

# REVIEW OF THE COALITION FOR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

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## Background

In February 2011, the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy (the “Coalition”) entered into an agreement with Dr. John Wallace, former Vice-President at MDRC, to conduct an interview-based assessment aimed at identifying those aspects of the Coalition’s work which have been more effective, and those which have been less effective, in advancing evidence-based policy reforms. The purpose of the assessment is to help inform the Coalition’s future activities and direction, so as to maximize the Coalition’s effectiveness.

During February and early March 2011, Dr. Wallace conducted interviews with a diverse set of 15 individuals selected by the Coalition and with whom the Coalition has either worked or whose program evaluations have been reviewed by the Coalition. The interviews, which lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, guaranteed the confidentiality of responses. The interviewees were typically high-level officials from six different types of organizations or areas: (1) federal executive branch agencies and departments, including the Office of Management and Budget (OMB); (2) congressional staff; (3) state-level officials; (4) foundations; (5) think-tanks and research organizations; and (6) creators of programs that were rigorously evaluated. In some cases, individuals spanned categories, such as when an interviewee had worked for one type of organization but was interviewed after changing jobs to work for another organization.

## Summary of Findings

In general, there was a strong consensus that three activities of the Coalition are most effective and highly valued: educating policymakers in the executive branch and Congress on the credibility, utility and value of randomized controlled experiments; sponsoring careful reviews of existing evaluations to assess their strength and validity, and well communicating the results of these reviews; and providing one-on-one feedback and advice to policymakers in response to specific evaluation-related requests.

In terms of potential future activities, interviewees cited the current and likely long-term federal and state budget environment, leading many to say that the Coalition should consider “taking its message” to new, larger social program arenas where its impact could be much greater. Two potential new areas were identified as ones that the Coalition might consider, but with caution: first, education-related entitlement programs, particularly postsecondary education student aid; and second, health care service delivery in the Medicaid and Medicare programs. In both areas, few rigorous studies have been or are being conducted. Most interviewees also expressed a caveat that the Coalition’s limited resources and staff may preclude a serious effort in a new policy area, and that the educational role that the Coalition plays with Congress should not diminish.

## Other Observations

In addition to the overall findings, most striking about the interviews was the consistency in views about the value of the Coalition's work and the reasons for its value.

1. The independence of the Coalition gives its voice significantly greater weight than others as it presents the case for rigorous evaluation. Other organizations that argue for (or against) rigorous studies – program administrators and operators, universities, or research firms – almost always have some level of self-interest. The interviewees repeatedly stated that the Coalition has no agenda other than the promotion, through rigorous studies, of good public policy and responsible governance. One interviewee well summarized what most others also stated: “[The Coalition] . . . is able to make a major contribution to the field because of its independence and objectivity.”
2. The honesty of the Coalition's positions, publications, and advice was noted as well, and its willingness to take on strong opponents having other interests. “Jon doesn't pull punches; he calls it like it is,” said one top policymaker. And another noted: “The Coalition follows through and isn't afraid to hold people's feet to the fire.”
3. As a result of its independence and honesty, the Coalition has developed a notably high degree of trustworthiness that enables it to influence in a significant way both executive and legislative staff on matters related to evaluation of social programs. As one interviewee stated, “Jon's the real deal.”

These attributes led many interviewees to make the point, as one put it, that, “It's a unique organization – no doubt about it.” As another stated, “The Coalition moved mountains where I've not seen mountains moved before.” Finally, one individual stated, “We look to the Coalition to continue to carry the torch.”

## Findings in Detail

### *1. Areas of Consensus on the Coalition's Strongest Activities.*

A clear consensus emerged that three of the Coalition's activities carried the highest level of value and were most effective:

- Educating a range of policymakers – in Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, and federal departments (specifically named were AmeriCorps and the departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, and Justice) – about the unusually high level of value and credibility that scientific, randomized controlled experiments have for increasing the effectiveness of social programs. Since, as one reviewer put it, the Coalition “has no other dog in the fight,” its independence gives it a unique voice.

The Coalition was also given credit by multiple interviewees for OMB's establishment of a requirement that many discretionary domestic programs be subject to rigorous evaluation. Credit was also given to the Coalition for certain pieces of legislation carrying similar requirements. As one interviewee stated, “The Coalition played a central role in

securing this Administration’s commitment to high standards of evidence.” And another interviewee stated, “The push for strong evidence would not have happened as quickly and widely and with so relatively little controversy without the Coalition.”

- Sponsoring – and then widely communicating the results of – careful reviews of existing evaluations of social programs and demonstrations. These reviews have been undertaken by panels of experts, convened by the Coalition, to provide a hard-nosed assessment of the level of the evaluation’s validity. These assessments have provided important, actionable information to Congress, executive branch agencies, and program administrators and operators. In addition, the reviews have led to an increased interest in some federal agencies, and among some program creators and operators, in having their programs rigorously evaluated so they can achieve “Top Tier” status.

The Coalition’s communications activities – email blasts, concisely written reports and summaries of evaluations, Op Ed pieces – also drew positive comments, as well as suggestions for the future (see below). Typical responses on the efficacy of the Coalition’s communications were:

- “The Coalition delivers its message in a very clear and compelling way.”
  - “The Coalition’s communications are fine; they don’t need to improve.”
  - “The communications are very professional and clear. I always read them.”
- Providing one-on-one feedback to executive agency and congressional staff on an as-requested basis. This “technical assistance” covered a range of areas: broad evaluation plans, specific evaluations designs, key findings across evaluations, and identification of rigorously evaluated programs that are both effective and save money. Interviewees remarked on the flexibility of the Coalition staff, the speed of their responses to *ad hoc* requests, and their thoroughness.

Relative to these, other activities of the Coalition, such as holding small group meetings and conferences, did not elicit a similar consensus about their value.

## 2. *Potential Future Activities*

Potential future activities for the Coalition’s consideration emerged during the interviews. While all interviewees offered suggestions, they also offered three caveats: first, any new work should not jeopardize the Coalition’s hard-earned reputation for independence; second, the ongoing education of congressional staff should not be sacrificed in traditional domestic discretionary policy areas, even as the Coalition may also target congressional staff in new policy areas; and third, there was a recognition that given its size and limited resources, the Coalition “can only do so much.”

Many reviewers noted a potential downside of continuing to focus primarily on smaller discretionary programs, for two main reasons. First, the Coalition has already experienced major successes at several federal agencies that are unlikely to be undone (HHS, DOL, ED, DOJ, and, most importantly, OMB), and where commitment to rigorous studies has become “institutionalized,” as one interviewee put it. Second, the main national debate now and in the

coming years is likely to be around budgets and resources – and, at some point, entitlement programs. As one interviewee put it, perhaps too enthusiastically (but perhaps not): “Effectiveness studies in the context of entitlement programs promise to reap huge budget benefits.”

In short, a concern was voiced that to have an impact in the new environment and to remain relevant, the Coalition may need to bring its independence, honesty and trustworthiness to bear on the entitlement program arena where rigorous evaluations are rare. Only one interviewee stated a belief that the Coalition should continue to focus solely on discretionary programs: “It is important for Jon not to abandon his work in the discretionary program arena, which will need his help in the coming years.”

By “entitlement programs,” interviewees specifically mentioned student aid (Pell Grants in particular) and the two major health care services programs, Medicaid and Medicare.<sup>1</sup> As one individual stated, “The Coalition has been so effective an advocate across multiple social program areas, but he [Jon] should advocate beyond the discretionary realm. I do not see a great risk for Jon in moving into Medicare and Medicaid.” Or, similarly, another interviewee said, “Jon needs to enter the health care arena. Health care costs are driving the debate. We have to learn how to bend the health care cost curve. If not Jon, who can bring rigor to health care studies?” And finally, another interviewee stated, “Absolutely it is important for the Coalition to make inroads into the entitlement areas. Otherwise, in this environment, the Coalition will be playing at the margins.”

But undertaking Coalition activities in the entitlement areas also elicited a great deal of caution and advice:

- “In principle, the Coalition should move to big ticket items, but can it be done? How much resistance will the education or health care research communities offer? And can it be overcome?”
- “Jon should wait for those areas to be moving in the right direction before he gets involved.”
- “If Jon decides to enter the health care field, he needs to be prepared for major battles against entrenched interests. There’s the potential for a much bigger bang for the buck, but the opposition will be strong.”
- “As a first step, Jon should carefully explore the pros and cons of advocating for more rigorous study in the huge health care field. He may well decide it’s a snake pit he’d rather not enter.”
- “The health care field would be a natural extension of his current work, but he needs to approach it very cautiously. Bringing Jon’s lens and diligence to the health care field would be a major benefit, but it would take at least a year to prepare and plan, and it would interrupt the flow of his current work.”
- “Before moving into a new entitlement areas, Jon needs to identify allies in the federal agencies on the Hill who will welcome and support his advocacy. It’s a tangle of tough issues.”

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Social Security Administration entitlement programs were not mentioned by any of the interviewees, possibly because in the past 10 years, SSA has launched several rigorous evaluations of promising interventions in the adult and youth disability areas.

- “Over time, the Coalition has figured out ways to be engaged in the Appropriations process for some discretionary programs. The challenge ahead will be to engage the committees in the mandatory entitlement area.”

In summary, tensions and cautions abound with any expansion of the Coalition’s activities into the entitlement arena, and, if it chooses to do so, would require extensive planning and the involvement of a group of knowledgeable advisors.

### 3. *Other “Miscellaneous” Recommendations of Interviewees*

Although these three points were made by just a few interviewees (or even only one), they nevertheless raise noteworthy issues for the Coalition to consider:

1. In its role overseeing expert reviews of the quality of evaluations, the Coalition should advocate for the inclusion of credible cost and benefit-cost data based on the experimental results. Even if a program is effective, what are its net long-term savings and costs to the government? Participant impacts alone do not tell the full story; benefit-cost data are needed as well – and this will be increasingly the case in the current environment. Top tier evaluations should provide both.
2. The Coalition’s communications strategy could be improved in two ways. First, it should better engage and educate the general public or, as one interviewee said, “Target the *New York* or *Financial Times* less and *USA Today* more.” Second, two new audiences were noted as appropriate targets of Jon’s emails about effective programs: foundations and private management consulting firms that work with federal agencies that operate social programs.
3. The Coalition should develop and adopt a consistent approach to Congress about the resources needed for evaluations. They should not be specific line-item appropriations for research *per se* (which are subject to easy deletion), but rather, for each major program, a percentage set-aside of program dollars that are reserved for research and evaluation. This would draw a direct link between program and evaluation, and help ensure adequate funding. (This interviewee went on to note that 3% would be an appropriate level because “it compares to the low-end of private sector R&D budgets.”) This suggestion would require that the Coalition engage with authorizing committee staff – which could have additional benefits – in addition to staff of the appropriations committees.