



Improving Health Services Research

Field-building activities for health services research, 2006–10

SUMMARY

From 2006 to 2010, [AcademyHealth](#) hosted numerous professional meetings and produced a report with recommendations on how to improve health services research—a multidisciplinary field in which practitioners develop solutions to cost, quality, and access problems in patient care.

AcademyHealth, based in Washington, is a professional society for health care researchers and policy analysts.

Key Results

AcademyHealth held:

- Five National Health Policy Conferences
- Five Annual Research Meetings
- Five sessions on state-level research and policy issues

Recommendations

AcademyHealth produced a report, *Strengthening the Field of Health Services Research: A Needs Assessment of Key Producers and Users*, prepared for AcademyHealth’s Council of Sponsors of Health Services Research in 2006. It documents “the major opportunities and challenges in the field” and highlights “critical infrastructure needs in human resources, methods, and data.” Its recommendations include:

- Develop a compelling business case for the field of health services research including a vision for how the findings from research projects will transform the health care system
- Improve the skills of new researchers in writing, leadership, and teamwork
- Fund a broader array of research topics such as health care disparities, genetics, insurance coverage, and financing strategies

Funding

RWJF supported this project from July 2006 through November 2010 with two grants totaling \$395,000.

CONTEXT

Findings from health services research can lead to improvements in the health care system. Examples include new programs for the elderly, investments in information technology to reduce errors in patient care, and expanded access to mammograms for women.

But sometimes policy-makers do not learn about significant research findings and how to translate them into public policy, which hinders efforts to improve health care. This happens because “researchers are not always able to effectively communicate their work to decision makers,” said Jennifer Muldoon, MHSA, director of the conferences team at AcademyHealth.

AcademyHealth

That is where AcademyHealth comes in. “AcademyHealth’s goal is not only to support the professional needs of researchers but also to facilitate the dissemination of their research, thereby improving the delivery of health care,” Muldoon said.

The organization was established in June 2000 through a merger of two other health services research organizations: the Alpha Center and the Association for Health Services Research.

AcademyHealth provides:

- Numerous conferences designed specifically to encourage interaction between researchers and policy-makers
- Technical assistance and educational programs to improve researchers’ skills
- Information about the financial, human, and data resources necessary to improve the quality of health services research
- Technical assistance and synthesis to assist policy-makers and other decision makers in identifying, evaluating, and implementing research-based policy solutions

RWJF's Interest in This Area

RWJF has supported AcademyHealth's Annual Research Meeting and the National Health Policy Conference since 2000. See [Program Results](#).¹

The Foundation also has supported AcademyHealth's efforts to educate policy-makers and the public about the value of health services research. See [Program Results](#)² on a 2002 communications campaign as well as [Program Results](#)³ on a research project about strengthening the field.

AcademyHealth also manages two RWJF national programs—*State Coverage Initiatives* (which runs through January 2013) and *Changes in Health Care Financing and Organization* (which runs through August 2014). It previously managed the National Health Care Purchasing Institute, an RWJF national program that is now closed.

THE PROJECT

With funding under these two grants, from 2006 to 2010, [AcademyHealth](#) supported the field of health services research and health policy through a series of national health policy conferences, annual research meetings, and sessions on state-level research and policy initiatives.

The project staff also produced a report outlining recommendations to strengthen the field of health services research.

Other Funding

Many other funders supported the national health policy conferences and annual research meetings. For more information, see [Appendix 1](#).

RESULTS

In reports to RWJF and an interview for this report, AcademyHealth staff said that the organization supported:

- **Five National Health Policy Conferences, 2006–10, co-hosted by AcademyHealth and the journal *Health Affairs*.** Project Director Muldoon said the meetings attracted a mix of researchers (40%) and users of research (60%), including officials from the state and federal levels of government, health plans, and purchasers. About half of the attendees were senior-level officials.

¹ The report covers grant ID#s 48542 and 51635.

² This report covers grant ID# 46228.

³ ID# 34534

Conferences were held in Washington on the following dates:

- February 6–7, 2006, with 649 attendees
- February 12–13, 2007, with 584 attendees
- February 4–5, 2008, with 679 attendees
- Feb. 2–3, 2009, with 810 attendees
- February 8–9, 2010, with 400 attendees. About 800 people registered, but a blizzard kept many people away.

Conferences included plenary sessions with health policy leaders such as Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, MPA; Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.); and Margaret Hamburg, MD, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration.

At the 2007 meeting, for example, Steve Burd, chairman and CEO of Safeway, spoke about the supermarket chain's efforts to use economic incentives and penalties to promote employee health. A PowerPoint® presentation is available [online](#).

There also were breakout meetings on health policy issues such as childhood obesity, preventive medicine, federal and state roles in health reform, and solutions to the nursing shortage. Several of the meetings included a seminar on long-term-care policy.

As a result of media-outreach activities, which RWJF funded, 141 reporters attended the conferences from 2006 to 2010, or an average of 28 per year.

- **Five Annual Research Meetings, 2006–10.** Muldoon said that the attendance mix at these meetings was about 75 percent researchers and 25 percent users of research.

Meetings were held on the following dates:

- June 25–27, 2006, Seattle, with 2,139 attendees
- June 3–5, 2007, Orlando, Fla., with 1,923 attendees
- June 8–10, 2008, Washington, with 2,305 attendees
- June 28–30, 2009, Chicago, with 2,270 attendees
- June 27–29, 2010, Boston, with 2,411 attendees

The meetings consisted of about 150 breakout sessions, which included research presentations, roundtable discussions, and methods workshops. Individual presentation topics included hospital quality (2006), quality in group practices (2007), preventing and managing chronic disease (2008), Medicare spending growth (2009), and nursing home quality (2010).

Poster presentations, which RWJF sponsored, also were an integral part of the conferences, growing in number from 700 in 2006 to 1,089 in 2010.

[Archives of presentations](#)—including podium speakers, roundtables, and poster sessions—are available on the AcademyHealth website. Videos are available on AcademyHealth's [YouTube Channel](#).

- **Five pre-session conferences in connection with the Annual Research Meetings.** AcademyHealth started one-day meetings of its [State Health Research and Policy Interest Group](#) in 2005 to provide a forum for researchers and policy-makers to share information about state-level research projects and policy initiatives.

Topics included:

- "Monitoring the Health of Colorado's Safety Net" (2006)
- "What Happened to Those Who Lost TennCare?" (2007)
- "Evaluating the Medicaid Reforms in Florida" (2008)
- "State Financing for Health Insurance Coverage Initiatives: Observations and Options" (2009)
- "Reforming Health Care Delivery Through Payment Change and Transparency: Innovations in Minnesota and Massachusetts" (2010)

[Archives of presentations](#) are available on AcademyHealth's website.

- **A report, *Strengthening the Field of Health Services Research: A Needs Assessment of Key Producers and Users*, prepared for AcademyHealth's Council of Sponsors of Health Services Research in 2006.** It documents "the major opportunities and challenges in the field" and highlights "critical infrastructure needs in human resources, methods, and data."⁴

Launched in 2004, the Council of Sponsors is composed of governmental and private funders of health services research. The goal of the council is to provide an avenue for the major funders to provide input into the future direction of the health-services research field.⁵

For a list of council members as of 2010, see [Appendix 2](#).

To arrive at the recommendations in the report, project staff interviewed 35 leaders in the fields of health services research, health policy, and medical practice. Some 21 of them were producers of research such as leaders of university and non-university-based health-services research centers; 14 were consumers of research including

⁴ *Strengthening the Field of Health Services Research: A Needs Assessment of Key Producers and Users*. Washington: AcademyHealth, 2006. Available [online](#).

⁵ Under separate RWJF grants, ID#s 60350 and 64627, the council held summits in Washington in 2007 on the health services research workforce and in 2009 on data and methodology.

federal policy professionals, state health officials, health care purchasers, providers, and consumer advocates.

Recommendations

The report contains the following recommendations:

- Build stronger cross-agency collaboration so that health services researchers are included on interdisciplinary teams and can contribute their expertise to multiple areas of research.
- Encourage greater coordination between the NIH [National Institutes of Health] and AHRQ [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality] so that these entities might recognize and build upon their complementary skills and interests.
- To both stimulate scientific innovation and address the needs and priorities of research sponsors, offer targeted solicitations in a broader array of research topics than currently available. In addition to health care quality, the categories most often cited by those interviewed for the report as needing more investment include health care disparities, genetics, coverage alternatives, and health financing strategies. Develop mechanisms that allow researchers to specify the types of research and translation activities needed for these areas of investigation.
- Develop a compelling business case for the field of health services research that will provide the budget justification for continued (and increased) investment in the field. The business case would go beyond describing what health services research is, providing a vision that will outline how health services research will transform the health care system in the 21st century and excite investors (i.e., policy-makers and the public).
- Encourage the development and inclusion of communication, translation, and writing for decision makers in curriculums at graduate health services research programs. Leadership and communication skills-building workshops also need to be made available on a continuing education basis.
- Push research funders to offer incentives for researchers to improve translation of research findings. Funders may want to encourage researchers to use persons skilled in knowledge transfer and research translation to assist them in developing key messages from their research and in disseminating their findings.
- Support funding for, and development of, effective approaches to recruiting underrepresented individuals in both university and non-university-based settings.
- Expand the funding infrastructure for graduate students and new researchers to support them throughout their early career development.
- Push for funding that will improve the functionality of specific national health datasets and develop new datasets to meet future research demands.

- Encourage federal agencies and foundations to fund the development and improvement of state and regional data sets.
- Sponsor the development of a Medicaid “database best practices guide” for obtaining and using Medicaid data. Ideally, such a guide would offer examples of how states have made their data available to researchers while preserving confidentiality and privacy.
- Provide dedicated funding to support the development and use of reliable linkages among federal databases.
- Support funding for and development of effective approaches to recruiting underrepresented individuals in both university and non-university-based settings.
- Expand the funding infrastructure for graduate students and new researchers to support them throughout their early career development.
- Devote more resources to training in the appropriate use of existing methods, including education in the areas of applied informatics and large database management.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Web-based videoconferencing is a good substitute when speakers cannot attend a conference in person.** As a result of a blizzard, many speakers and attendees were not able to get to AcademyHealth’s National Health Policy Conference in 2010. However, the project staff used web-conferencing and screen-recording software to allow speakers to present their materials remotely. (Report to RWJF)

AFTERWARD

Another RWJF grant⁶ supports all activities in this project, except the Council of Sponsors, through 2013.

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⁶ ID# 68313

APPENDIX 1

Other Funders

The national health policy conferences were supported by government agencies including the National Center for Health Statistics and the Department of Veterans Affairs, and a wide range of other funders—more than 20 in 2010—each year. Examples of funders included the American Association of Medical Colleges, Eli Lilly, and the University of California.

The Annual Research Meetings were supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the National Center for Health Statistics. Private funders also supported the meetings. In addition to RWJF, examples of other private funders included the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Palo Alto Medical Foundation Research, and RAND Health.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided \$30,000 in support for the Council of Sponsors of Health Services Research.

The Georgia Health Policy Center (\$3,200) and the Rutgers Center for State Health Policy (\$2,000) provided additional support for the pre-sessions of the State Health Research and Policy Interest Group at the Annual Research Meetings.

APPENDIX 2

Council of Sponsors 2010

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)
- Brookings Institution
- Commonwealth Fund
- Grantmakers in Health
- Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation
- Kansas Health Institute
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Milbank Memorial Fund
- National Center for Health Statistics
- National Institutes of Health (NIH)
- RWJF
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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Report or White Paper

Report

Strengthening the Field of Health Services Research: A Needs Assessment of Key Producers and Users. AcademyHealth, Washington, November 2006. Available [online](#).