

Teaching Our Students about Evidence

Marieka Klawitter

Co-Editor

Many of us work hard to teach our students how to use evidence in their work. In statistics, research methods, policy analysis, program evaluation, and many issue-area courses, we ask our students to learn about data quality, data analysis, and how to effectively communicate about evidence to policy makers. We live in a data-rich time: data are available on our desktops or at the click of a button on almost any issue. I am not sure if this makes it easier or harder for students today who still need to understand which data, manipulated in what ways, and communicated in what formats will answer the questions we have.

Several resources will help us engage students in pondering evidence. The first is the recent American Statistical Association statement on the meaning of p values (Wasserstein & Lazar 2016), highlighting the limitations of statistical significance and the need for care in performing and presenting data analysis. In short, the statement reminds us that no one calculation can reveal a causal relationship and its importance. Instead, we must help students develop the capacity to use a broader set of indicators and processes for developing evidence. I will be using this resource in my statistics course, to help students understand the need for judgment in creating or understanding evidence.

A second resource is a set of background papers created by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (2016) for the bipartisan Commission

on Evidence-Based Policymaking. The authorizing legislation asks commission members to consider how to increase the availability and use of survey and administrative data in designing and assessing government programs and policies. The background papers describe the types of evidence needed for that task, including general data and evidence and program-specific analysis, and will serve as wonderful readings for students. Part of the motivation for this work is the challenge of gaining respondent cooperation in data-collection efforts like the U.S. Census and other surveys in this time of online overload. I will be assigning the paper on using data for my statistics and policy analysis courses to emphasize the need for skills in finding and applying data.

Encouraging students to see evidence as a key ingredient in management and policy development requires us to help them see it as an evolving and living enterprise. These resources point to changing environments and understandings of that work.

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Marieka Klawitter is a faculty member at the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance of the University of Washington. She holds a Masters in Public Policy from the University of Michigan and a PhD in Economics from the University of Wisconsin. Her research focuses on public policies that affect family work and income, including studies of welfare, family savings, and anti-discrimination policies for sexual orientation. Marieka teaches courses on public policy analysis, quantitative methods, program evaluation, and asset building for low income families.

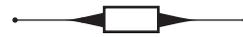
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