" implies philanthropy)	State of CA, academia, media	UC Berkeley and UCLA	Crime Homelessness Education Employment Health care Poverty	Evan White, Executive Director evanbwhite@berkeley.edu
Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab	Unknown	Laura and John Arnold Foundation	State of CO	University of Denver	Affordable housing Recidivism reduction Prevention and early intervention for system-involved youth Marijuana-funded programs	Gov. John Hickenlooper, schedule request
iZone	Unknown	unstated	New York Department of Education, NYC school districts	NYC Department of Education	New technology, education (learning models, college readiness)	Mayor Michael Bloomberg; program cut back under Mayor Bill DeBlasio
The Lab @ DC	Evidence-based lab	Laura and John Arnold Foundation	Military, academia, housing industry, law enforcement	Office of Budget and Performance Management	Policing Criminal justice Homelessness Gov. administration	Mayor Muriel Browser, schedule request

Policy Lab	Method	Funding Source	Stakeholders	Based out of...	Issues	Champion
McCourt Policy Innovation Lab	Design-led lab	unstated	City of DC, Georgetown students, GU faculty	Georgetown's School of Public Policy	Anacostia neighborhood River restoration Tunnel transportation Parklands	Margaret O'Bryon, Founder and Faculty, Director, margaret.obryon@georgetown.edu
Multnomah Idea Lab	Unknown	Department of Multnomah County Human Services	City of Portland, Multnomah County, citizens served	Portland, OR	Homelessness LGBTQ Poverty	Mary Li, Director, TheMil@multco.us
Oregon State Policy Analysis Laboratory	Mixed method	OSU tuition	Public policy students, City of Corvallis	Oregon State University	Food-water-energy nexus Hunger and food waste Aging and disability	Dr. Erika Wolters, Director, Erika.Wolters@oregonstate.edu
Rhode Island Innovative Policy Lab	Unknown	Laura and John Arnold Foundation	State of RI, Brown University	Brown University	Criminal justice Education equity Poverty	*Justine Hastings, Director, justine_hastings@brown.edu
Transatlantic Policy Lab	Unknown	Bertlesmann Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation	Board of Directors, contractors	Washington, D.C.	Social Inequity	Anthony Silberfeld, Director, Transatlantic Relations, anthony.silberfeld@bfna.org

Policy Lab	Method	Funding Source	Stakeholders	Based out of...	Issues	Champion
UChicago Urban Lab	Unknown	Pritzker Foundation David Lynch Foundation	Chicago Children's Advocacy Center, Chicago Jobs Council, Children's Home and Aid, Heartland Health Outreach	University of Chicago	Crime Education Health Poverty Environment	Roseanna Ander, Executive Director, rander@uchicago.edu
UMichigan Youth Policy Lab	Unknown	Laura and John Arnold Foundation	Ford School of Public Policy, Survey Research Center	Ann Arbor, MI	Education Poverty Maternal/infant health Youth Employment	Brian Jacob, Co-Director, bajacob@umich.edu

Notes. The method section of the table refers to four policy lab types as outlined in McGann, Blomkamp, & Lewis (2018). Funding sources, stakeholders, and issues were stated on each policy lab's website. Champions are those who offer unique support of the lab.

*The Rhode Island Innovative Policy Lab is undergoing restructuring as of April 2018.

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