

Traditional academic institutions and aging policy research: Identified challenges and emerging opportunities

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Background

Gerontological research plays a critical role in identifying and addressing the physical and mental healthcare needs of ethnically and racially diverse aging populations.

- Policy-level changes facilitate changes in individual behavior;
- Policy-makers value academic research because it is perceived as less biased than research from certain “think tanks” or advocacy organizations;
- Previous studies have focused on how research findings are translated for a policy-audience;
- Few studies have examined the role of academic environments in supporting policy-relevant research¹;
- New research suggests that there is a shortfall of policy-relevant research generated by academic institutions.

Research Objectives

The aims of this qualitative study are:

- To examine barriers and facilitators to developing an aging policy-relevant research agenda in a traditional academic institution
- To explore additional challenges associated with early career status and minority group membership

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Methods

Participants (n=24)

- Tenure-track or tenured faculty at U.S. college/university
- Engaged or interested in aging policy-relevant research
- Recruited from NIA Resource Centers on Minority Aging Research (RCMAR), GSA preconference attendees, GSA Task Force on Minority Issues, or the Health and Aging Policy Fellows Program

Data Collection

- Focus groups (n=6) approximately 60 minutes each, conducted over the phone or in person
- Barriers/ facilitators to conducting aging policy-relevant research

Data Analysis

- Focus group data were transcribed and common themes were identified

Study Participants

Participant Characteristics (n=24)	Percent
Gender (% female)	92
Race/Ethnicity - Black, Latino, or Asian (Minority group membership)	73
Tenure status	
Tenure-track (early career)	71
Tenured (mid-career)	8
Tenured (senior career)	21
Discipline	
Social Work / Family studies	34
Nursing / Medicine	42
Public Health / Gerontology	16
Public policy / Healthcare science	8
Regions	
East Coast, West Coast Mid-west, South	

¹ Policy-relevant research is defined as studies conducted to inform public policy, which may encompass both policy process and decisions, but excludes advocacy (i.e., the act of persuading an individual to support or oppose a specific policy).

Results

Barriers

➤ Extra time

“I will have made those relationships... to aging-related health disparities among African American and Latino elders. But I do find it takes a lot of time...” Tenure-track (early career)

➤ Research seen as less valuable or less rigorous

“That’s the point I’m making. It’s perceived as not having much scientific rigor.” Tenured (senior career)

➤ Premium placed on external (federal) funding

“... from a university viewpoint, NIH funding is valued... at a higher level than other types of funding.” Tenured (senior career)

➤ Seen as “resident expert”

“... when topics come up about Latino health... I can often be dragged into conversations about that. Because I’m the expert on all things Latino, whether or not I really am.” Tenure-track (early career)

Facilitators

➤ Participant commitment to making a difference

“... [policy research] is a way to go about changing the way things are... to advance the way things are examined.” Tenure-track (early career)

➤ Champion or mentor

“...the 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.” Tenured (senior career)

Conclusions

Strategies to strengthen the academic environment for conducting aging policy-relevant research include:

- Maximizing mentorship opportunities
- Expanding networks of policy researchers
- Increasing external funding opportunities
- Reframing the value of policy research, particularly in terms of tenure and promotion decisions