Investigated: This study presents findings from a series of focus groups, composed of stakeholders both on Capitol Hill and among national stakeholder organizations, used to identify strategies health services researchers can use for the effective dissemination and expanded use of health services research in health policy. Methods: Focus groups were created to assess the usefulness of rural health research products and approaches for disseminating information, and in each focus group, respondents were asked for their evaluation of several types of dissemination products and approaches, as well as participants’ utilization of research findings. Conclusions: The focus groups identify strategies that include tailoring products to policymakers’ needs, making research products accessible, expanding working relationships with end users, and investing in greater capacity for dissemination. Implications are drawn for researchers who need to be proactive in thinking about the applications of their research to health policy, and who need to identify and seek resources to help them fund dissemination efforts.

KEY WORDS: dissemination, policy, research

Widespread agreement exists that health services research should be more accessible and useful to policy makers and other key stakeholders at the national, state, and local levels.1 The health research community has offered detailed recommendations to research and funding audiences for promoting greater research dissemination and use.2 In addition, federal funders are seeking ways to strengthen links between researchers and important target audiences by identifying the information needs of end users and developing mechanisms for promoting effective research dissemination.3

This article draws on a series of focus groups, comprising stakeholders both on Capitol Hill and among national stakeholder organizations. The findings from these focus groups were studied in order to identify strategies critical to the effective dissemination and expanded use of health services research. This analysis leads to the identification of the following five strategies as crucial for researchers and funders to follow:

1. Engage end users when framing research.
2. Tailor the design of products to meet the needs of the diversity of end users interested in health research.
3. Make research products easily accessible to end users.
4. Expand contact and working relationships with end users.
5. Invest in developing greater capacity for effective dissemination.

In addition to discussing each of these strategies, this article discusses the requisite infrastructure needed to enhance research dissemination. Although the analysis presented here is drawn from focus groups of Washington-based policy makers, especially the Congress, and these focus groups are limited to some extent, the results presented here should have broader implications for the dissemination of health services research to broader audiences—federal executive branch
agencies, state and local government officials, and health system leaders, in addition to Washington-based policy makers.

● Background

Health services research is an important tool used for informing a range of decisions about structure, financing, quality, and access to healthcare. This issue of promoting greater research dissemination and use has been extensively discussed in the health research community for a number of years. However, this topic has been studied more broadly in other countries than in the United States. A 2000 conference offered detailed recommendations to the research and funding audiences for promoting greater research dissemination by researchers to policy makers. More recently, the Coalition for Health Services Research notes, “Health services research when appropriately funded, coordinated and disseminated plays a critical role in addressing problems related to the nations’ health care system.” Both of these approaches identify a set of issues and potential solutions for expanding policy makers’ access to and use of health services research through improved products and dissemination.

● Methods

Three focus groups were conducted to assess the usefulness of rural health research products and approaches for disseminating information. The focus groups were conducted under a project funded by the federal Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) and directed by the University of North Dakota Center for Rural Health in collaboration with the Health Panel of the Rural Policy Research Institute. Although the findings are drawn from information gained from focus groups with rural health analysts, they are generally applicable to the dissemination of research to health policy. One of these groups was a National Issue Group comprising 17 representatives from various national organizations, selected with input from the ORHP. The National Issue Group met in Washington, DC, in December 2006. The meeting was tape recorded to assist in reporting results and focused on a set of questions. The other focus groups, convened in January 2007 in Washington, DC, were composed of two groups of more than 20 congressional staff. The focus groups of legislative staff were composed of staff from both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Participants were invited on the basis of participation in the Rural Health Care Coalition in the House of Representatives or the Rural Health Caucus in the Senate. Several of the participants had previous working experience with one or more panelists, helping to establish an informal tone to the discussions.

The responses from these processes were analyzed in the following manner: (1) transcripts of the meetings were prepared and summarized; (2) these transcripts were analyzed by study authors for common themes and messages; (3) the team of authors prepared synthesis of the results; and (4) following the meetings, participants were queried for additional feedback via e-mail.

In each focus group, respondents were asked for their evaluation of several types of dissemination products and approaches, as well as participants’ utilization of research findings. Each focus group was provided with examples of research dissemination products (brochures, fact sheets, working papers/reports, policy briefs, PowerPoint presentation slides, press releases, Web sites, and other products) produced by rural health research centers. Focus group participants were also shown compilation documents describing research in progress. All of these documents provided a representation of the output of the rural health research centers and other rural health researchers. National Issue Group participants were sent electronic links to the sample documents before the meeting along with the agenda, and were asked to examine the documents before the meeting. This was not done for the congressional staff meetings because of their more limited time availability.

During the focus group discussions, focus group conveners asked questions regarding how staff access current information and how researchers can improve timely access to and presentation of information. Questions were asked from a standard protocol designed for the focus groups, and an informal tone was followed in the focus groups in an intentional effort to encourage all comments, including those that might be critical, about how researchers disseminate information.

● Key Strategies

Interviews with key stakeholders both on Capitol Hill and among national stakeholder organizations suggest five key strategies critical to bridging health services research to health policy: researcher–policy-maker relationships, research relevance, research products, information accessibility, and resources dedicated to research dissemination.

1. **Engage end users when framing research.** Researchers should anticipate users’ needs by developing long-term agendas that consider emerging health issues. One of the common complaints made by users is that the research they need is rarely readily
available. Researchers should engage users in framing their research agendas to improve the relevance of their research. Strategies might include:

- Establish a “research to policy network” composed of researchers and users. Such networks could help the research community understand and anticipate users’ information needs as well as assist users in gaining familiarity with the broad knowledge base available through the research community.

- Develop additional “synthesis” products that summarize in an accessible, readable format what is known on a topic to identify needed additional research.

The process of conceiving and executing a research study often requires substantially more time than the time frames typically followed by policy makers. Nonetheless, it may not always be possible to anticipate specific policy issues that will be relevant in the near future by structuring research around broader themes that have been identified by policy makers as of interest, the chances of researchers possessing both the expertise and the data needed to answer more focused questions as they arise are improved. Researchers and others should monitor policy developments so that previously released research findings are communicated when they are relevant to current policy debates.

2. Tailor the design of products to meet the needs of the diversity of end users interested in health research. Different products are needed for different stakeholder groups. Thus, research delivered to policy audiences must be packaged to fit the need of and appeal to the audience. Policy makers prefer short, to-the-point, and user-friendly products, such as policy briefs or summary fact sheets that contain key information relevant to policy discussions. Policy briefs containing key descriptive findings can be disseminated while the researcher is preparing a journal article containing detailed statistical analysis on the same subject. Peer-reviewed journal articles often do not meet the needs of users who seek timely research translated to accessible language. However, journal articles remain important to users as an additional source of information that reinforces the credibility of the research. Some users report regularly perusing certain journals, specifically Health Affairs, The New England Journal of Medicine, and The Journal of the American Medical Association.

Policy briefs or other dissemination products should have well-written titles that reflect key “takeaways” from the research, because many users will not read further if the title does not entice them to read further. Products should include strategic visuals, such as simple and clear graphs/charts, presented in color, but should avoid superfluous pictures. Detailed information on local areas (eg, states, counties, congressional districts) appeal to policy makers, since “all politics is local” even if the issue is national. The products should be structured to include key findings easily found by the reader, contact information for the authors (including Internet links if available), policy or practice implications, references, and sources for further information. Users emphasize that every research product must include policy recommendations in the context of legislative realities. Users need to know the limitations of the analysis, but information about the methods should be available as references or through Internet links.

3. Make research products easily accessible to end users. Users having ready access to research findings anticipate research utilization. Users need research results in seconds or minutes, not hours or days. Multiple communication channels are needed to reach various audiences, including policy makers, associations, advocacy groups, and media. Users indicate that traditional communication vehicles for research findings, including conference presentations and peer-reviewed publications, are not a primary information source. Alternatively, they report that electronic and verbal communications are preferred delivery modes. Users prefer e-mail announcements with links to new research findings. This allows for timely access to information and actively routes documents directly to interested parties. In addition, well-designed and easy-to-use Web sites draw users to relevant research findings. A single electronic portal to facilitate easy access to relevant research findings was cited as an important information source, rather than relying on finding multiple Web sites. Web sites should be professionally designed, have search capabilities, connect to all other research centers, and be tested for usability and usefulness to ensure that barriers to accessing information are eliminated. However, researchers should be careful to avoid information overload, which many decision makers face, especially congressional staff. This can be avoided by emphasizing reviews and synthesizing analysis, pointing to the highest-quality research.

Virtually all research products produced in paper form should be electronically available.

4. Expand contact and working relationships with end users. Perhaps the most effective means of disseminating research to policy users is through direct, interpersonal contact. For research to inform policy, users must trust that the information they receive is reliable and credible and will often rely on personal contacts with researchers they trust. Sustained and
substantive communication engenders trust. Policy staff turnover demands that researchers regularly renew efforts to establish and nurture relationships with new staff. The obvious point of contact for researchers is with policy staff associated with the researcher’s own state. Another natural interchange may occur with staff to committees with jurisdiction over the issues investigated by a researcher. Occasionally, special relationships may be built because a staff becomes familiar with the researcher’s work and as a result trusts the judgment of that researcher.

Researchers need not be the primary contact for policy users to communicate research findings at critical times. Intermediaries can connect the researcher’s work to policy activity. The most typical example would be advocacy groups using research findings, with the credibility of the work resting with the researcher but the timely input being the role of the group. Researchers can take advantage of this conduit by proving unambiguous results (not subject to interpretation) to the groups.

Researchers earn the trust of policy makers when they present accurate and evidence-based information, acknowledge data or information limitations, provide an objective and nonpartisan viewpoint, work diligently to be a recognized expert in their field, respond to staff requests in a timely fashion, and provide policy-relevant information specific to staff needs.

Researchers should provide timely and objective analysis, even if it may conflict with established policy views. Although researcher–policy-maker relationships develop best through interpersonal interaction, trust can also develop through electronic communication or shared written documents.

Policy makers need “deliberative forums” where research is a focal point for discussing policy issues. For example, the National Health Policy Forum or AcademyHealth’s National Health Policy Conference in Washington serve this purpose. More specific forums focused on topics, such as rural health, can highlight and identify priority research and policy.

5. Invest in developing greater capacity for effective dissemination. Effective dissemination efforts require dedicated resources to support specialized knowledge and skills in addition to the resources needed for the research activity. The two uses, research and dissemination, must be additive—scientifically sound research is the core ingredient to everything suggested by end users. Policy communication skills are particularly important for the development and dissemination of products valuable to policy audiences. Some efforts could be unfamiliar to researchers; for example, writing effective press releases, alerting potential users to new research output. Thus, new skills may be needed to complement those of research teams.

The imperative to produce timely, useful, and accessible information creates a competitive pressure for many researchers; that is, should researchers dedicate limited resources (time, dollars, and people) to produce material for users or to produce scholarly publications? Managing this conflict is possible with a combination of the following:

- Dedicate resources and staff time to dissemination; for example, fund staff positions designated for information dissemination and provide media skills and/or writing training to certain researchers.
- Include specific funding requests for information dissemination to users during grant application or cooperative agreement processes.
- Recognize that if funding is limited, there will be a trade-off between the quantity of research and dedicating resources to dissemination. Negotiate the allocation of resources with the funding agency.
- Consider all available resources for dissemination, including public relations units within universities, assistance centers for dissemination, professional associations, and dissemination units within funding agencies.

Researchers should have a business plan and budget for effective dissemination that identifies resources consistent with a menu of options to meet the needs of policy makers, trade organizations, and practitioners. The budget should include funding for writers (eg, science writer, journalist), public relations, and publications requirements, such as Web site development and management, support for telephonic and electronic communications, travel to sustain relationships, and staff time for dissemination.

Critical to all of the considerations regarding resources for dissemination is recognition by the funding source that dedicated resources are required for dissemination. The same trade-offs that confront researchers also confront funding agencies. If expectations are imposed on researchers to be more effective in dissemination and there are no new resources provided, funding agencies will need to adjust expectations for the volume of research activity.

● Conclusions

This article outlines strategies to enhance the application of health research by users through more effective
dissemination. Evidence from focus groups conducted by the University of North Dakota for the federal ORHP and other sources indicates several broad strategies for improving the effectiveness of dissemination, including the following:

1. Tailor product design to meet the needs of the diversity of end users interested in health research.
2. Expand contact and working relationships with end users.
3. Engage end users in framing their research.
4. Make research products easily accessible to end users.
5. Invest in developing greater capacity for effective dissemination.

The analysis presented here has several implications for the efforts of researchers, their institutions, and agencies granting funds for policy-related health services research. In particular:

- **Implications for research project development:** Researchers need to be proactive in thinking about the applications of their health policy work for the development of health policies, beginning in the project development phase and continuing all the way through the completion of final reports. Researchers need to identify and seek resources to help them fund dissemination efforts throughout the project, but especially as project results are obtained and can be disseminated.

- **Implications for timely dissemination:** Researchers should consider users’ needs when developing research project timelines and dissemination strategies. Users’ need for immediate, relevant, and quality research in a timely fashion (when policy is being developed, not after the fact) requires that researchers develop an ability to adapt to the needs of users if they want their research to be valued and used. Researchers also need to be responsive to requests for data and analysis in a timely fashion, even if the research results are not yet “ready for prime time.” This requires developing relationships with users and nurturing these relationships. In addition, researchers need to develop and enhance their skills in the areas of research dissemination. Finally, researchers should develop the ability to use multiple methods to deliver research findings in a timely fashion, including the media that are an effective intermediary between researchers, the public, and users.

- **Implications for program announcements:** Federal granting agencies need to be proactive in encouraging researchers to develop dissemination strategies throughout their projects. This includes providing not only the carrots of funds and resources to help researchers develop the infrastructure to disseminate research either at their home institution or through a central location (such as the Cancer Control Planet but also the stick to require that all policy-relevant health services research have a dissemination plan to policy and/or practice.

**REFERENCES**