According to researchers David Gough and Annette Boaz, research findings are increasingly being used by decision-makers to influence policy development. But the ways that research findings are understood and used is often determined by how the findings are communicated. This means that research communication, otherwise known as knowledge mobilization, plays an important role in policy development.

Recently, CFICE researchers Anne Middleton and Elizabeth Whitmore decided to do some digging. They wanted to understand the role that knowledge mobilization plays in creating policy. They compiled their findings in a paper titled *Information into knowledge: Navigating the complexity in the campus community engagement context*.

Specifically, Middleton and Whitmore looked at how two examples of community campus engagement partnerships mapped against a knowledge mobilization process, known as the K* spectrum. The K* spectrum is a model that helps researchers evaluate knowledge mobilization that occurs in community-campus partnerships. The K* spectrum defines knowledge mobilization as the process of sharing information and having it used. In this definition, information becomes knowledge when the information influences a decision made by an individual or an organization.

The K* spectrum is broken into three functions or phases that the information must meet before the knowledge mobilization process is considered successful.

First, knowledge mobilization efforts must be informational. This means that knowledge mobilization collects and presents information.

Second, knowledge mobilization efforts must be relational. This means that community and academic research partners must develop a common way of speaking about the research.

Third, knowledge mobilization efforts must be systemic. This means that the research being shared must lead to change within an institution or a culture. In other words, the information must influence the policy decisions being made.

So back to the study. Middleton and Whitmore mapped two examples of community-campus engagement projects against the K* spectrum to understand how knowledge mobilization in these contexts helped information be transferred, understood, and used properly for policy development.

What they found is that transforming information to knowledge that influences policy decision-making is a slow process and it is much more successful when there is an equal power balance and mutual respect among partners. When the relationships were unequal, there was a higher chance that the knowledge mobilization occurring was not informational or relational; that is to say that people didn’t receive the information being mobilized, or they didn’t relate to it or understand it in the same way.
The study also found that the systemic function of knowledge mobilization in these partnerships was unequal; policy decision-makers had more power than advocates in their ability to make change.

Overall, what the research revealed was that the success of knowledge mobilization in creating policy largely depends on community-campus partners developing equal relationships built on trust and mutual respect.

The K* mapping exercise provided a useful framework for understanding the knowledge mobilization activities taking place in these community-campus partnerships. It was also useful for helping partners build relationships by identifying what phase of the K* spectrum the partnership was in, and what was needed to move the knowledge mobilization efforts to the next phase.

For more information, you can access the report online in the April 2016 issue of the journal: Evidence and Policy by visiting ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/ep and selecting “fast track articles”.

This plain language podcast is brought to you by the Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement project, a 7 year action-research project that investigates how to improve community-campus partnerships. For more information, please visit our website at carleton.ca/communityfirst/

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