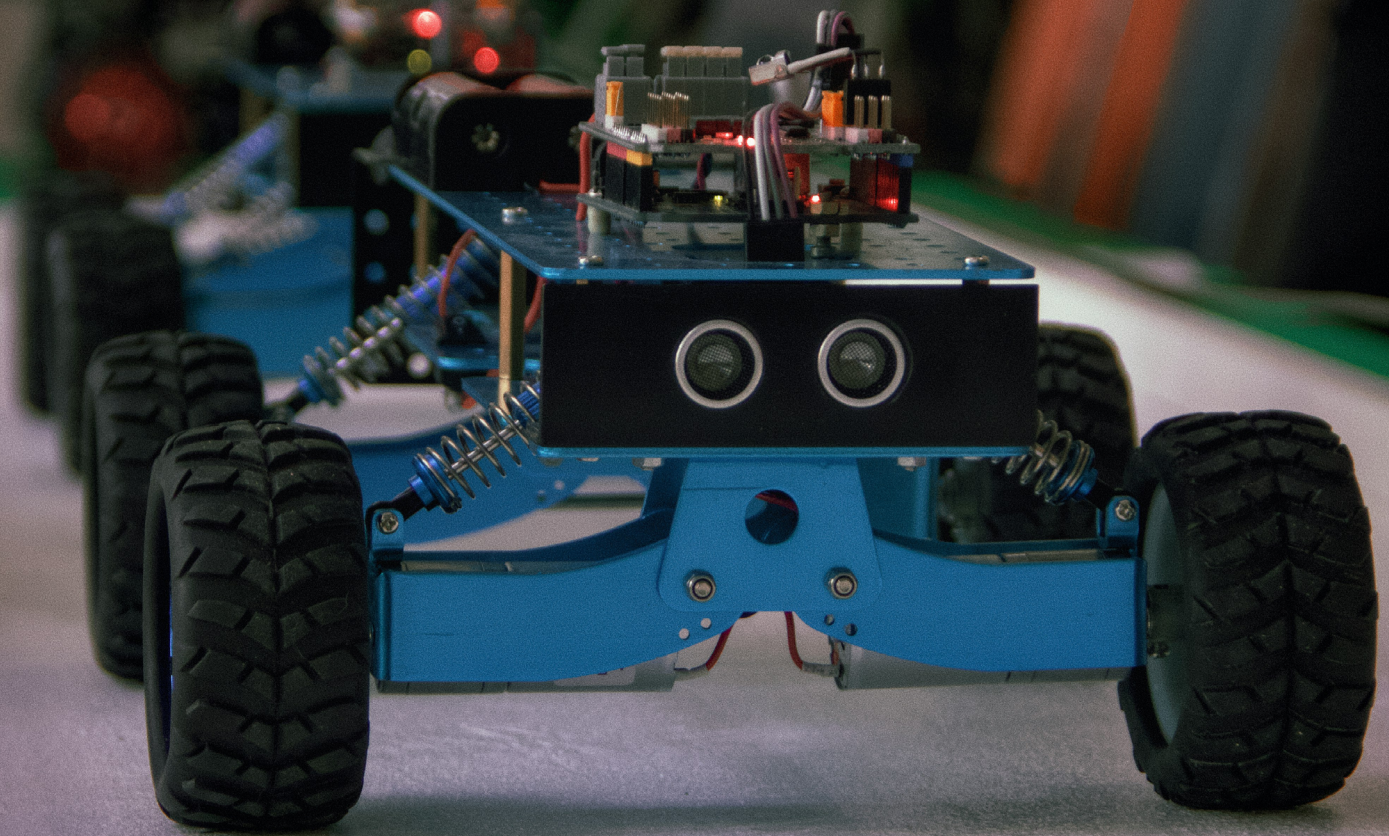


# The Research-to-Impact Ecosystem



| PERCEPTIONS, BARRIERS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## About Us

### Lead author

↳ **Kate Burns**, Director, State and Local Innovation, Federation of American Scientists

### Contributing authors

↳ **Andy Gordon**, Associate Director, State and Local Innovation, Federation of American Scientists

↳ **Rose Mische Commins**, Senior Manager, State and Local Innovation, Federation of American Scientists

↳ **Stefania Di Mauro-Nava**, Consultant, State and Local Innovation, Federation of American Scientists

## About the Federation of American Scientists

The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) works to advance progress on a broad suite of contemporary issues where science, technology, and innovation policy can deliver transformative impact, and seeks to ensure that scientific and technical expertise have a seat at the policymaking table. Established in 1945 by scientists in response to the atomic bomb, FAS continues to bring scientific rigor and analysis to address national challenges. More information about FAS's work at [fas.org](https://fas.org).

The State and Local Innovation (formerly MetroLab) team within FAS aims to take good ideas from the lab to local governments through intentional, regular and impact-driven policy alignment. This mission is twofold: to put science in cities and to understand, support, and enable transformative partnerships between cities and universities. More information about the State and Local Innovation team's work at <https://fas.org/issue/metrolab/>.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the Author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Schmidt Futures, our Steering Committee, nor the entirety of the Federation of American Scientists.

FAS can be reached at 1150 18th St. NW, Suite 1000, Washington, DC, 20036, [fas@fas.org](mailto:fas@fas.org), or through [fas.org](https://fas.org).

COPYRIGHT © FEDERATION OF AMERICAN SCIENTISTS, 2026. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

## Contents

---

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>1</b>
KEY FINDINGS .....	1
<b>METHODOLOGIES.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>THE RESEARCH-TO-IMPACT ECOSYSTEM: PERCEPTIONS, BARRIERS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>19</b>

## Executive Summary

---

The Civic Research Agenda is a culmination of several years of study, partnerships, and intelligence gathering that is the first comprehensive reporting on the priority research needs of American cities and counties. This report provides our findings on the current relationship of local government and university partnerships, including perceptions each has on the other, barriers to working together and recommendations for moving these partnerships and conversations forward.

## Key Findings

### Perceptions

Local governments view research as **producing knowledge**, and researchers view public policy as **exercising power**.

Faculty and staff at a university feel they are perceived as detached, selfish, or difficult partners. University participants wanted to convey that research is indeed useful, applied work matters, and that research is impact-oriented. Generally, local governments aimed to position themselves as capable partners.

**University faculty and staff fear being seen as too intellectual and disconnected.**

**Local government staff fear being seen as not intellectual enough.**

### Knowing Who To Work With

There is **no clear structural discovery system on either “side.”** Both are operating informally, and often, only by direct relationships. This also presents evidence that **the research demand/supply ecosystem is deeply relationship-dependent**, creating high barriers for newcomers, inequity of access, and bottlenecks around well-connected individuals.

### Making Research Accessible

Various recommendations were given over the course of the workshops to make research more accessible. In this case, “accessible” means not just having the ability to search, find, and read research publications, but to understand and comprehend findings in a way that makes science and research usable to communities. Local governments made the following recommendations:

- ↳ **Provide a one-page executive summary with no technical jargon;**
- ↳ **Toolkits and program designs should be included in publications; and**
- ↳ **Eliminate research paywalls and create centralized repositories.**

## Recommendations

This report includes 8 recommendations to consider for projects that local governments and universities take on together. It also includes recommendations outside of the direct local government and university line of sight. These include:

- ↳ **Examining ways to include community engagement as a tenure track requirement;**
- ↳ **Redefine “scientifically novel” for federal grants that would bring novel ideas to a *new* community; and**
- ↳ **Bolster philanthropic support for networks as this report provides evidence that conferences and networks are the leading way these two disparate communities can better work together.**

## Methodologies

---

In 2024, the Civic Research Agenda project created a steering committee to support this endeavor. The purpose of this committee was multifaceted: 1) to provide guidance and assist MetroLab in selecting cities in which to conduct workshops; 2) ensure the agenda is representative of the diverse and dynamic needs of local governments across the country; 3) ensure that the agenda is appropriate in scope; an exhaustive research list doesn't necessarily reflect the priorities and urgency of local government research needs; and 4) review the final R&D agenda to ensure it is an actionable document that translates to the scientific ecosystem. The Steering Committee included the following individuals:

- ↳ **Hana Passen** | Director of Innovation & Partnerships, Stanford Impact Labs
- ↳ **Terri Matthews** | Director of Town+Gown:NYC @ NYC DCC
- ↳ **Joda Thongnopnua** | Directorate for Technology, Innovation and Partnerships (TIP), National Science Foundation
- ↳ **Justin Kits** | Assistant Vice President for Economic Development, The University of Tulsa (formerly Tulsa Innovation Lab)
- ↳ **Kevin Cooke** | Assistant Vice President, Research Policy, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
- ↳ **Alvaro J. Muñoz** | Director, International, Community, and Economic Engagement, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
- ↳ **Mark Ritacco** | Senior Advisor, Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP (formerly Chief Government Affairs Officer, National Association of Counties)

Acknowledgement of these individuals demonstrates the collaborative and comprehensive nature of this effort. It does not, in any way, indicate that these individuals or their organizations condone this report and should not be taken as “sponsorship,” legal advice, or approval of its contents.

For the purpose of this report, “local government” is considered to include U.S. cities and counties, and “research” refers to the use of data, analysis, and evidence to inform local government decisions, policies, and implementation.

The Civic Research Agenda is informed by three primary sources, as described in detail below:

- ↳ A MetroLab-produced digital survey
- ↳ In partnership with the National League of Cities (NLC), a MetroLab-NLC digital survey
- ↳ In-person workshops hosted at nine locations

## **MetroLab Survey**

The Civic Research Agenda Survey was developed in order to gather feedback from a broader range of cities. MetroLab contracted with PorchLight Insights, a local government consulting firm based in Kansas City, MO, to manage survey development, administration, and analysis.

The survey instrument was developed with feedback from the Steering Committee, and sought to gather information about: 1) cities' experiences with research collaboration with university/college partners, including frequency and barriers; 2) priorities for research collaborations with university/college partners and feedback on specific ideas; 3) preferences for research reporting/communications; and 4) basic demographics about jurisdictions to allow for comparison (type, name, state, population). The survey was designed to primarily consist of multiple-choice or ranking questions to support a high rate of completion, with a few key open-ended questions. The survey was built in the Survey Monkey platform and tested for ease of use and readability with select local government staff.

While contact information was gathered in the survey to ascertain survey completion (particularly if multiple people from the same city or county took the survey), survey participants were informed that all individual responses would be kept confidential and not included in any reporting. Survey reporting was at the aggregate level, and any information that is attributable to individual answers was anonymized to exclude the participant name and the name of the jurisdiction.

The target survey audience was cities and counties across a range of population sizes and geographies that had some experience or opinion about local government research. To reach this audience, we partnered with other organizations that support local government research and innovation, including Results for America, the Alliance for Innovation, the Bloomberg Center for Government Excellence at Johns Hopkins University, and state municipal leagues. MetroLab and PorchLight Insights also distributed the survey through their respective contact channels. Outreach began in early April 2025 and continued through early July 2025 and each partner used their own distinct URL to allow targeted tracking of outreach. As this invite was sent to a network of local government representatives over several channels and over the course of several months, the total number of surveys "sent" are unknown. After cleaning the data, a total of 47 responses from local government staff were received through this survey outreach.

## **MetroLab-NLC Survey**

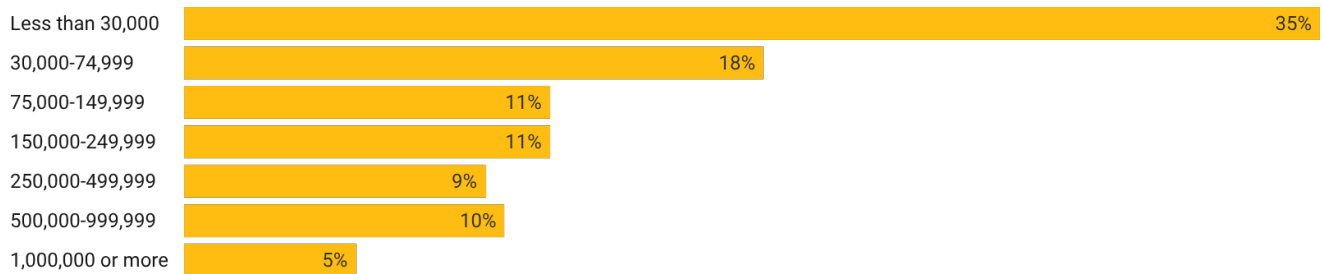
In an effort to further broaden outreach to cities, in June 2025 MetroLab partnered with NLC, which routinely sends "pulse" surveys via their platform to their network of municipalities to gather information about operations and best practices. To align with NLC's pulse survey structure, the Civic Research Agenda Survey was modified to include just five key questions, in addition to collecting basic demographic information. These questions all aligned with questions from the full survey and included: 1) frequency of collaboration with university/college

partners on research projects; 2) barriers to collaboration (open-ended); 3) priorities for research collaborations with university/college partners; 4) feedback on specific ideas for collaboration; and 5) research they would like to get from a college/university (open-ended).

NLC cleaned and provided the data to the project team, after which it was integrated into the previous survey with cross-cutting results reported. A total of 120 survey responses were received through the NLC survey process.

**In total, combining the MetroLab-NLC survey and the MetroLab survey**, this analysis includes a total of 167 survey responses. These responses represented 152 distinct jurisdictions and 37 states (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico). The results primarily came from cities and towns (92%), representing a broad range of population sizes.

### Share of MetroLab-NLC Local Government R&D Survey responses by city population



### In-person Workshops

This initiative also included in-depth workshops with nine communities. MetroLab aimed to target cities and counties that represented a wide range of compositions. Ultimately, the nine workshops that were hosted showcase a mix of urban vs. rural, small vs. medium vs. large population, strong university partnerships vs. virtually non-existent, and geographic diversity.



Working collaboratively with mayors, county leaders, and university partners, these workshops allowed us to better understand best practices in creating actionable research, identify existing barriers, and to locally grow these ecosystems. The audience consisted of local government department leaders and staff, university faculty, and key community partner organizations (i.e., local community foundations, housing groups, and chambers of commerce).

TOTAL WORKSHOP ATTENDEES	
TOTAL NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS AT THE IN-PERSON WORKSHOPS	366
TOTAL NUMBER OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS	81
TOTAL NUMBER OF LOCAL GOV REPRESENTATIVES	139
TOTAL NUMBER OF UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVES	146
TOTAL NUMBER OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS REPRESENTED	12
TOTAL NUMBER OF UNIQUE LOCAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS REPRESENTED	85
TOTAL NUMBER OF UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONS REPRESENTED	42
TOTAL NUMBER OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED	59

The “bucketing” of policy domains and sub policy domains were based on the following:

- ↳ Survey results
- ↳ Confirmation received across the workshops of including specific research questions were grouped with suggested policy domains

- ↳ The discretion and expertise of the FAS State and Local Innovation team. The policy domains align more closely with how local governments are structured (i.e. typical departments that sit within a local government, Department of Housing, Public Works, etc), versus typical academic structures (i.e. School of Engineering, Geography and Environment, Public Policy, etc).

## The Research-to-Impact Ecosystem: Perceptions, Barriers, and Recommendations

---

In addition to studying the specific policy domains and priority research needs of local governments, the survey and in-person workshops included questions that studied the current relationship of local government and university partnerships. In many ways, a research agenda is just a starting point; what impact can come from a list of priority knowledge gaps if no action is taken, or if the research is conducted but is not given to an individual or institution who can use it?

To answer these questions, it was critical to understand how local governments and universities feel they are perceived, identify barriers to trust building, and understand more deeply the points of friction that are preventing research from better shaping local policy decisions and programs.

### Perceptions and Myths to Bust

At each workshop, we asked local governments to provide one word to describe “research,” and we asked the university community to provide one word to describe “public policy.”

Local Governments’ Description of Research:

- ↳ Words related to data and statistics appeared most frequently (18%); suggesting a perception of quantitative information
- ↳ Trends of academic framing (12%) including mentions of terms such as “white paper,” and “abstract”
- ↳ Words describing efforts that are time intensive and slow (9%)
- ↳ Descriptions of high costs were also included (4%), such as “money,” “expensive,” and “grant funding”
- ↳ Positive descriptions (12%) included words like “objectiveness,” “opportunity,” “impact,” and “knowledge”

Universities’ Description of Public Policy:

- ↳ The most common response to describe public policy typically had a reference to rules and lawmaking (30%), including words such as “laws,” “government,” and “structure”
- ↳ University attendees also described public policy by highlighting challenges, mostly in recognizing the political nature of it (18%) with words like “politics,” “one-sided,” or “negotiation”
- ↳ Words describing efforts that are time intensive and slow (6%)
- ↳ Positive descriptions included viewing public policy as an opportunity to create change (15%), including words such as “change-maker” and “innovation”

When comparing the answers to both of these questions, ultimately, research is seen as **producing knowledge**, and public policy is seen as **exercising power**.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS DESCRIBING “RESEARCH”		UNIVERSITIES DESCRIBING “PUBLIC POLICY”	
DATA-HEAVY	ACADEMIC	RULE-HEAVY	GOVERNMENTAL
SLOW AND EXPENSIVE	ABSTRACT	CONSEQUENTIAL	POLITICAL AND NEGOTIATED
OBJECTIVE (IDEALLY)	KNOWLEDGE-PRODUCING	POWER-DRIVEN	ACTION-DIRECTING

The workshops also asked both groups to identify a myth they want to bust to the alternative group.

Myths **local governments** would like to “bust” - in other words, statements they believe university communities believe but are untrue –include the following:

- ↳ [21%] that local governments have a lot of money available, are themselves adequately resourced, and have ample time to read large amounts of research
- ↳ [20%] that local government staff are uninformed, not smart, or not resourceful
- ↳ [16%] that local government staff lack motivation, are lazy or don't care, and want to preserve bureaucracy
- ↳ [13%] that local governments cannot innovate and adapt
- ↳ [13%] that local governments are hard to work with, and in particular, they resist academic insight
- ↳ [6% ] that local governments are not data-driven

Generally, local governments aimed to position themselves as capable partners, and to correct structural misconceptions.

Myths **universities** would like to “bust” - in other words, statements they believe local government communities believe but are untrue include the following:.

- ↳ [25%] that universities are elite; faculty live in an ivory tower
- ↳ [19%] that universities produce research that is impractical, only theoretical, or not client-driven
- ↳ [15%] that universities only care about publishability, and faculty/staff do not care about their community
- ↳ [11%] that universities are slow, research takes a long time, and they can't work quickly
- ↳ [11%] that universities have a lot of money and funding is not constrained
- ↳ [11%] that research only takes into account quantitative data

Almost half of all responses indicate that faculty and staff at a university feel they are perceived as detached, selfish, or difficult partners. University participants wanted to convey to the audience that research is indeed useful, applied work matters, and that research is impact-oriented.

When comparing the two, university staff are more concerned about relational image, whereas local governments are focused on structural misunderstanding. The research community identified words like “elitism,” “self-interest,” and “detachment” as primary concerns. Local government staff focused more on resource constraints, political realities, and authority limits. In addition to local government staff voicing concern on the perception of their intellectual capability, there is a notable status misalignment:

**University faculty and staff fear being seen as too intellectual and disconnected. Local government staff fear being seen as not intellectual enough.**

## Knowing Who To Work With

MetroLab Network was established in 2015 to serve as a third party connector between universities and local governments. Over ten years later, we wanted to understand if this type of role is needed. Specifically, we wanted to explore how these relationships were formed, and whether or not external support (such as the MetroLab Network) was helpful. At the in-person workshops, a question posed to the group included “How do you know who to work with from the other side?”

Local governments knew who to work with at universities based on the following:

- ↳ [43%] Personal networks: by way of existing relationships, word of mouth, former students, and events and convenings
- ↳ [21%] Online searches: using Google, LinkedIn, or generally looking at websites
- ↳ [13%] Reaching directly to the university institution
- ↳ [8%] No method at all: “I have no idea,” “luck,” and “we don’t” were included in these responses

Universities knew who to work with at local governments based on the following:

- ↳ [44%] Personal networks: by way of existing relationships, word of mouth, former students, and events and convenings
- ↳ [21%] Online searches: using Google, LinkedIn, or generally looking at websites
- ↳ [10%] Cold contacts and outreach
- ↳ [6%] No method at all: “I have no idea,” “luck,” and “we don’t” were included in these responses

Between the two institutions, the answers are almost identical, suggesting there is **no clear structural discovery system on either side**. Both are operating informally, and often, only by direct relationships. This also presents evidence that **the research demand/supply ecosystem is deeply relationship-dependent**, creating high barriers for newcomers, inequity of access, and bottlenecks around well-connected individuals.

## Barriers To Research Collaboration

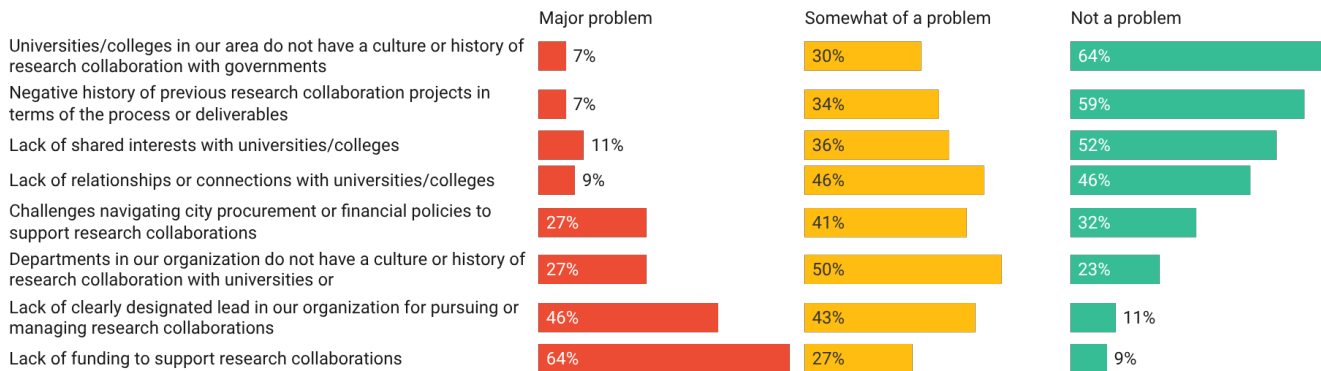
Across all methodologies, FAS ascertained the most significant points of friction between local governments and universities working together on research questions.

From the survey:

In the survey to local governments, staff cited issues that were inward facing such as lack of funding, no designated lead or central effort, and lack of relationships or connections with universities.

### Over the past three years, to what extent have the following barriers hindered research collaboration between your organization and university/college partners?

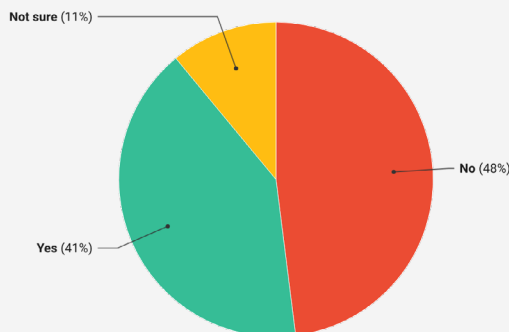
Major problem    Somewhat of a problem    Not a problem



Indeed, the survey found that only a minority of cities and counties have a central office to coordinate research activities.

#### Do you know who to coordinate with?

1. Larger population cities were not significantly more likely to say "yes" (43%) but medium and large cities were more likely to say "not sure";
2. The most common answer when asking the location of a centralized office was offering a list of multiple departments;
3. Another common answer when asking if there is a centralized office coordinating research projects was a data/innovation office, followed by an administration office or the Mayor's Office



- ↳ Larger population cities were not significantly more likely to say "yes" (43%) but medium and large cities were more likely to say "not sure"
- ↳ The most common answer when asking the location of a centralized office was offering a list of multiple departments
- ↳ Another common answer when asking if there is a centralized office coordinating research projects was a data/innovation office, followed by an administration office or the Mayor's Office

Other barriers to research collaboration that emerged from the survey to a local government audience:

- ↳ Limited staff capacity and time
- ↳ Not receiving priority in a political environment
- ↳ Location constraints
- ↳ Timelines not aligning between a city/county and a university
- ↳ Lack of collaboration with stakeholders to do regional projects or studies

Finally, the survey asked respondents to ask how important certain elements are when communicating research results, labeling various elements as either “very important,” “important,” “somewhat important, or “not important.”

**One hundred percent of respondents cited that a concise summary of results that is easy to understand is very important or important.**

Additionally, **one hundred percent of respondents cited specific recommendations about how their jurisdiction could use the results as very important or important.**

Other critical elements considered “very important” or “important” included:

- ↳ [97% of respondents] specific insights for my jurisdiction
- ↳ [97% of respondents] consideration of funding implications related to research
- ↳ [87% of respondents] infographics and impactful data visualizations
- ↳ [69% of respondents] presentation of results to elected officials

At the in-person workshop the question; “what are barriers to the research-to-impact pipeline,” was posed to the audience. Participants noted that barriers are not necessarily about research production, but more around institutional design and governance. The exercise also highlighted a clear need to define the word “impact.” Each audience had a different definition; for local governments “impact” meant something they could implement, and for universities it meant theory contribution. And importantly, local governments noted that **for research to be as actionable as possible, it needs to go beyond observational and include recommendations.**

Below are more specific takeaways and feedback identifying barriers to making research more actionable with local government partners:

- ↳ Barrier: the problem statement. Local governments and universities should define a clear problem statement and scope the projects within a manageable time horizon
- ↳ Barrier: incentives and timelines are mismatched. Political cycles move faster than peer review cycles
- ↳ Barrier: implementation is the missing middle. Outputs should include what to do next, address procurement, staffing, and budget constraints, and identify which department/ partners owns the recommendation

- ↳ Barrier: managing relationships. Clear points of contact are needed, and regular check-ins are helpful

## Motivation and Financial Support

The workshop participants also had robust discussion around institutional motivations and financial support for research that answers a call from the local government community. Challenges that were recognized:

- ↳ **Federal funding requires projects that are considered scientifically novel.** The research needs of local government decision makers are not necessarily at the frontiers of research.
- ↳ **Philanthropic funding (which is often in support of local government priorities) is not included in the “R1” point system.** It was suggested that federal agencies change policies around what may be considered in the R1 point system in furtherance of this type of work (including to add philanthropic funds to the point system, for example).
- ↳ **Tenure track requirements do not emphasize community engagement as a consideration.** How can translation research activities be better accounted for at the university/institution level?
- ↳ **Academics do not like to provide recommendations which contain degrees of certainty,** yet government decision makers desire higher levels of certainty when making a decision.

### Hiring a Consultant v. Hiring an Academic

Throughout this project, FAS inquired on the right conditions for a local government to hire a university researcher vs. hiring a consultant. Three factors stood out in tipping the balance to hire an academic instead of a consultant:

- ↳ An 18 month time horizon to start and finish a project
- ↳ Has more technical requirements than an average project
- ↳ Results from a neutral party are desired

## Research Outputs: Increasing Accessibility

Various recommendations were given over the course of the workshops to make research more accessible. In this case, “accessible” means not just having the ability to search, find, and read research publications, but to understand and comprehend findings in a way that makes science and research usable to communities. Local governments made the following recommendations:

- ↳ Provide a one-page executive summary
- ↳ No jargon, and preferably the summary is not above an 8th grade reading proficiency level
- ↳ Toolkits and program designs should be included in publications
- ↳ Eliminate research paywalls and create centralized repositories

Participants called for improvements in how data is shared. This included calling for the creation of shared knowledge infrastructure, and to create agreements that simplify governance and use of city/county datasets. Local government participants emphasized the challenge of research living behind paywalls, limiting access for city staff who do not hold academic subscriptions.

One research study<sup>1</sup> found that only 28% of all academic research articles are freely available. When findings are published exclusively in paywalled journals or institutional repositories, cities face barriers to accessing research that was often publicly funded. While there have been recent pushes for open access to scholarly research, furthering the ability of local governments and universities to directly collaborate around targeted research collaborations will further advance access and outcomes from research.

## **Recommendations for Local Governments and Universities**

The recommendations below are specific actions that will set up for successful partnerships between local governments and universities.

### **Establish a “front door” to the organization.**

Establish a visible, standardized entry point for research collaboration. The front door can be a digital site, it can be a person who holds relationships across the organization. The “front door” should be formally or informally responsible for connecting any research effort with the right person within their institution. This does not require building a new office or even a new position in every case. If possible, name this person on a website.

### **Mutually write a problem statement.**

A local government can publish its own research or learning agenda. Or a process can be developed early on that will establish the appropriate scope of work for a research project, setting up for success the expected level of specificity to the answer. This process could include the following questions:

- ↳ What specific policy problem is being addressed? And what department owns it?
- ↳ What decision or action will this research inform?
- ↳ What constraints or political realities shape the context?
- ↳ What is the appropriate timeline?

### **Make the research actionable and accessible.**

If appropriate, the researcher(s) should provide recommendations on what to do next. If possible, publish it on an accessible website and avoid using technical jargon.

---

<sup>1</sup> Piwowar H, Priem J, Larivière V, Alperin JP, Matthias L, Nortlander B, Farley A, West J, Haustein S. 2018. The state of OA: a large-scale analysis of the prevalence and impact of Open Access articles. PeerJ 6:e4375 <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.4375>

### **Cut to the chase.**

Methodologies are critically important to the research and scientific process. But when presenting evidence to a local government partner, or the community, less “how” and more “what.” The executive summary and recommendations provided should start with what the problem/answer is.

Additionally:

- ↳ To the extent possible, make the research targeted to the specific jurisdiction
- ↳ Include comparisons to peer cities/counties

### **Build implementation considerations into the process.**

Ownership, capacity, and alignment of decisions with political and other contextual timelines surfaced repeatedly in the workshops. These challenges all fall under the need for better implementation pathway planning up front rather than as an afterthought, if at all.

At project inception, partners should confirm:

- ↳ Which department will own adoption (which should have been determined already during joint scoping)
- ↳ Whether that department has participated in scoping
- ↳ What staff capacity is available
- ↳ Whether student fellows or interns can extend capacity
- ↳ Which policy window the research aims to influence (or if that particular decision window is always open)
- ↳ Whether interim deliverables are needed to meet that window

Templates for cover sheets and implementation briefs can be developed once and shared broadly. If widely adopted, they could become the norm for applied municipal research.

### **Integrate the legal community.**

Participants noted that relevant legal statutes are often viewed as a permanent barrier to desired outcomes. A recommendation is to integrate the legal community (government and academic) into the process so that the law is viewed at worst, as a temporary obstacle, and at best a creative tool for implementing solutions.

### **Establish a procurement process or a master contract to streamline paid projects for research.**

Create clearer contracting pathways and guidance for engaging universities in applied work. Standardized memoranda of understanding and defined procurement tracks for research partnerships will reduce ambiguity and shorten time to launch.

### **And standardize data sharing agreements.**

Institutions should adopt standardized data use agreement templates and governance checklists. Rather than negotiating from scratch each time, partners can work from a shared model that addresses privacy, security, and compliance expectations upfront.

## **Recommendations for Further Exploration**

This report also calls for recommendations outside of the direct local government and university line of sight. There are numerous barriers identified in the surveys and workshops that, if addressed, could make research more actionable. These include:

- ↳ Examining ways to include community engagement as a tenure track requirement;
- ↳ Redefine “scientifically novel” for federal grants that would bring novel ideas to a new community; and
- ↳ Bolster philanthropic support for networks as this report provides evidence that conferences and networks are the leading way these two disparate communities can better work together

But there are also two noteworthy recommendations that are high effort, and high reward:

### **Establish Peer City Benchmarks**

Throughout the workshops, local leaders repeatedly asked for research to include comparisons to peer cities or counties. But when asked who they consider to be their peer, it was often a mixed response. “What city/county is my actual peer jurisdiction and what information can I glean” is a high demand question with few answers. A more precise model of peer identification would cluster jurisdictions by policy-relevant conditions.

While this effort to strengthen the pipeline would likely require a net new effort, it would be worthwhile if local governments would no longer ask, “What are cities/counties like ours doing?” and instead could ask, “Who has already faced this exact structural challenge, and what evidence guided their decisions?”.

### **Treat the Research to Impact Pipeline as Civic Infrastructure**

Similar to peer benchmarking, this effort to strengthen the pipeline would be a greater lift than many of the other recommendations, but would allow for sustained infrastructure to be built. Cities invest in roads, water systems, and broadband because those systems make everything else possible. The research-to-impact pipeline should be viewed the same way.

Right now, applied research partnerships depend too much on personal relationships and informal processes. Each new project requires rebuilding intake processes, renegotiating data agreements, and redefining expectations.

Treating the pipeline as civic infrastructure means making collaboration predictable and durable. It would require:

- ↳ Standardized data systems and clear data sharing agreements
- ↳ Dedicated research partnership or translation staff
- ↳ Clear public entry points for engagement
- ↳ Shared templates for scoping, executive briefs, and implementation planning
- ↳ Recurring joint priority-setting aligned with city strategic plans

These reduce transaction costs, shorten timelines, and increase the likelihood that research will be used. When this becomes part of how a city operates, rather than something that depends on individual champions, the pipeline strengthens, research stops being episodic and becomes embedded in the ongoing governance process.

## **The Why**

Finally, at the in-person workshops, FAS asked the participants how these types of partnerships improve their work. In other words, why should we invest time, money, and resources into local governments and universities working together.

When asked “how can universities support policy and programmatic needs to local governments,” cities and counties offered the following:

- ↳ There is a demand for evidence-based policy and data analysis; local governments want universities to function as applied research partners, not just knowledge generators.
- ↳ Local governments asked for help with workforce support due to capacity constraints and staffing shortages. How can they be better plugged into data science projects, internships and externships, and creating workforce development pathways?
- ↳ “Provide summaries of best practices quickly,” local governments are in need of research that is usable, not just published.
- ↳ Universities should invest in ways to make collaboration ongoing, and build trust with staff to ultimately become long-term partners.
- ↳ Local governments want universities to help convene. Universities are seen as neutral conveners with access and awareness to expertise.

In the same way that universities can support local governments, local governments can support universities as critical innovation and economic development institutions. When asked “how can local governments support universities to be engines of economic growth and innovation,” university faculty said the following:

- ↳ The biggest theme in response: faculty want local governments to bring them real problems to solve. Local governments can act as problem generators, and universities truly want to know what research demand exists.

- ↳ Access to data is essential for research and innovation. Faculty asked for easier data sharing, government data sets, and partnership opportunities for data collection.
- ↳ Collaboration structures are needed, not just individual relationships. Examples cited were innovation centers, advisory boards, and structure partnerships.
- ↳ University faculty want to see their students thrive. “Hire our graduates” was a common response.

Combined, these responses suggest that the main barrier isn't misaligned goals, but coordination and infrastructure for collaboration. These are solvable problems that if addressed, can unlock policy innovation for communities across the country.

This report is the manifestation of why MetroLab was started. It is a roadmap that will move further the theory of change that our research ecosystem has a bounty of insights and policy interventions, and when done in partnership with local innovators, catalytic impact is in our grasp.

FAS looks forward to continuing this work, and hopefully, bringing research problem statements and answers to communities across the country.

**faculty want local governments to bring them real problems to solve**

“Tell us what you need”

“Bring problems of pressing local importance”

“Provide real data and real-world problems”

“Research questions that come from real-world needs”

“Give us wicked, complex problems”

## Acknowledgements

---

We would like to thank Schmidt Futures, who provided the funding for this program. Without their support, this effort would not have been possible.

We would also like to thank Kate Bender of PorchLight Insights for her help in conceiving, developing, distributing, and analyzing the information from our national survey, as well as Christine Baker Smith at the National League of Cities for amplifying our survey in their networks to help gather the data used in this report.

Additionally, a sincere thank you to our Steering Committee, whose insights and thought leadership were helpful in framing this report, as well as tremendous gratitude to our FAS colleagues, namely Dr. Jedidah Isler for her editorial support and leadership in reaching the finish line as well as our colleagues in the communications department who helped produce this material for public consumption.

Lastly, we would like to thank the following individuals from the nine communities we were able to visit in order to host in person workshops.

### **Allentown, PA**

- ↳ The Honorable Matthew Tuerk, Mayor, City of Allentown
- ↳ Katharine Haring, Ph.D., President, Muhlenberg College
- ↳ Laura Furge, Ph.D., Provost, Muhlenberg College
- ↳ Michaela Boyer, Chief of Staff, City of Allentown

### **Baltimore, MD**

- ↳ Ralph O. Mueller, Ph.D., Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, University of Baltimore
- ↳ Amanda Phillips de Lucas, Ph.D., Director Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance – Jacob France Institute, University of Baltimore
- ↳ Dartanion Swift-Williams, Chief Data and Performance Officer, City of Baltimore
- ↳ Jason Howard, Ph.D., Deputy Director, Analytics, Mayor's Office of Performance and Innovation, City of Baltimore

### **Columbus, OH**

- ↳ Dave Dixon, Director of Data Analytics & Strategy, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission
- ↳ Harvey Miller, Ph.D., Director, Center for Urban and Regional Analysis (CURA) at Ohio State University
- ↳ Jessica Kuenzli, Chief Regional Planning Officer, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission

**Guilford County, NC**

- ↳ Victor Isler, County Manager, Guilford County
- ↳ Alice Mahood, Director of Integrated Services, Guilford County Manager's Office

**Houston, TX**

- ↳ Michelle Smirnova, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Housing and Neighborhoods and Associate Professor of Sociology, Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University
- ↳ Caroline Cheong, Ph.D., Associate Director of Housing and Neighborhoods, Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University
- ↳ Ruth N. López Turley, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Director, Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University

**Kansas City, MO**

- ↳ The Honorable Quinton Lucas, Mayor of the City of Kansas City
- ↳ C. Mauli Agrawal, Ph.D, Chancellor, University of Missouri - Kansas City
- ↳ Troy Lillebo, Associate Vice Chancellor for External Relations, University of Missouri - Kansas City
- ↳ Gavriel Schreiber, General Counsel, The Office of Mayor Lucas
- ↳ Nataniel Addington, Director of Community Engagement & Outreach, University of Missouri - Kansas City

**Lincoln, NE**

- ↳ The Honorable Leirion Gaylor Baird, Mayor of the City of Lincoln Rodney D. Bennett, Ph.D, Chancellor, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
- ↳ Nathan Meier, Associate Vice Chancellor for Research, Capacity and Competitiveness, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
- ↳ Kim C. Morrow, Chief Sustainability Officer The Office of Mayor Gaylor Baird
- ↳ Riley M. Slezak, Senior Advisor to the Mayor, The Office of Mayor Gaylor Baird

**Little Rock, AR**

- ↳ The Honorable Frank Scott, Mayor of the City of Little Rock
- ↳ Marquis Willis, Chief Data Officer, City of Little Rock
- ↳ Emily Cox, Vice Chancellor for University Affairs, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

**Syracuse, NY**

- ↳ The Honorable Ben Walsh, (former) Mayor of the City of Syracuse
- ↳ Lois Agnew, Ph.D, Interim Vice Chancellor, Provost and Chief Academic Officer, Syracuse University

- ↳ Katherine McDonald, Ph.D, Associate Vice President for Research, Syracuse University  
Office of Research
- ↳ Sevgi Erdogan, Ph.D, Associate Professor, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University
- ↳ Jeff Hemsley, Ph.D, Interim Dean, Associate Professor, School of Information Studies,  
Syracuse University
- ↳ Carsten Østerlund, Ph.D, Professor and Associate Dean for Research, School of Information  
Studies, Syracuse University

## About the Federation of American Scientists

The Federation of American Scientists is dedicated to democratizing the policymaking process by working with new and expert voices across the science and technology community, helping to develop actionable policies that can improve the lives of all Americans. For more about the Federation of American Scientists, visit **FAS.org**.