

# ACCELERATE POLICY AND RESEARCH FOR GREATER IMPACT

An Initiative hosted by the University of Washington's Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology (CSDE) and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC)

## Executive Summary

Across the nation we've witnessed a heightened demand for evidence-based policy-making and program design. Public-serving organizations recognize the value of research for the success of their programs but are often constrained by limited budget, time, or staff capacity to design and implement that research. Many research funders are interested in supporting applied research that informs policy and practice, but receive too few aligned research proposals.

In response to this landscape, *Accelerate Policy and Research for Greater Impact* was led by the [University of Washington's Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology \(CSDE\)](#), with support and inspiration from the [Social Science Research Council's Public Innovations Program \(SSRC\)](#). The Initiative centered Washington-based, public serving organizations with ideas for research projects that would benefit from collaboration with UW scholars. Through a carefully-designed process, CSDE connected UW researchers to these organizations, helped forge a new path for their research, and advanced the probability of "good fit" matches to potential funders. By the end, every selected organization walked away with the building blocks of a strong research project proposal.

The initiative assumed that partnerships between public-serving organizations and researchers make good sense because: **organizations** can leverage their existing data for high-quality (low cost, high impact) research designs; **researchers** can focus their skills and experience for direct impact on policy and program decisions; and 3) **funders** can maximize the impact of limited resources on real-world decision making. Our approach to achieving our objectives included: 1) building partnerships from the very start; 2) ensuring mutual effort to understand + trust each partner, and to seek co-benefit; and, 3) relying on public sector needs and curiosities as the research focus and guide throughout.

Full program details can be found [here](#).



*Accelerate Policy and Research for Greater Impact* is not an isolated initiative; it is part of a broader “movement” in which we are all learning how to fortify partnerships between public-serving organizations and research institutions, and increase the relevance of research for solving pressing problems.

## Project Participants

Thirty-one public-serving organizations applied with proposals for partnering with UW researchers; 20 were from government agencies and 11 from non-profit organizations. Nine projects were chosen for their fit with funding opportunities and likely good matches for UW researchers. Eight PSOs completed the program, including the Washington Administrative Office of the Courts, Seattle City Light, Sound Transit, Washington Attorney General’s Office, Washington Employment Security Department (two projects), Walk About Yakima, and Build 2 Lead. UW researchers came from many parts of UW’s Seattle Campus, including scientists from the Center for Studies in Demography & Ecology, College of Arts & Sciences, Evans School of Public Policy & Governance, Law School, School of Medicine, School of Pharmacy, School of Public Health, and School of Social Work.

## Project Format

The facilitators met virtually with the public-serving organizations once to collect information that would help them make the matches with UW researchers. Two in-person day-long meetings were held for the teams to work together on their ideas. These meetings occurred 1 month apart and were thoughtfully designed and facilitated. Between the two meetings, the facilitators met with the UW researchers to gauge the team’s progress during the first meeting and needs for the second. The facilitation team collected feedback from all participants after both in-person meetings.

### Core Team

**Sara Curran**, Director of the [Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology \(CSDE\)](#) , UW; [scurran@uw.edu](mailto:scurran@uw.edu)

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**Lisa Marshall**, Chief of Staff, [Social Science Research Council](#)

## Project Outcomes

In their final feedback, PSO leaders and research scholars indicated that the Initiative had achieved every one of its initial goals, including:

- Enduring relationships built across the public sector and with UW
- Practical insights gained by the researchers and/or by the public-serving leaders
- Research strategies and research questions sharpened through the collaborative approach
- Public-serving organizations advanced in their development of potential research projects
- Teams gained a deeper understanding of the funding landscape

## Team Acknowledgements and Factors for Success

The composition of the core team contributed to the initiative. Every core team member deeply trusted each other and what they brought to the table. UW/CSDE's large community of research affiliates and strong connections with research funders was essential to the success of the work. These resources allowed our two team leaders to match practical research ideas from public-serving organizations with UW researchers who have related substantive and methodological expertise. The engagement of an expert facilitator helped shape the design of the entire Initiative, and each component of it. The consultant's "learning-centered approach" supported productive dialogue, self-directed progress, and relationship-building. Strong, reliable administrative support at CSDE allowed the UW leads, and the contracted facilitator, to do what they do best. The SSRC funder served as a supportive thought-partner from the beginning, and offered extremely practical insights into the funding landscape at our final event. UW's Central Advancement team joined the final event and offered invaluable advice to all participants, while also providing specific advice to individual teams.

## Five Cross-Cutting Themes to Inform Future Initiatives

1. **Partnerships must be designed with flexibility, and willingness to live with uncertainty.**
2. **Academic researchers are eager to conduct impactful research.**
3. **Public-serving organizations benefit from networking with *each other* about research.**
4. **The basic components of a Letter of Intent (LoI) was a strong organizing framework for the teams' work together. *One more in-person day (3 total) would have allowed them to walk away with a complete draft LoI and a more focused set of potential funders.***
5. **Many public-serving organizations need research that is descriptive or predictive - rather than causal.**