# Addressing State and Local Problems: How Universities can Accelerate Public Impact Research through Public Affairs

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## 1. Introduction

Historically, public universities have played a foundational role in the civic life of their states. From providing high-quality educational programs to translating research through university extension and economic development offices, from operating service learning to continuing education initiatives, there are multiple channels for universities to engage and serve communities (Boyer, 1996; Fitzgerald, et al, 2010). Yet with the documented erosion of trust in higher education (National Academy of Science, 2025), scholars and leaders are now seriously considering anew how higher education contributes value.

One important channel for rebuilding trust is through the systematic inquiry we carry out through our research. The Association of Public Land Grant Universities (APLU) recently embraced the broad term 'public impact research' to highlight how university research impacts society (APLU, 2019). Research funders and academic associations increasingly consider how to accelerate the creation of research that centers public impact (Bednarek, et al; 2025; Redd, et al 2024; Renoe, et al 2023). In these conversations, institutional barriers within higher education are often highlighted, such as promotion and tenure practices, financial support, and scholar capacity (Sdvizhkov, et al 2022). Although these institutional barriers certainly exist, there is a more fundamental limitation. Scholars often lack experience navigating the public context, particularly at the state and local levels. How do local communities define their interests, commonalities, and boundaries? What are the roles played by state agencies, local municipal boards, or the relationships between counties and nonprofit service providers? What are the implications of public financing and philanthropic practices for change making? These and other important questions shape the construction of the public square, creating opportunities and constraints that affect any attempt to use scholarly research to address societal challenges.

Schools of public affairs are uniquely equipped to navigate this public context. Here, we use the term public affairs as a broad umbrella to include schools of public policy, public management, governance, and public administration. We understand policymaking and implementation processes and teach about the daily operations of public, nonprofit, and private institutions. We also regularly help practitioners with program design and evaluation across many topical domains. We appreciate the importance of context in shaping understanding of problems and viable solutions and often draw upon multidisciplinary theories for insights in our scholarship. We also draw upon diverse methodologies for inquiry and communication. Many scholars have rich professional relationships based on substantive engagement with policy practitioners and program implementers—and many of these practitioners are our alumni. These unique assets position schools of public affairs to play a pivotal role in higher education at this moment.

In this essay, we argue that public affairs scholars must name and accelerate knowledge sharing about the essential roles we already play in our states' ecosystems. To facilitate

this, we are launching the Public Impact Research Accelerator (PIR Accelerator) as an initiative that positions our field to lead the way in defining, enabling, delivering, and documenting *public impact* through our research, particularly for the benefit of our state and local communities. Because public universities are geographically located in unique state and local contexts, our universities do not compete for public impact. Rather, we can benefit from strategic collaboration that accelerates our collective capacity.

We envision the PIR Accelerator as a time-limited initiative to build capacity and shift the institutional landscape for public impact research within and across public universities. Given our positions at the University of Washington and The Ohio State University, we are starting the PIR Accelerator network with public affairs schools that are part of the Big Ten Academic Alliance. Together, the Academic Alliance brings together institutions across 13 states, representing a combined population of 147 million people. The Academic Alliance already supports a network of public affairs Deans which potentially makes coordinated action easier. However, the PIR Accelerator network is open to other mission aligned public institutions and scholars.

This essay articulates the intellectual agenda underpinning this vision. It is founded on the philosophy of pragmatism in social science that weaves through our field (Ansell, 2011; Bardach, 2004; Barzelay, 2019; Carboni, et al 2019; Dewey, 1938; Rorty 1982; Schneider and Ingram, 2003; Whetsell, 2023). We synthesize prior insights from the vast literatures on engaged scholarship, research translation, knowledge utilization, philosophies of science, and community-research partnerships, to suggest a theoretical and methodological foundation and develop a shared language to ground our discussions and action planning.

While we nod to various traditions, we do not spend time summarizing the many toolkits and best practices that describe techniques and core skills for carrying out community engaged research such as building trust, engaging with stakeholders, and producing practitioner friendly reports (Burns et al 2021; Hoyt, 2011). In fact, in our conception, public impact research does not presume a particular form of engagement or a particular type of deliverable. Instead, we believe it is anchored by a process of inquiry – learning about the context, designing and implementing a research design, creating materials to help others act, reflecting and adjusting given what is learned – that creates different forms of public impact. This work is grounded by a fundamental commitment to helping everyday people – program operators, public managers, community leaders, state policymakers - make progress on a problem at hand. Yet, this process and its results need to be more widely understood, embraced, and resourced. While not often recognized, we also know from our own experiences that this approach is a way to enjoy both an intellectually fulfilling and a practically satisfying scholarly career.

## 2. Shared Language: Defining Public Impact Research—Isn't this Just Engaged Scholarship? Or Research Translation?

Because of the incentives created by our disciplines, academics are well versed in parsing concepts and constructs. Various terminology is employed and careers made arguing about ontological and epistemological distinctions. Here, our intention is not to continue that intellectual exercise for its own sake, but instead to clarify the boundaries of what we mean by public impact research for the purposes of this endeavor.

Thinking about research is influenced by conventions in the natural sciences. Historically, there was a distinction made between 'basic' and 'applied' sciences. Basic science focused on advancing knowledge for its own sake, often in a laboratory setting, to generate discovery and understanding of fundamental principles. Applied science focused on practical problems or achieving specific goals. Yet the boundaries between basic and applied science are often blurred, particularly as public and private funders push basic science researchers to articulate the 'broader impacts' of their research for society (Bednarek, et al; 2025). In fact, the range of approaches for research that benefit society is vast with varying degrees of public interaction (Drahota et al. 2016; Boyer, 1996; Van de Ven 2007).

For example, one approach to benefiting society is participatory action research. It focuses on the direct engagement of people who are involved in the domain of interest – schoolteachers; neighborhood residents; teenagers or retirees – to shape research questions, data collection protocols, analytical processes, or research products (Cornish, et al 2023; Drahota et al. 2016; Lee et al. 2024). Scholars focus on the processes of engagement and their agency to create change in society through their research. Researchers are expected to not simply document problems, but to advocate for social change (Ospina, et al 2008; Lee et al 2024).

Another common approach to benefit society through research is translation. Most fundamentally, translation seeks to make the results of research more accessible to non-researchers, including policymakers and practitioners. Activities often focus on methods of communication to bring research insights to the public domain and frame it in a way that it might be what is needed or useful. Indeed, there is an entire field of study of translational research that brings together theories of innovation diffusion, social marketing, and persuasive communication (Ashcraft et al. 2020).

Research translation is also common in domains where technological innovations, novel solutions, and inventions need to be deployed. In these domains, translation activities include interactions with the private sector through test-beds (an environment in which new solutions are tested in controlled environments), technology sandboxes, and other forms of industry-university partnerships. Whether through strategic communication or industry-university partnerships, translation activities focus attention on tactical issues to help disseminate research to external audiences.

Both participatory action research and translational activities center the *methods* of interacting with the public. In this regard, both can be understood under a broader umbrella of *engaged scholarship* where varying degrees and forms of engagement reflect distinct assumptions about how knowledge is produced and communicated (Van de Ven 2007). One approach assumes that research will be more useful and relevant if it is co-produced with the community, while the other assumes that research will be most useful when it is appropriately communicated to or deployed with external stakeholders. The central defining feature of both is the method of engagement used by scholars.

By contrast, the approach we take here is to prioritize the *purpose* or *use* of the research in practice, which may or may not require specific forms of engagement. Decades ago, when the causal social science boom was underway, Argyris (1993) called attention to the importance of producing *actionable* knowledge rather than knowledge for knowledge's sake. Actionable knowledge is implementable and can be used to make change in the external world. It aligns with a methodology of pragmatism and intentional design, which we describe in more detail later in this essay. While engagement may be

necessary to produce actionable knowledge, the methods of engagement are a means to an end rather than an end in and of themselves (Lemos et al. 2018; Mach et al 2020; Oliver et al. 2019).

As scholars at public R1 universities with a core mission to serve our communities, it is critical that we center *outcomes*. An overemphasis on engagement, co-production, or participatory action research can unintentionally burden our communities with asks of their time and talent without obvious returns (Barnes, et al, 2009; Lemos et al. 2018; Oliver et al. 2019; Park et al. 2024;). For example, in a recent study of community perceptions of engaged research with a large land grant university, Park and colleagues (2024) found that community members often had difficulty distinguishing engaged research activities from numerous other activities initiated by the university such as outreach services, service-learning, and professional services. While some community members were able to recall specific positive examples of long-term reciprocal research engagements, others expressed concerns about the short-term, transactional nature of their interactions with researchers. For these community members, there is significant time and resource costs associated with such activities.

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities has also embraced a shift from methods to outcomes in their intentional use of the term "public impact research." According to their definition, public impact research is "a broad label to describe how university research improves lives and serves society—locally, regionally, nationally, and globally" (APLU 2019). They emphasize "drawing upon deep understanding of specific areas [of research] to build new knowledge and engage with stakeholders to identify and address societal issues." Thus, rather than presuming that scholarly attention should focus on the processes and methodologies of engagement, the definition highlights the central purpose: to benefit the public.

## 3. Research Use as Public Impact

Centering the public impact of research requires an understanding of how research is used to create value in society—and in this case—in our state and local communities. In this approach, while research use is a necessary condition for public impact, it can take many different forms. In fact, there is an entire field of scholarship that interrogates knowledge use. It describes different types as well as factors that enable or hinder use, and a related literature examines different ways of conceptualizing research impact. We draw insights from these literatures to become more precise in our thinking about what we mean by the public impact of research for state and local communities.

While there are numerous ways to think about research utilization, most frameworks generally differentiate three main types of use: instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic (Amara et al. 2004; Beyer 1997; Beyer and Trice 1982). *Instrumental use* is the most conventionally understood way that research is expected to affect policy and practice. Research offers knowledge or specific insights that are used to solve a particular problem. This was the classic understanding of the policy sciences, where knowledge generated through systematic scientific inquiry could be brought to bear to develop solutions to wicked public problems (Weiss 1979). This understanding of research led to the development of policy schools and applied policy research and consulting firms in the mid to late 20$^{th}$ century, such as the RAND corporation, MDRC, Urban Institute, and Abt Associates, espousing values related to "evidence-informed policy and practice."

These entities built a robust industry around responding to the pressing questions faced by government, often through technically sophisticated analysis that generates evidence for policymakers and practitioners (Burkhauser and Burkhauser 2024; Radin, 2013).

It is also the understanding that motivates the contemporary field of implementation science concerned with the evidence-practice gap that breaks down during the implementation process (Greenhalgh et al. 2004; Westerlund et al 2019). In this conception, research should be used to identify the most scientifically effective practice (e.g. vaccine distribution practices, job training programs, or eviction prevention), to isolate the implementation barriers that get in the way of using what is proven to work in causal evaluations. Scholars in this tradition call attention to the political and organizational factors that prevent or facilitate the direct translation of research 'evidence' to policy (Ashcraft et al. 2020; DellaVigna et al 2024; Cairney et al. 2016; Cairney and Oliver 2017). When instrumental use is the goal, part of the role of an impactful researcher is to not only discover novel evidence, but to situate or frame that evidence in a way that is politically feasible and operationally doable.

While scholars in this tradition often lament the fact that evidence is not reflected in policy or used with fidelity by practitioners, this instrumental understanding overlooks other uses of research in broader policy and governance systems. *Conceptual uses* of research are more indirect and diffuse. Research is used to shape ongoing conversations and frame issues rather than solve concrete problems (Amara et al. 2004; Beyer 1997; Beyer and Trice 1982; Mach et al. 2020). In an early study, Weiss (1979) called attention to this as the 'enlightenment function' of research. Under this conceptualization, research does not need to be politically feasible or reflect shared values; research that is used can even be 'social criticism' to push forward new ideas or shape conversations. Interestingly, there is consistent evidence across studies and context that respondents associated with government are more likely to report conceptual rather than instrumental research uses (Amara et al. 2004; Crowley et al. 2021; Nelson et al. 2023).

The third type of research use, *symbolic*, is sometimes criticized as a less intended byproduct of scholarly inquiry. Symbolic use does not offer new knowledge or insights to solve problems but instead provides legitimacy for predetermined actions or solutions to problems (Amara, et al. 2004). For example, consider a case where a school district decides that charter schools are (or are not) the solution to improve education for residents. Research evidence can be found to support either decision and may be leveraged symbolically to help justify or legitimate the district's decision. Decades ago, in her seminal work on the role of the policy analyst, Alice Rivlin (1984) noted that no serious policy debate occurs without someone citing 'research' or evidence.

In our conceptualization, we do not presume that a particular type of use is more important than another, nor that uses are mutually exclusive. Filling an evidence gap, framing a problem, or providing legitimacy for solutions are all ways that research can be utilized to impact state and local communities. But what is *public* about public impact research? If research is used by state and local stakeholders, is it always for *public impact*?

There is a large body of literature that defines and interrogates research impact outside of academia, often referred to under the broad umbrella of societal impact (e.g. Bornmann 2013; Bozeman and Sarewitz 201; 1Pablo Dorta-González 2024; Smitt and Hessels 2021). Some scholars further separate the social and political impacts of

research (Bednarek et al. 2025; Boaz et al. 2009; Hansson and Polk 2018; Reale et al. 2018). Whereas scientific impact is defined by advances in new lines of inquiry or analysis, social impact is defined by changes to the “cultural, economic, and social life of individuals, organizations, and institutions”, and political impact is defined by the use of research for “political decisions, and motivations and rationales for political action and priority setting” (Reale et al. 2018). While these alternative forms of impact make sense theoretically, there isn’t a clear approach to their measurement. Alternative citation metrics track mentions of researchers or their published articles in news outlets or social media (Bornman 2014; Bornmann & Haunschild 2018) or in government policy documents (Dorta-González et al. 2024). Yet it is generally acknowledged that these altmetrics are only able to partially capture the societal, or public impact of research.

In a pragmatic sense, the public impact of research may not be the result of specific research products but may instead be created through the research process itself. The process of conducting research may activate or mobilize a group of public stakeholders around a particular public problem. Indeed, the mobilization of an interested and informed public is often considered a core feature of democratic governance and is perhaps the most important public impact our research can have on society (Dewey 1927; Moore 2021; Whetsell 2024).

This is perhaps why so much scholarly attention has focused on the processes of engagement, as we have discussed in participatory action and translational activities. Yet sometimes, a mobilized public already exists around a problem and this engagement throughout a research process is not necessary. At worst, it may be disingenuous and exploitive (Lemos et al. 2018). In our minds, it is not engagement for the sake of engagement that creates public impact.

Instead, the public impact of research for state and local communities emerges through a process of systematic inquiry that centers a public problem and works towards positive change. Following the lead of other public affairs scholars, the public component of research impact is research that contributes to public values or creates public value (e.g. Bozeman and Sarewitz 2011), which can occur at any stage of the research process and can take multiple forms. When researchers can play a role as part of the social learning ecosystem around the problem to advance *collective* understanding around a *societal problem*, they will be impactful.

Taken together, we view public impact research as inquiry that is used to address public problems—which could include problem framing, problem legitimizing, or problem solving. Research is more likely to have public impact when it is intentionally designed around an in-depth understanding of place, problems, and trusted relationships with the affected organizations and communities. For public impact in state and local communities, this involves researchers having an in-depth understanding of the local context—including key stakeholders, governance structures, how the community defines and approaches the problem, and the types of evidence most useful to affect change in a particular place at a particular time. At the same time, researchers can advance public impact by bringing to the problem situation an in-depth understanding of the problem and current evidence outside of the local context, as well as standards for evaluating the quality of evidence and conducting inquiry.

## 4. Methodology of Inquiry for Public Impact

Fundamentally, the value of public impact research lies in its ability to support the emergence of insights and inquiry, things that help people and institutions move beyond the doubts that often surround real world problems to act with more confidence. As such, it allows us to break apart the false dichotomy often applied to scholarly research between rigor and relevance. As suggested earlier, it does so by drawing principles from pragmatism, a core, intellectual orientation within the philosophy of science. It also employs a multi-disciplinary approach to research methodology. It is shaped directly from the thinking of John Dewey (1910; 1927; 1938) and other pragmatist philosophers (Peirce, 1998; Parker-Follett, 1995; Rorty 1982), as well as writings of public affairs scholars (Ansell, 2011; Schneider and Ingram, 2003; Shields 2008; Whetsell 2024). Pragmatist philosophy emphasizes inquiry as an interactive, experimental-driven process situated in how people interact with their contexts. The meaning or truth of an idea lies in its practical consequences. For pragmatic scholars and leaders, inquiry is deeply shaped by human agency, democratic health, and the active creation of publics where interactions among people create collective or state action.

**Figure 1: Methodology of Inquiry for Public Impact**

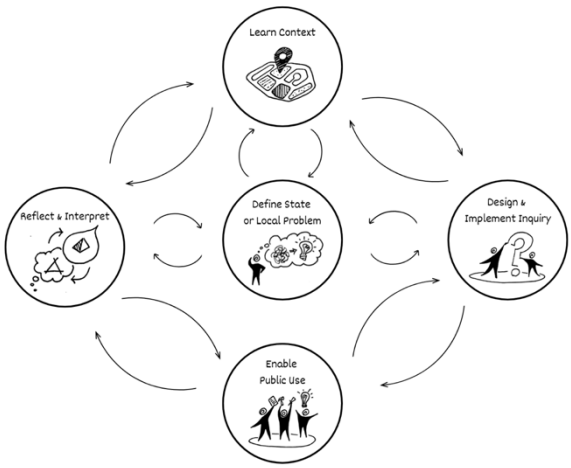


Figure 1 illustrates a pragmatic methodology of inquiry for public impact research. Our approach recognizes there is complexity in the processes of creating public impact through research and that various activities interact in nonlinear and emergent ways. However, there are core elements, such as deep understanding of context and problem centering, that are necessary for research to move beyond explanation to address public problems.

The methodology of public impact research is ***problem oriented***– with inquiry centered around a real-world problematic situation. This problem orientation is embedded in and defined by the context but also emerges and is refined through the process of inquiry. Sometimes, the role of the researcher is to elevate a problem that has been under-recognized or under-resourced and conduct inquiry in a way that brings new ways of thinking about the problem to the agenda. Dewey (1938) talks about this as "calling people into action" around the problem and sees inquiry as a way to improve democratic capacity. Other times the role of the researcher is to elicit and respond to problems that are elevated by the community—by local, state, or even federal practitioners and policymakers. In either case, the focus is not on inquiry for the sake of building or testing theory, but on bringing tools and methods of systematic inquiry, including theory, to the benefit of a problem. In this practice, problematic situations are approached with critical optimism, "the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered" (Dewey 1938, 179).

These types of opportunities for systematic inquiry are grounded in a particular place and at a particular time (Dewey 1927; 1938). ***Contextual grounding*** is fundamental in public impact research as it shapes the understanding of the problem, nature of the inquiry, interpretation of

findings, and research use. Context knowledge includes deep understanding of the policy and program environment surrounding a problem at the local, state, and national levels. Context knowledge also includes deep understanding of a particular geographic community, nonprofit organization, or state agency—understanding the governance and power dynamics within the particular place. In earlier writings, we conceptualize this as 'strategic action fields' where actors build power and influence how events unfold (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). As researchers understand the context, they come to understand what is viable and useful to respond to the presenting problem. Some researchers gain this contextual knowledge over their careers as they engage in the field and place. But there are also systematic tools to help researchers new to a setting learn about it, including policy field analysis (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015), stakeholder analysis (Bryson, 2004), operational process audits, or critical design ethnography (Barab et al. 2004).

When engaging in public impact research, there are various ways a researcher can ***design and implement inquiry*** into a problem. Designers who develop products or buildings recognize that effective design is crafted in relation to presenting constraints--in supply chains, materials, or the geography at a building site. Similarly, the methodology of public impact research recognizes there are real world constraints that surround presenting problems, such as short timelines, limited data availability and cleanliness, and constrained financial resources. There are tradeoffs to be weighed and decisions to be made. While the range of potential research designs are almost infinite – from randomized controlled field trials to descriptive ethnographies – the design of public impact research is shaped in relation to the other elements, including context and intentional decisions about use. Because understanding often is emergent, designs that are sequential or phased may be particularly appropriate. Mixed methods for data collection, documentation, and analysis are often helpful and can benefit from the talents of interdisciplinary teams.

A pragmatic approach to public impact research also requires continuous ***reflection and interpretation*** to inform the next right thing to do. Rather than starting with a particular set of tenets to test (deductive) or building insights entirely from the context (inductive), both types of logic can be present and inform each other. For example, researchers may start out analyzing a particular problem situation using one set of metrics and learn through the analytical process that other indicators are actually more appropriate and develop an alternative research design. In this sense, scholars are engaged in active learning. Access to an interdisciplinary team who possesses a range of skills in facilitation, documentation, and analysis of both numeric and unstructured data is invaluable given the iterative nature of inquiry.

Finally, public impact research is constantly attuned to ***enabling the use*** of research to frame, legitimate, or provide ideas about potential solutions at multiple steps in the process. Importantly, this use is not limited to the end product of a study, such as a published research article or report. Instead, research use can include valuable interactions, tools, and artifacts that are generated at various stages. For example, as we approach a research problem, we often write glossy reports filled with photographs and descriptive data tables for practitioners. We make research presentations for policy makers and funders unlikely to ever read such reports. We also have created web-based apps for frontline staff, worksheets for supervisors, and conducted trainings for program operators. We craft toolkits and resource guides for citizens. Each type of product is shaped in relation to our assessment of the context, what is feasible and of the most value in the moment. We have come to refer to this as a process of creating

"implementation resources" through the research process that help our partners move forward solutions in very concrete ways (Hill, 2003; Moulton and Sandfort, 2020). This aligns with the pragmatists vision that scholars should frame problems and inform public conversations rather than direct policymaking (Dewey, 1938).

This attention to use and the associated practices is perhaps the most distinguishing ingredient in our methodology of inquiry for public impact research. While peer reviewed research is often ultimately created from these endeavors – because it provides a means to build shared knowledge with other scholars and support teaching the next generation – it is not the end. In fact, rather than viewing public impact and scholarly impact as oppositional, we find that the pursuit of both types of impact is mutually beneficial. Yet there are distinct capabilities needed to work in this way. A recent study of published articles in leading public affairs journals from 2015 to 2019 documents that fewer than one-third of authors indicated that their research was attempting to influence practitioners or be used in policy or administrative decisions (Bozeman, et al. 2025). The study further revealed that the most significant predictor of research use in practice was a scholar's motivation to impact practice.

Certainly, individual researchers shoulder some of the responsibility for developing this capacity and motivation. But without institutional support, they face an uphill battle. Institutions, particularly public R1 universities, have an essential role in building and reinforcing a public impact research ecosystem. We believe, given their unique expertise, schools of public affairs are important intermediaries who can accelerate universities' capacities at this time.

## 5. Building Institutional Ecosystems that Support Public Impact Research

There is increasing recognition that universities—particularly R1 public universities—have an imperative to increase the public impact of their research endeavors. This push has been institutionalized through several large-scale field building efforts, including through the coalition of public land grant universities (APLU 2019), the National Academy of Sciences (NAS 2025), new government university partnerships (Doleac and Harvey, 2025), and public and philanthropic funder networks (Bednarek et al. 2025). Schools of public affairs can step up in this moment to play a unique role in a public impact ecosystem, both within their own universities and in coalition with others, to more effectively serve our state and local communities.

There are some precedents. For example, University Extension Services in public, land grant universities were originally created through government appropriation to assist with the translation of agricultural innovations for wide-scale adoption by local farmers. Working with farmers, researchers led the development of disease resistant crops adapted to various locales that helped increase agricultural productivity. Other extension researchers established seed banks to ensure that seed variants developed in geographic ecosystems were preserved, ensuring that public values were not overshadowed by market values (Peters, 2010). Now extension offices exist in every county in most states and provide much more than agricultural programming; there is also a national network that connects scholars and staff across institutions.

***Within R1 Public Universities***

The decentralized nature of universities is a design strength; it can enable faculty to pursue research that aligns with their unique curiosities, research approaches, and motivations, including those to partner with external entities. Yet decentralization without coordination undermines coherence, communication, and impact. In relation to our interest here in enabling strategic relationships around public problems, the challenges are well understood. External organizations find it difficult to approach the university with their questions, secure appropriate resources, or navigate to aligned researchers where there is capacity and shared interests. Researchers across R1 campuses need training, support, and incentives to invest in public impact research. This is often referred to as the 'two cultures' or 'two communities' problems (Bednerek et al. 2025; Hoyt, 2011; Isett and Hicks 2020; Landry et al 2003).

Public affairs schools already bridge the two cultures through their role in training the very practitioners and policymakers who may be the users of university research. Many of the graduates of our programs go on to work in state and local governments, nonprofit, and community organizations. Public affairs schools also provide non-credit professional development and training programs for state and local public affairs practitioners. And we often run student consulting labs, research centers, and intern programs that benefit state and local organizations. Yet oftentimes, these efforts are operated as one-off activities, not coordinated with other campus activities in the same partner organizations or recognized as part of a suite of resources that our schools and universities can provide to state and local communities.

Through increased coordination, schools of public affairs can play an important intermediary role within universities to accelerate public impact research, building capacity for and brokering relationships with state and local government entities and civic institutions. The literature on community-academic partnerships is clear that intermediaries are often an important component of enabling research utilization (Crowley et al. 2021; Isett and Hicks 2020; McNall, et al 2008; Nesbit and Jones 2025; Oliver et al. 2022). Along with our sister disciplines of city and regional planning, social work, and public health, our schools have expertise in state and local government contexts that can help train and equip scholars at all levels (students, post-docs, assistant professors, tenured faculty, research scientists, research staff) to engage more intentionally and skillfully with external partners.

This intermediary role can be formalized through the creation of public impact research (PIR) hubs within schools of public affairs. As Figure 2 summarizes, the hubs can provide capacity for a range of essential functions: curating knowledge about public governance structures in the state and local communities; facilitating the design of projects and supporting effective community engagement; activating scholars from other academic units with relevant content or methodological expertise relevant to the specific problems brought to the university; deploying multi-media communication to share with state residents the results of these projects; attracting philanthropic support for new projects; and implementing catalyst funds to inspire public impact research to spread across the campus.

**Figure 2: Roles of Public Impact Research Hubs within Public Affairs Schools**

- Curate knowledge about public governance in state
- Provide professional training in methodology of inquiry and facilitate design of PIR projects
- Assist with appropriate community engagement and results sharing
- Activate scholars in wide array of academic units to participate
- Administer catalyst funds
- Solidify partnerships with practitioner networks
- Coordinate other resources such as internships and student consulting projects.

Within universities, sustainable funding for PIR hubs can be built like other important university functions: dedicated line-item investments from general funds or endowments; 'taxation' from funding pools such as contracts for services or indirect costs; fee for services revenue generation; or philanthropic social impact investments. Some combination of funding mechanisms is likely the most sustainable. For example, the University of Georgia uses institutional funding to match fee for service revenue from state and local partners 3:1 (Nesbit and Jones, 2025).

PIR hubs can take different forms depending on the needs and capacities in each context. The hubs can partner with established university or college centers already working in topical areas (e.g. education, public health, environment, housing, or mental health services). These centers often are shaped by the vision of a particular principal-investigator, a talented scholar knowledgeable about the policy and practice issues in that domain. However, these topical centers often struggle to be sustained when that investigator retires or leaves for another job. By coordinating with the PIR hub, their important work can be enhanced and supported by university-wide investments and enable other investigators to benefit from their impact-oriented work. Each PIR hub can also build close working relationships with relevant membership associations in the state's ecosystem, such as chapters of the international city/county manager associations, state and national association of counties, and state and national nonprofit associations. These entities often have a trusted role in helping leaders learn about promising practices and other ways to address local problems.

In the last decade, some universities have tried to address this problem in a different way, by establishing university-wide 'outreach' or 'community engagement' senior administrators or offices. However, these efforts are often notoriously underfunded, unable to weather changes in top administration. Because they do not have a disciplinary home, they have not garnered the authority needed to drive systematic change within universities. By necessity, they have focused on training individual investigators in techniques of engagement. While techniques for cooperative goal setting, sharing power, developing group cohesion and managing partnerships is important (Boyer, 1996; Drahota et al. 2016; Nesbit and Jones, 2025), these engagement practices are insufficient to ensure impact and use of research by state and local practitioners we have discussed here. In fact, the very terminology used – and the

structural position in senior administrative offices – artificially brands this work as 'service' in the minds of faculty.

In contrast, unlike these anemic outreach offices, many universities now have well-staffed and resourced commercialization or technological transfer and innovation offices. These offices have a similar goal to bring research innovations to practice as what we are discussing here. But the focus is on the private market-- assisting researchers in securing patents, making connections to industry, and commercializing returns on their research (APLU, 2023). Certainly, investments in private market innovation can also benefit the public while producing a "win-win" return to universities, communities, and business partners. Yet, as the University Extension example of the seed bank suggests, there is also a role that universities play in preserving public value even when there isn't immediate market value. Rather than viewing "outreach and engagement" and "innovation and discovery" as siloed endeavors that are weighted and rewarded disparately, we view both as critical, mutually reinforcing components of the public impact research ecosystem within R1 public universities.

***Across Universities: Designing a Public Impact Research Accelerator***

The vision laid out here requires a fundamental shift in how research is conceived, carried out, and rewarded at public R1 universities. It involves elevating this work and investing in it as a core and legitimate part of the research enterprise. It involves public universities prioritizing-- like they do for discovery, translation, and marketization – research intended to directly create societal value for the states within which the universities exist, including the residents, civic associations, networks, and government entities. We optimistically believe this shift is possible. And we know that to realize this vision in the current environment, we must accelerate visibility, learning, and capacity across the country.

Drawing from our understanding of social systems, we recognize that this scale of change can be accomplished through system level interventions. We can accomplish more as a collective of public affairs schools in public R1 universities than we can acting individually. Public affairs scholars also know quite a bit about the formation of collaborative, voluntary interorganizational networks and their impacts (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Carboni et al. 2019; Clark 2021; Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Sandfort and Milward, 2008). Motivation for action and shared understanding of a common vision and goals are critical, as well as processes and structures for governance.

In our case, we are motivated by the researchers (our colleagues) who do this 'hidden work' every day, running uphill against institutional constraints to create public value for our communities. Their tenacity, pragmatic optimism, and commitment to public impact through their research is inspirational. In a moment when higher education is under attack and the value of our work to society is in question, these scholars offer a counter narrative that centers the public in the work that they do.

We see at least four broad goals that can shape the activities of a PIR Accelerator. These goals are subject to refinement as we develop our shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities that can benefit from strategic, field-wide intervention. But at a minimum, they give us a starting point.

(1) <u>Grow shared resources and capacity for public impact research</u>

Oftentimes the pursuit of resources for research is a competitive endeavor, where scholars compete for a limited pool of prestigious funding. Research programs and

centers are launched to have a competitive advantage in a particular problem area or policy context, to set their work apart from their national and international peers. A fundamental premise that guides the vision of the PIR Accelerator is that we are not in competition with each other for public impact in service to our state and local communities. The University of Washington is uniquely positioned to serve King County, Spokane, Yakima or the Colville Nation in Washington. Ohio State is uniquely positioned to serve Franklin County, Holmes County, Findlay, or Cincinnati in Ohio. We have unique contextual understanding about and trusted relationships in place.

While the contexts are unique, the approaches to inquiry that enable public impact are not unique to a specific place. The tools and practices we develop to conduct inquiry in Yakima, Washington can help inform the tools and practices to conduct inquiry in Holmes County, Ohio. We can share rather than duplicate resources to build our collective capacity for public impact. We can easily imagine sharing effective materials and tools through open access repositories and toolkits. We can leverage existing resource repositories and assess their effectiveness in a diverse array of public impact research projects with state and local leaders across policy and program areas.[1] In developing these shared tools and practices, we can collaborate with national associations such as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), the National Association of Counties (NACo), and the National League of Cities (NLC).

There is also opportunity for shared learning and coordination around common and pressing problems facing our state and local communities, such as economic and workforce development, housing supply, climate change, food insecurity, and even national security. The PIR Accelerator can leverage problem-specific expertise from network members, national intermediaries, think-tanks, and university research centers to help advance solutions for our state and local communities. Rather than replicate the in-depth problem expertise, the PIR Accelerator can serve as a conduit to facilitate knowledge sharing and coordinated action across public universities in service to our state and local communities.

In recent years, other communities like this have emerged, often among individual investigators who have received a specific source of funding. For example, the NSF's "Accelerating Research Translation" program brought together grantees to build capacity around technology transfer. In the last five years, William T. Grant Foundation built a Use of Research Evidence (URE) Methods Repository—primarily focused on youth-oriented programs and education scholars. In fact, public and private research funders have themselves coordinated their own actions and developed coordinated strategies to fund people and projects that integrate community engagement, translational research, or research use in the Transforming Evidence Funders Network (TEFN) (Bednarek et al. 2025). The actions of these funders are strategic and honed to make changes in the universities' research ecosystem. Many now include assessment of engagement processes as part of the funding rubrics and criteria to evaluate proposals; some offer funding for capacity building for engaged research partnerships; they describe a need for rigorous studies of whether and how engaged research leads to improved outcomes; and they appear interested in funding capacity building, shifting incentives for

[1]One such example is: https://transforming-evidence.org/projects/use-of-research-evidence-methods-repository

researchers within academic institutions and supporting development of boundary spanning intermediaries.

(2) Develop approaches to recognize and reward the public impact of research in place
In the national conversation about public impact research, there is a vibrant discussion about the importance of measuring public impact. The current practice of assessing scholarly impact using bibliographic indices, such as h-index, i10-index and journal impact factors, were developed in the mid twentieth century and institutionalized by the 1990s. While offering comparable standards in many fields, these tools incentivize scholars to share research exclusively in scholarly outlets. Alternative citation metrics developed in the past few decades, such as the Altmetric Attention Score to measure social media, news and some policy citations of researchers and articles, and more recently, the Overton Index that more explicitly measures citations in policy documents and grey literature such as papers from think tanks. Empirical analyses of these alternative metrics tend to find a high correlation between media mentions and the citation of research in policy documents (Dorta-Gonzalez et al. 2024). While these metrics offer some promise of measuring impact outside of academic circles, they are likely insufficient measures of the public impact of research, particularly for state and local communities.

There are numerous barriers to measuring the public impact of research, including difficulty causally tying specific research to specific societal outcomes, the duration of time it takes to observe the impacts of research, and the different meanings of research impact for different disciplines and policy areas (Bornmann 2013). Despite these constraints, we recognize the importance of developing shared standards by which to assess public impact research. Shared standards and ways of communicating impact can support learning, strategic planning, accountability and public relations. In the United Kingdom, public financial investment in higher education led to the development of a conceptual model, methodology and tracking system to measure the societal impact of research.[2] Building from an earlier model launched in the 1980s, the current approach called the "Research Excellence Framework" combines quantitative metrics with peer reviews of case study narratives. There are a variety of other such hybrid approaches to measuring the societal impact of research in other countries (Bornmann, 2013; Thelwall, 2021). This type of hybrid approach seems promising for our focus on state and local problems and may be able to be adapted for use with the PIR Accelerator.

Shared standards and approaches for assessing public impact can enable our universities to tell a collective story of how our research is impacting our state residents and addressing the problems they face. Shared standards are also a critical component for assessing faculty performance, providing criteria for the granting of tenure and subsequent promotions (APLU, n.d.; Rushforth and De Rijcke, 2024; Sdvizhkov, et al 2022). Public affairs schools often struggle with the limitations of bibliographic impact measures in assessing faculty performance, given the importance our field places on reaching audiences outside of academia with our research. The PIR Accelerator can collaborate to elevate and systematize an alternative measurement approach across schools of public affairs that can also serve as a model for other academic fields. These shared standards can also pave the way for national awards through prestigious public

[2] See UK Research and Innovation: https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/research-england/research-excellence/#contents-list. Retrieved on October 15, 2025

affairs associations that recognize scholars in the field for their public impact, particularly in service to their state and local communities.

(3) Apprentice the next generation of public affairs scholars to conduct public impact research

There are a range of practices underlying the methodology of public impact inquiry. Most are currently passed to graduate students through mentoring or through an informal apprenticeship model in which a principal investigator brings students alongside to work on public impact research projects. While training initiatives have emerged for natural scientists in public engagement, most focus upon the communication techniques such as writing, storytelling and use of multimedia tools (Muindi and Luray, 2023).

The PIR Accelerator can democratize learning about successful strategies and approaches to public impact research in a variety of ways, allowing these insights to transcend individual relationships. For example, PIR network institutions can collaborate to co-design seminars for graduate students to be offered (virtually) at multiple universities. Network partners can contribute shared learning materials, such as case studies and simulations from real projects, to support larger scale training. This content could be further developed into certificate programs or micro-credentials. Campus-based training also could be implemented by the PIR hubs for graduate students and faculty within and across the participating universities. Within universities, network institutions could work with offices of academic affairs to offer PIR training as a formal faculty professional development opportunity. The professional development network within the Big Ten Academic Alliance also could be activated to share trainings and resources across institutions. The PIR Accelerator could host graduate student and faculty PIR scholar in residence programs across partnering institutions to help grow and disseminate shared practices.

## 6. Conclusions

We need collective capacity to shift our field aligned with these ideas. The PIR Accelerator is a time-limited initiative to facilitate this shift, leveraging the unique role of public affairs schools located within public research universities. The movement is already underway. In November 2025, we convened a small group of public university leaders, faculty members, researchers, and graduate students in public affairs schools with established track records and interests in public impact research. We harvested insights from trailblazers about the facilitators and barriers to public impact research. We reflected upon the courage it takes, as well as the resources and institutional support we might build to accelerate this type of practice within our schools and across our universities.

As we've begun work on this initiative, we've unearthed some underlying assumptions that drive our sense of the collective opportunities for our field in this moment. First, it is undeniable that there is a significant disconnect when universities focus only on traditional academic research for scholarly audiences. We are living in an increasingly complex time with significant public problems created by income inequality, climate change, and political polarization. Evidence abounds that the typical academic approaches to knowledge development and dissemination may no longer be sufficient to respond adequately to these complex challenges. The uncertainty caused by loss of trust in public institutions and rapid technological change creates an opportunity to think differently about how public universities interact with their publics.

Second, public R1 universities and public affairs schools hold important resources that can be deployed to respond to these challenges, particularly as felt by residents in our states. Our alumni and their professional networks are the very people being asked to address complex, societal problems. Students are eager to engage in practice-based learning. Many scholars are already trained in multiple methods of inquiry that can be directed toward public problems and are motivated to help.

Third, although these resources exist, universities have not effectively centered or made visible the results of public impact research in our states or what it takes to produce this at high quality. There is not an inherent tension between relevance and rigor, between public impact and scholarly impact. But we need to be able to better articulate a shared understanding of how we do this work and why it matters.

Finally, while public R1 universities have embraced their unique roles in creating economic impacts through our education of students and marketization of discovery, we have not done so as directly with our unique abilities to strengthen civic health and create public value. These opportunities – clear in this moment when the roles and legitimacy of higher education are being challenged – are too significant to overlook.

As we have made clear, pragmatist philosophy and methodology underpins the scholarly agenda we have discussed here. For Dewey (1927) and the other pragmatists philosophers, inquiry is a critical ingredient in a healthy democracy. It is what calls people together and it is how we refine knowledge. People must encounter each other, engage in collective dialogue, and undertake experimental problem solving. Through the PIR Accelerator, we hope to focus the attention of public universities on this important calling to help respond to the questions in our country at this time.

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