

During the last thirty-five years, I have served as a five-term state legislator and chief House sponsor of the state budget, leader of two statewide business associations dedicated to shaping public policy, and, currently director of a state agency. In these diverse capacities, I have gained an appreciation for joining on-the-ground subject matter expertise with cutting edge research and technical practice in order to more fully inform policy, toward the goal effective outcomes. More often, I, and those with whom I have worked, have tried to formulate policy when critical information to make an informed decision has not been available.

Certainly the legal and programmatic practices of state government reinforce the administration of siloed legislative imperatives. While I recognize the need for distinct missions among state agencies and their unique capacities to serve Illinois citizens, I would argue for a more comprehensive perspective as it relates to evidence-based policy making. Many state agencies have in-house research offices charged to respond to legislative requests. A multi-agency data infrastructure, coupled with the enhancement of data-analytic skills among agency staff, would establish an important precedent for policymaking based on a comprehensive context. The more siloed perspective mitigates the range of considerations for key questions that should be asked of every policy proposal: What's the value statement? Who does this impact? What benefit or harm does this change present?

One of the most pressing legislative budgetary issues during the 1980's was building new capacity to house the growing incarcerated population. This legislative discussion would have benefited from a more comprehensive contextual understanding of this population. In retrospect, an integrated multi-agency effort to investigate demographic trends of the at-risk population, training opportunities for the incarcerated, their post-release employment outcomes, attributes of recidivism, and community impacts could have lent important insight to these discussions. Recent initiatives in the direction of evidence-based policymaking are critical, but, in my experience, such efforts need to be undergirded by linking sources of information that lends comprehensive analytical perspective. In the aforementioned example, linking data from training/education, employment and earnings, corrections, and community/place would have vastly improved the contextual understanding for deciding present and future prison capacity requirements.

In my role as a leader of business associations, I became acutely aware of the number one concern voiced by Illinois businesses year after year, which is the need for a workforce with relevant workplace skills. Business executives often make the case that the very skills needed to grow the Illinois economy do not receive sufficient attention in the current education curriculum. A significant amount of my time was spent advocating on behalf of the business community with education institutions, as well as with high school students and parents to consider careers in industries experiencing shortages of skilled labor, e.g., manufacturing, that may not require a four-year degrees. A key information gap in my conversation with these stakeholders was systematic evidence on employment outcomes for individuals in credential/training programs compared to those who complete a four-year degree.

And now, as director of a state agency charged to help people find employment, and to aligning multiple agencies to this charge, I have focused agency resources to support the value proposition of framing and answering policy questions on employment outcomes. To that end, we have begun linking our employment and earning records on Illinois workers to data compiled by the education/training community (Illinois Board of Higher Education, Illinois Community College Board, Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, and Illinois Student Assistance Commission). We have produced employment outcomes on job stability, career earning, and mapping of career pathways for high school students, community college students and 4-year degree students by program of study. Currently, we are developing public-facing data visualizations to post these outcomes for institutional researchers, students and parents. We work closely with our data sharing partners to develop data-rich products to inform both institution policymaking and decision making by students and their parents on career choices. The final product, to be released in Fall 2018, will include more than ninety post-secondary institutions and cover their student graduating cohorts from 2012 forward.