President Barack Obama speaks with the Office of Science and Technology Policy Social and Behavioral Sciences team in the Oval Office.

Photo: Pete Souza/White House

White House releases report on applying behavioral science to government policy

J-PAL North America
October 13, 2016

The White House's Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST), a subgroup of the Office of Science and Technology Policy that has been working to make government more effective, recently released its second report. This might seem like quiet, behind-the-scenes-work, but it can make a big difference when scaled up across national programs.

Mary Ann Bates, deputy director of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) North America — a research center based at MIT that seeks to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence — has worked with the SBST over the past two years. "I've been impressed by key elements of their approach," she says. "They test relatively small tweaks to programs, but these can add up to real changes that improve lives."

Report highlights include:

- a 53 percent increase in workplace savings plan enrollment rates by military service members — more than 4,800 new enrollments — and over $1 million dollars in additional savings in just one month; and

- a doubling in the rate at which student loan borrowers in default contacted default-resolution representatives.

"SBST has been exemplary in how they have made research integrity a major priority," Bates says. "They are committed to building A/B testing and random assignment into their studies.

RELATED

Paper: "Annual Report — Social and Behavioral Sciences Team"

Mary Ann Bates

J-PAL North America

School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences

When appropriate, this can be a very valuable tool for understanding which approaches work and why. They have also highlighted the studies that didn't work, too. That's a refreshingly transparent approach for both academia and government. And they have mastered the art of tapping into external resources and collaborating across agencies."

SBST has partnered with researchers from nationally recognized universities who often provide their time pro bono while getting the chance to conduct policy-relevant studies in partnership with the government. Given the close alignment of J-PAL North America's specialization on randomized evaluations, its network of academics has been excited to partner with them on multiple studies, and J-PAL staff have collaborated from the start on knowledge sharing and best practices in designing and running studies for maximum effect. In particular, Kelly Bidwell, former senior policy manager with J-PAL North America, was one of the initial SBST members during its launch, and a leader in building the work of SBST.

Last year, President Obama institutionalized their work by signing an executive order to make SBST permanent and directing federal agencies to include behavioral science insights in the design of their programs.

"I'm hopeful that their work will continue to have an impact for years to come and set the norm for how government innovates," Bates says.

Topics: Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)   SHASS   Economics

Government   Political science   Policy   Social sciences

President Obama   Research   Behavioral economics

About This Website

This Website is maintained by the MIT News Office, part of the Office of Communications.