Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

Civic Engagement

Bringing Together Research and Action

Two new programs aim to help academics to engage more directly with nonprofits and social change initiatives.

By Stephanie Wykstra | Winter 2018

Late in the evening on November 8, 2016, after what felt like the "worst party" he'd ever attended, Will Adler considered his future. He was halfway through a PhD in neuroscience at New York University, but he felt a tension between his academic interests and his desire, in light of the US election results, to do something more immediately useful. So he invited fellow students and professors in NYU's neuroscience and psychology departments to a meeting, and they began considering how they could direct their skills to improving public policy.

By late fall, they had formed Scientist Action and Advocacy Network (http://www.scaan.net/) (ScAAN) with the goal of partnering with nonprofit organizations that could use their help. They soon got in touch with Raise the Age (http://raisetheageny.com/), a campaign advocating for New York to increase the age of criminal responsibility to 18. (New York was one of only two states that automatically prosecuted 16- and 17-year-olds as adults).

Neuroscience PhD student Jenn Laura Lee led ScAAN's effort to present research on the malleability of the adolescent brain to lawmakers. This was an important contribution to conveying the matter in a way that non-neuroscientists could understand, say Raise the Age advocates Beth Powers and Stephanie Gendell. In April, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed "raise the age" policy into law.

Academic researchers often labor for years on research without knowing whether and how it will affect the world. Lee describes ScAAN's work with nonprofits as "a way to stay sane in graduate school … to do something now and see the effects of your work." A main barrier to this sort of collaboration is that many scientists don't know how to get in touch with nonprofits that could use their skills.

But another new group is working to address this issue. This past February, Adam Seth Levine of Cornell University, Jake Bowers of the University of Illinois, and Donald Green of Columbia University launched the site Research4Impact (http://www.r4impact.org/) to facilitate such connections. The website enables researchers as well as nonprofit and government staff to enter profiles and connect with collaborators. It currently has more than 350 members.

New York University neuroscience PhD student Jenn Laura Lee speaks at a press conference in support of raising the age of criminal responsibility to 18. (Photograph courtesy of Scientist Action and Advocacy Network)

There are certainly other organizations that bring together government and nonprofit partners with academic researchers—such as Evidence in Governance and Politics (http://egap.org/) , Innovations for Poverty Action (https://www.poverty-action.org/) , and Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (https://www.povertyactionlab.org/) (J-PAL). But Research4Impact puts a unique emphasis on expanding the scale and ease of collaboration through an online platform, Levine says. He is also excited about the site's "match-making" feature, through which platform staff make introductions when they see a potential pairing.

Research4Impact has also released a guide of recommended collaboration practices, stressing the importance of good communication in areas such as plans for research, publication of results, and data sharing. While researchers may think they're being clear, Levine says, they're often using terminology and making assumptions that differ from their partner's. For example, researchers generally consider control groups necessary in an experiment, but the idea of excluding people from an intervention may seem like a waste of resources to practitioners. Research4Impact's guide to collaboration recommends taking time to clarify jargon and discuss reasoning.

A further barrier to academics getting involved in partnerships with nonprofits is the perception that to be successful, scientists must be single-minded. When he was a postdoctoral student, ScAAN's Wei Ji Ma, now an associate professor of neuroscience and psychology at NYU, asked other scientists whether he could combine NGO work with his career in science. The answer was often no, with an insistence that to be successful, a scientist must have "total focus."

Nevertheless, Ma decided that he was committed to staying involved in social action and found that he could do so alongside his science career by partnering with others—the very idea behind ScAAN.

Levine has also noted that academics often meet the idea of collaborating with nonprofit or government partners with "grudging acceptance." He speculates that this attitude comes (in part) from the feeling that the collaboration is not very intellectually interesting, and hopes that bringing together a community through Research4Impact will help show otherwise. Levine thinks that in the long term, the platform may also contribute to shifting the system of academic incentives from one where tenure review committees reward academics mostly for publishing to one where they give more consideration to the practical impact of the academics' work.

In the coming year, ScAAN and Research4Impact both aim to expand their reach. ScAAN is partnering with the New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement, summarizing research on the psychological effects of solitary confinement, and assisting the tenants' rights group Metropolitan Council on Housing in better understanding the people it serves. The group has recruited members from other NYU departments, including environmental studies, and is getting involved with environmental projects. It is also reaching out to those who want to start similar initiatives at other universities, such as Princeton. Like Research4Impact, it sees limitless opportunities for partnerships.

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