



## Growing Translational Social Science at Stanford and Beyond

### A blueprint for increasing the public impact of social science

In the ongoing national conversation about the purpose of the university, debate is intense but consensus clear on at least one thing: institutions of higher education should not just be repositories of knowledge, as though stockpiling scholarship in a warehouse, but rather channel that knowledge into action that serves the common good. Stanford's Founding Grant makes this our intellectual lodestar, urging us to "promote the public welfare by exercising an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization."

It's a rousing mission, but one that needs continual recommitment if it is to really animate campus life. Theorists within academic disciplines can all too easily lose touch with those in the policy schools seeking to apply abstract findings productively. A more productive relationship would require the social sciences to reorient themselves to become an integral component of, in President Tessier-Lavigne's words, a "purposeful university" that contributes to human flourishing and the public good. An unconventional, invigorating research model, inspired by biomedical discovery and embodied in Stanford's Immigration Policy Lab, can equip them to do just that.

Just as translational medicine drives breakthroughs from the lab bench to the patient's bedside, so too can translational social science deliver insights to the trenches where policymakers and practitioners are grappling with tremendously complex problems. Immigration and refugee issues provide a revealing testing ground for this model, in part because the knowledge gap is so much more glaring than in other policy areas, and in part because recent political and humanitarian crises have made the need for solutions particularly urgent.

In the absence of clear, empirical evidence about what works and what doesn't, policymakers facing these crises either kick the can down the road through stopgap measures, or act on impulse, making rash decisions that eventually backfire. For example, the allocation of refugees in Europe amid the Syria crisis undermined treaties that stipulated where refugees must be settled, and it almost tore apart the European Union itself. All this was done in utter ignorance of a rational allocation procedure that had broad acceptance among citizens of EU members. This dearth of evidence is also detrimental on the ground level,

hampering the daily work of the many people striving to improve outcomes for immigrants, refugees, and host societies.

The Immigration Policy Lab, then, emerged from academics' desire to relieve policy dysfunction and from practitioners' demand for guidance—its lifeblood being creativity and relevance. Using new sources of data and sophisticated analytical methods, we can not only evaluate existing policies and programs with greater confidence than before; we can also design and test approaches that depart dramatically from the status quo. In this way, we found, social science can be a catalyst for innovation, ultimately helping transform outdated public programs to meet 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenges.

**W**e believe this problem-focused research model can revitalize social science and align it with the vision of Stanford as a purposeful university. Its formula can be replicated in projects addressing a wide range of policy challenges. Social scientists have long been part of the policy realm, but especially in political science and sociology, experts are called in for their judgments but not their findings. Our lab seeks to translate the best of basic science into findings that speak directly to policy evaluation and reform.

Our recipe for success calls for a lab that is

- **Team-oriented:**

The traditional model in sociology, economics, and political science involves isolated scholars working for several years on a focused project, usually one with broad theoretical

implications, and then publishing single-authored treatises aimed at scholars in their sub-discipline. By contrast, our lab creates a collaborative environment in which professors tackle projects shoulder-to-shoulder with program managers, post-docs, graduate students, and some undergraduates. Mentorship is baked into the process; young scholars benefit from an apprenticeship that prepares them to lead future projects and cultivates expertise in policy-relevant research early in their careers; faculty find fresh inspiration in the diverse perspectives and talents of their trainees.

- **Interdisciplinary:** Developing actionable knowledge, especially in an issue area as complicated and contentious as immigration and asylum policy, leads us to reach across traditional academic boundaries. One project might partner political scientists with clinicians and population health experts; another could bring together anthropologists, labor economists, and social workers.
- **Timely:** We maintain a relentless focus on salient, real-world problems. Like the pursuit of game-changing technologies or cures for disease, our research has us moving swiftly to make discoveries that can be applied to fast-



evolving challenges. Typically, academic research proceeds at such a glacial pace that practitioners can't apply it to their most pressing issues; by the time findings are delivered, circumstances have changed. Our Lab's staff structure allows us to be responsive and work with practitioners in real time, without sacrificing rigor.

- **Synergetic:** Social scientists' established role usually leaves them above the fray rather than down in the engine room where policy is crafted and programs are run; they have tended to engage in a one-way transfer of analysis from the sidelines to decision-makers in the thick of things. Our lab, however, has taken the lead in forging new partnerships linking local and federal government, non-profits and NGOs, and philanthropies. This allows us to move beyond recommending small, incremental changes in the current way of operating, to embed ourselves in programs that need to be reimagined rather than merely reformed.
- **Service-minded:** Our work calls for a certain humility; we begin by listening to and learning from the people whose decisions shape the outcomes of immigrants here in California and around the world. What do policymakers and service providers need to know in order to fulfill their vocation and improve countless lives? At a time when anti-immigrant sentiment is rising and newcomers are often left on the periphery of society, we keep our research questions fixed on the people whose future hangs in the balance.

With support from Stanford's leadership, our research model could inspire peers throughout the social sciences to reconnect to their public purpose.

In his inauguration address, President Tessier-Lavigne valorized the characteristics we see as

essential to our lab and its vision for translational social science: *optimism* that solutions are possible, even for society's most daunting challenges; *confidence* that human ingenuity can deliver them; *courage* to experiment and follow the evidence where it leads; and *beneficence*, which lifts discoveries out of the lab and into the lives of the most vulnerable.

Stanford should realize the promise of this vision by committing resources to the growth of problem-focused social science labs; dedicating physical space for these labs to come together; and making work in these labs a key element of graduate training. With that strategic investment, translational social science will move from promise to widespread practice—at Stanford and beyond.

—Jens Hainmueller, David Laitin, and  
Jeremy Weinstein, faculty co-directors



[immigrationlab.org](http://immigrationlab.org)

The Immigration Policy Lab is dedicated to the rigorous evaluation and design of immigration and integration policy in countries throughout the world. By guiding those who set public policy and serve immigrant communities, our research can improve lives and strengthen host societies. Our work comprises:

- 20 ongoing projects
- 7 countries
- Partnerships with federal and state governments and non-profits