

Making a difference over 50 years

Rebecca M. Blank

Rebecca M. Blank is Chancellor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an IRP Affiliate. This article is adapted from remarks she delivered at the 2016 IRP Summer Research Workshop.

In this essay I reflect on the accomplishments of the Institute for Research on Poverty, known as IRP, in the last half-century. This is personal for me. I have been an IRP Affiliate for many years and IRP played an important part in my intellectual training. But before reviewing how IRP has transformed our understanding of poverty and informed development of antipoverty programs and policies, I would like to share a few words about how we got here.

Development of IRP

There are three University of Wisconsin–Madison faculty members who were leaders in three successive generations, and whose work made Wisconsin the obvious place for IRP to grow and flourish in the past 50 years. The Institute for Research on Poverty is a monument to all three of them. The first was Professor Richard Ely, whose pioneering work helped to establish this campus as the country's premier center for social science research at the turn of the 20th century. Ely and a group of economists here at the University of Wisconsin–Madison composed the so-called "Wisconsin School." The Wisconsin School emphasized the responsibility of the emerging new field of social science and social science research to inform government policy and to improve people's lives. That commitment of the University to outreach and public service is what came to be called the Wisconsin Idea, and it continues to be central to the mission of the University of Wisconsin.

Ely and John Commons worked with state lawmakers to develop the nation's first worker's compensation and unemployment compensation programs, and the first state income tax system; they also provided important advocacy for child labor laws. Their innovations in Wisconsin became national models for government's role in the workplace. They also trained a second generation of Wisconsin School advocates who continued and expanded on their work.

The man who became a leader of that second generation was Edwin Witte, who was deeply influenced by the Wisconsin School and particularly by Commons, whom Richard Ely recruited to the faculty. Edwin Witte had just joined the faculty here when he was called to Washington, D.C., in the wake of the Great Depression to head the federal Committee on Economic Security. President Franklin Roosevelt gave

him six months to design a national unemployment and pension program. Witte quickly recruited two Wisconsin colleagues, and together they drafted and helped shepherd through Congress the Social Security Act of 1935, the most dramatic expansion of the federal safety net in America's history.

Witte is best remembered as the "Father of Social Security," but he consulted on many other transformative pieces of legislation, including the National Labor Relations Act. He profoundly influenced the emergence of social science research on social policy problems through the 56 Ph.D. students he advised during his tenure on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus.

This leads us to the third generation, which included Robert Lampman, who is credited as the "intellectual architect of the War on Poverty." Lampman worked on the Council of Economic Advisers under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. As those administrations focused on problems of poverty, he argued that ending poverty would require more than just a healthy, growing economy and that specific programs were needed, aimed at assisting poor families. His writings were central to the launch of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Lampman was in a position to advocate for funding for a poverty research center at the very moment when the administration wanted to assure that there was evidence demonstrating the impact of the War on Poverty.

The University of Wisconsin's long tradition of applied social policy research made this campus a natural choice for a poverty research center, but the University was initially reluctant; some of the faculty viewed this work as not sufficiently academic, and they worried that analysis of government programs would take them away from their more serious research work. These concerns meant the University drove a hard bargain. The agreement the University of Wisconsin signed with the federal government in 1966 specified that the research center would have full control over grant funds, research topics, and the information to be published. This was also a very "Wisconsin" agreement—it specified that the research center, which was to be known as the Institute for Research on Poverty, would emphasize collaboration across many social science disciplines, and promote the sharing of knowledge and discoveries with the policy world; in short, that IRP would reflect the Wisconsin Idea.

Over the years, the Institute has tackled critical descriptive and analytical questions such as:

- Who are the poor and what are their characteristics?
- How do we appropriately measure poverty?

- How do safety net programs interact with labor market involvement?
- How does family structure affect poverty?
- Do job training efforts work to reduce poverty?
- What are the factors driving persistent income differences among minority groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, or immigrants?
- How should child support systems function?
- What are the connections between income and health?

The early tension over whether IRP would be a center of basic academic research or a center for policy analysis was resolved over time with the clear answer: It would do both. Over the years, IRP has supported both fundamental scholarship and policy-relevant research that has often garnered immediate attention in Washington, D.C.

What has IRP accomplished?

As we look back 50 years, there have been a lot of research papers, edited volumes, and conferences sponsored by IRP. But what is the net effect of all this work? Let me suggest three contributions of IRP.

First, IRP has created a cadre of researchers concerned with poverty and social policy who are spread across the country and around the globe. Some of them were trained here at the University of Wisconsin. You find graduates of the University of Wisconsin–Madison everywhere around Washington, D.C., and in academic departments, working on issues of social policy and poverty. But IRP has not only helped students here on campus; it has nourished researchers with poverty-related interests from across the country. I am not a graduate of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, but as I mentioned earlier, I have been a part of IRP and their projects and conferences and workshops.

Crucially, IRP continued to support and encourage this work even as the various social sciences went through different fads. There were many years, for instance, in my field of economics, where doing applied microanalysis on social policy was *not* cool. This was, unfortunately, about the time I came out of graduate school. The network of IRP-related scholars who persisted in this work gave support to junior scholars who were not always encouraged by others in their field. I would say similar things about the reduced interest in empirical social policy analysis within sociology in recent decades, as interest in theory and cultural sociology has flourished instead. IRP has encouraged, trained, and mentored scholars in poverty and that has been important to many of us.

Second, IRP has helped make poverty and social policy research truly interdisciplinary. The three names I mentioned at the beginning of this article were all economists—Ely, Witte, and Lampman. And economists dominated the

research discussion in the early years. But IRP insisted that the analysis of poverty was necessarily a multidisciplinary enterprise. The Institute was an early experiment in interdisciplinary research. From its first days, IRP brought together economists, sociologists, political scientists, social workers, legal experts, psychologists, educators, anthropologists, geographers, and—this was a novel idea at the time—persons with strong skills in the emerging fields of econometrics, data analysis, and computer programming. I might note that those technical experts quickly became indispensable. Their work with the new data coming out of the Census Bureau or the Panel Study on Income Dynamics or the income maintenance experiments of the 1970s enabled them to extract information and study problems in new ways.

IRP made sure that the study of poverty was central to the social sciences, broadly defined, not just to one or two fields. The work on child support, on single mothers, on behavioral health issues all drew in researchers from multiple fields. Being at Wisconsin helped make this happen. Wisconsin’s long tradition of interdisciplinary research centers helped support and encourage IRP’s interdisciplinary efforts. And the strength of the social sciences at Wisconsin helped, with strong faculty researchers not just in core departments like sociology, economics, or political science, but spread across the university in departments such as Rural Sociology, the La Follette School of Public Affairs, Geography, Social Work, and Public Health.

Third, IRP has always maintained a strong link with the policy world, which has strengthened its poverty research in two ways. On the one hand, constant interaction with the policy community in the states, in the federal government, or in Washington, D.C., think tanks, has enriched the research agenda on poverty, opening up interesting questions that might not be obvious without these interactions. On the other hand, this link has meant that research findings and ideas are often rapidly translated into the policy community. The policy community reads IRP working papers and reads *Focus*. To be honest, at least for me, this always made working in this field much more interesting. I knew there was an audience who cared beyond my fellow academics.

The list of policies on which IRP researchers have had a direct effect is long. It includes such topics as welfare reform, job programs, the Earned Income Tax Credit and other tax provisions, child support enforcement, marriage policy programs, Food Stamps (or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, as we now know it), and Medicaid rules. The University of Wisconsin may no longer be home to an identifiable Wisconsin School, as led by Ely, Commons, and Witte, but IRP continues the tradition.

At the end of the day, when I look back on the 50-year history of IRP, I see at least three major lessons for how you build a center to have long-term impacts.

- *Collecting talent matters.* The list of IRP Affiliates and persons who have attended IRP conferences and events

over the years is a who's who in poverty research. It is a changing list, and IRP has done a good job—particularly through their Summer Research Workshops—in constantly reaching out to younger researchers and renewing those contacts.

- *Interdisciplinarity matters.* The more perspectives around the table, the more interesting the questions that get asked.
- *Staying power matters.* There have been other poverty research centers that have come and gone over this time period. None of them have had the impact of IRP.

There is always some cognitive dissonance when doing research on a key social issue like poverty. Critics will inevitably say, “Well, why don’t you actually do something about it, rather than just study it?” I strongly believe that those who want to “do something about it” will be better able to act if they understand the nature of poverty and the barriers facing the poor. I believe deeply in the power of social science research to tell us something useful that—at least occasionally—can be used to make policy just a little better.

All of that said, it has been hard to watch poverty and economic need grow following the Great Recession. It has been hard to look at the data on mothers and children living below half the poverty line. It has been hard to see Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and its replacement Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), shrink to a nonexistent program so that a cash safety net for most poor families simply does not exist anymore in this country. It has been hard to see the growing number of folks above poverty but no longer in the middle class, with growing problems of long-term unemployment among older men and drug addiction among younger men. It has been hard to realize that there remain far too many children born into very poor and struggling families. It has been hard to see the continuing struggle among too many persons of color and among new immigrants to find their place in American society.

We have to ask: Were we as researchers in any way complicit in these outcomes? Did we not pay attention to the right things? Did we not ask the right questions or put up warnings as soon as we might have for some problems? These are questions we must ask. I believe that many of these changes are the result of the interaction between a deep recession, followed by a very slow-growth economy, and a particularly partisan and vitriolic public political environment that makes arguing for any program that spends new money almost impossible—however much some groups need and deserve a bit of help. We were not alone in failing to fully predict these changes.

That said, we need to launch the next data collection project and the next set of studies looking at these problems, describing how they have come about, and testing various pilot programs that might make things better. If IRP does not

lead on this, then we will be complicit in letting things get worse without trying to bring attention and understanding to what is happening. I am a social scientist and I believe deeply in the value of research not just to the academic community’s understanding of a particular phenomenon, but to the public and policy debate. For 50 years, IRP has made it possible for social scientists to do that research.

IRP has transformed how we understand poverty, and has played an extraordinarily important role over 50 years in shaping programs designed to address poverty. It has mentored generations of scholars dedicated not only to research, but to sharing their knowledge to help alleviate suffering and change lives. That is a legacy of which we should all be proud. ■