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# NURTURING REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CHAMPIONS: PRB'S POLICY FELLOWS PROGRAM

"The PRB Fellows Program has been one of the most rewarding learning experiences for me and it has greatly influenced my approach to research over the years. The program taught me early on to ask 'so what?' and 'does it really matter?' questions before undertaking any research studies, and taught me the value of program and policy-relevant research. It also taught me the importance of writing results from complicated statistical research in simple, easy-to-understand language for non-technical audiences. I highly recommend the policy fellows program for all graduate students in population and health, and also for many starting or even mid-career faculty members in developing countries."

Vinod Mishra (1995-1996 Fellow), Chief, Population Policy Division, United Nations, New York

## Why Policy Champions Matter

Policies that lead to improved health and development come about through the efforts of policymakers and champions for evidence-based decisions. This process is often highly political, and advocacy must be firmly grounded in the best available data and research. However, many researchers do not consider the broader policy implications of their research or they do not know how to communicate their findings to policymakers and other nontechnical audiences. Research must be communicated effectively to those who create or advocate for policy change.

## Lessons Learned

For more than 20 years, PRB has worked with doctoral students to improve their skills in communicating their findings to policymakers. As former PRB Policy Fellows have advanced in their careers, their training in policy communication has been instrumental in how they approach their work. As professors, Fellows emphasize the policy relevance of research to their students and in their academic writing. As technical experts in governments, research organizations, and nonprofit organizations, they have a clear understanding of how to use evidence to inform policies. As reproductive health champions, they realize that simple and effective interpretations of complex research findings can advance evidence-based policies. PRB's experience in training the next generation of policy champions has taught us that:

- By asking the "So what?" question, Fellows learn to consider the policy relevance of research and how their work can influence policy change. As a result, many revise their original research questions to have greater policy relevance.

- Most graduate programs focus on building technical skills and writing abilities; through policy communication training and by learning to present research in clear, concise, nontechnical language, the work of student researchers reaches broader and more influential audiences.
- Training researchers to be good communicators requires both group and individual interaction, written and oral presentations, practical exercises, and feedback.

## PRB's Comparative Advantage

PRB has long contributed to evidence-based policies by giving voice to technical experts and translating complex data for nontechnical audiences. Most graduate programs do not train students to effectively communicate their research findings to those outside their discipline. As a result of decades of experience in reaching policy audiences with current information about population and family planning and reproductive health issues, PRB is well-suited to fill this gap in communications skills with its Policy Fellows Program for students pursuing graduate work in the areas of population, health, and environment. Each year, PRB solicits applications from developing-country Ph.D. candidates and carefully selects about 16 for a year-long training program. The program begins with a two-week summer workshop held at PRB, where Fellows learn about the policy process and practice techniques for effectively communicating research findings to decisionmakers. Throughout the workshop, Fellows interact with external policy research and communications experts and are mentored in small groups by senior PRB staff as they prepare their first policy briefs and oral presentations. The Fellows receive continual feedback on their work from staff and each other; by the end of the workshop, Fellows have gained considerable skill and confidence in identifying policy implications and translating research for policy audiences.

During the academic year, Fellows prepare three four-to-six-page policy briefs and one oral presentation for policy audiences. With feedback from senior PRB staff, Fellows revise their briefs until they meet PRB's high standards for accuracy and legitimate interpretation of results. During the closing workshop, held in conjunction with the Population Association of America annual meeting, Fellows present their research as they would for a policy audience. Their presentations are critiqued by two discussants, often including a former Policy Fellow. Through years of honing and evaluating the skills that Fellows need to communicate with policy audiences in their home countries and throughout their careers, PRB's Fellows Program offers a much sought-after professional development opportunity for future policy champions.

## Outstanding Results

The Policy Fellows Program has strengthened the knowledge and capacity of more than 300 individuals from 71 countries. PRB-trained Policy Fellows represent top-notch universities, and give the program very high marks. PRB Policy Fellows are making a difference at the global, regional, and country levels. The impact of the program on individual careers is seen in the many comments we receive from former Fellows who are now in positions of responsibility and authority in governments, international organizations, and universities:

- "The skills I learned at PRB have been very useful, not only to improve my presentations, but to teach my students how to present as well. Teaching...has given me the chance to pass this knowledge to generations of new students." Assistant Professor, National University of Colombia
- "I could even dare to state that PRB Policy Fellows program was the single most important experience during the five years I was abroad that prepared me for UNDP." Program Officer, UNDP
- "Policy Fellows program provided insight and skills in how best to approach policy makers, donors, and stake holders to make a change in policy, convince donors for funds and obtain consensus among partners." Project Officer, UNICEF
- "Our work is all about conducting and disseminating policy-relevant research on population and health. It is quite clear that those skills learned during the fellowship enhanced my relevance to working at APHRC" (African Population and Health Research Center). Research Scientist, APHRC
- The work that I conduct is helping shape country practices in the collection and compilation of information as well as in the presentation of results...just as PRB works with researchers to improve their presentation of information." Statistician, United Nations Secretariat

The BRIDGE (BRinging Information to Decisionmakers for Global Effectiveness) Project, funded from September 2003 through September 2010 by USAID's Bureau for Global Health, contributed to improved health, population, and nutrition policies and programs through effective policy-learning activities. BRIDGE disseminated information on priority health and population issues to policy audiences; worked with news media to enhance the quality and quantity of coverage of key health and population issues; and strengthened the capacity of individuals and institutions to use data and research effectively in disseminating information to policy audiences.



## POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU

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