

A conversation with Susan Urahn and Brian Hill on September 25, 2013

Participants

- Susan Urahn — Executive Vice President, The Pew Charitable Trusts
- Brian Hill — Senior Associate, The Pew Charitable Trusts
- Cari Tuna — Co-Founder, Good Ventures
- Holden Karnofsky — Co-Founder, GiveWell
- Josh Rosenberg — Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Susan Urahn and Brian Hill.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Susan Urahn and Brian Hill of The Pew Charitable Trusts to learn how Pew selects and implements its projects. Conversation topics included: Pew's process of project selection, several case studies in project selection, project strategy and design, and successful Pew projects.

Projects that Susan Urahn oversees

Ms. Urahn oversees Pew's Government Performance projects, which include all U.S. policy-related projects, except for those involving environmental policy. The aim of Ms. Urahn's projects is to make government function more effectively and efficiently and more in the public interest. Ms. Urahn's portfolio is divided into 5 clusters: fiscal and economic policy, state policy and performance, health, family financial security, and food/water. Each cluster is overseen by a senior staff member with expertise in the area. Currently, Ms. Urahn's portfolio includes projects on corrections, election administration, children's dental health, public sector benefits, economic policy, food safety, and others. She oversees 200 people across 27 projects of varying sizes.

Project selection

Pew does not have a single, formalized methodology for selecting projects. The assessment of a potential project generally involves a combination of conversations, research, grant-making, polling, and working with consultants.

When Pew assesses an issue for project candidacy, it looks for:

- An important problem.
- A problem for which there is not an effective voice for the public interest.
- A problem on which Pew can make progress, generally in the next 5 to 10 years with incremental advancement in the 3 to 5 year window, given the political landscape and Pew's resources, expertise, and position in the field. Determining whether a problem is tractable is a particularly challenging part of the process.
- The existence of clear, concrete actions that can be taken to address the problem.

- Goals that can be accomplished within a reasonable time span.
- A window of opportunity, due to recent changes in the political or social landscape.
- Under-resourced spaces in which Pew can add value.

Ideas for new projects and project areas often come to the attention of Pew's staff via the media, conversations with board members, and conversations with people outside of the organization. Projects given serious consideration usually come to Pew's attention through multiple channels.

Case studies in project selection

- Food additives

The food additives project is sunsetting after successfully achieving its goals, including four peer-reviewed journal articles that have shed light on issues surrounding the regulation of chemicals added to food in the United States, and produced recommendations for the FDA and industry to review. With Pew's support, the project leadership team has decided to move to the Natural Resources Defense Council to continue its work on food additives as part of NRDC's ongoing Safe and Sustainable Food Campaign. This is an example of Pew deciding not to undertake or duplicate efforts when others are doing good work in the same issue area.

- Corrections

Pew's 7-year project on sentencing and corrections policy in the U.S. is one of the largest projects in Ms. Urahn's division. The project was started in 2006 because the issue seemed tractable if it was framed as a fiscal issue and the area seemed under-resourced.

The corrections issue was considered viable because of the increase in research demonstrating cost-effective prison alternatives and because when framed as a fiscal issue, it could attract conservative support due to the potential for reform to reduce government spending while holding offenders accountable and protecting public safety. Finding ways to cut spending has become especially urgent because of the recession, which put pressure on state budgets. The project has focused on conservative policy makers, since they are able to help neutralize fears that support of reform will be tagged as soft on crime. To build and raise awareness of conservative support, Pew worked with the Texas Public Policy Foundation to help it establish the conservative Right on Crime initiative and engaged activist Pat Nolan at Prison Fellowship Ministries. These efforts have helped substantially reposition and reframe the debate about crime and punishment, away from soft vs. tough on crime to a conversation about maximum public safety return on investment.

When Pew began the project, it was one of the few organizations working in this space. Since then, the JEHT Foundation which was funding in this field has closed its doors. The Arnold Foundation as well as the MacArthur Foundation have entered it. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is also working in this space, though mostly on the local level and focused on the juvenile population. Corrections is an under-resourced issue, especially

given the large window of opportunity for reform that has opened, and it will need sustained attention over the next decade. The goal is not only to get reform enacted but also to build a system that has broad and deep political support so it will not be taken apart shortly afterward.

Pew has worked on the issue for 7 years and, assuming good progress, will continue to work on it. It has built substantial staff expertise in the field and credibility among top policy makers in the states.

Emerging issues

The Emerging Issues team looks for promising new areas where Pew may want to get involved, such as:

- Antibiotic resistance

The problem of antibiotic resistance is a large, compelling problem that seems tractable. A worthwhile project would be the establishment of a robust system for producing new antibiotics. Ms. Urahn estimates this could be a 10-year project. The problems in this area are problems of marketing and industry incentives, as well as medical stewardship, and might be addressed with policy change. Pew's exploratory research on this problem will include trying to answer why there has been little progress on a problem that has existed for 25 years.

- Controlling health care costs

Although the Affordable Care Act has made health care policy a difficult space to work in politically, rising health care costs are putting pressure on policymakers to act on the issue. There may be a window of opportunity here, and Pew is looking into possible interventions.

- Water

Pew plans to spend 1 year looking into water-related issues in the US as a potential project area (focusing on water infrastructure in cities, transportation of water and coastal resilience). Currently, it is engaged in a small number of research contracts, and it has 5 internal staff members investigating the area on a part-time basis. Pew is conducting polls, research scans, and conversations with experts and policy makers to learn more about the field.

The ideal portfolio

Generally speaking, there are benefits for Pew to be in a given space for a long time, so that it can develop its expertise, credibility, connections, and traction within that space. It can be easier to identify promising opportunities in an area in which it has already invested. When investing in

a new area, Ms. Urahn aims for portfolios of multiple 5-7 year projects, all driving toward a larger goal.

Short-term projects

Pew sometimes conducts short-term projects, in which it enters and leaves a field within about 3 years. It is hard to find an issue for which Pew can drive meaningful change in a 2-3 year period. Therefore, these projects must be highly targeted and opportunistic to be worthwhile.

For example: in a project on retirement securities, Pew pushed to change the opt-in provision of 401(k) accounts so that participation became the default. The Retirement Security Project was targeted, opportunistic, lasted 5 years, and had a national-level impact on savings behavior.

Project design and implementation

A good project design requires knowledge of the following:

- Where policymakers stand on the issue
- The nature of the opposition and the extent to which they may be swayed
- The relevant constituencies and the extent of their influence
- Whether stakeholders might be willing to make compromises on the issue, in exchange for progress on other issues they care about
- How the public, press, and relevant constituencies will respond to the project

When implementing a project, Pew will use a combination of tools, including:

- **Research** — Pew conducts research when there is a gap in its knowledge of the field, when there is a need for locale-specific information, or when data is missing or insufficient. Research on an issue might include answering questions such as best practices around the globe, and hidden costs and unintended consequences of proposed policies.
- **Building coalitions.**
- **Mobilizing critical messengers** — Critical messengers are those people uniquely positioned to influence public opinion on a particular issue, e.g. pediatricians on issues of childcare. Pew works with critical messengers to develop talking points and to write and place op-eds. It also brings critical messengers (e.g. victims) to relevant hearings.
- **Technical assistance to state governments** — Pew provides customized research and scopes out policy options tailored to each state (not one-size-fits-all).
- **Informing Policymakers** — Pew conducts and/or funds lobbying efforts, polling, advertising, and media campaigns to inform policy makers about our research, the public interest, and public opinion on key issues.

Name Recognition

In addition to using the tools listed above, Pew carefully manages its public reputation, because positive name recognition increases its effectiveness. Publishing research on important issues helps to increase its name recognition and reputation. Name recognition is particularly helpful when moving into new project areas.

Use of Internal Staff vs. Contractors

The components of any given project may be assigned to internal staff or contracted to people outside of the organization. Outside consultants are most helpful when working with well-defined research questions. Decisions about assignment allocation depend on: the degree of control/oversight Pew would like to maintain, the timespan of the assignment, the specificity of the assignment, and the expertise required, among other things. For example, if Pew plans to work in a given space for a sustained amount of time (3+ years), it is often less expensive and more effective to build the capacity to do work internally than to contract it out.

Successful projects

1. Election administration

Pew has operated multiple projects within the field of election administration. When Pew first entered the field, it spent 2 years researching and diagnosing the major problems and establishing connections in the field (e.g. with election officials, military personnel, the secretaries of state). Pew's research revealed a broken election registration system that still relied heavily on pen-and-paper systems that were error-prone and inefficient and did not effectively accommodate absentee voters such as U.S. expatriates and military personnel. Over the next 3 years, Pew publicized the fact that many absentee votes were not arriving in time to be counted, and it helped move a federal law to correct that problem. There was little opposition for this change, but there had not been a coalition to push it forward previously.

At the same time, Pew worked on a parallel project with Jeff Jonas to improve voter registration. Together, Pew and Jonas created an electronic platform for the collection and matching of election registration information with other public data sources to determine which voters are currently eligible to vote in a district. It should help to deal with some of the problems that policymakers are attempting to fix with voter ID laws. The platform is called ERIC, or Electronic Registration Information Center and it is being managed by an independent nonprofit organization led by the participating states. Seven states have signed on to use it and other states are interested in joining the organization. From start to finish, the ERIC project will likely be a 7-8 year commitment.

2. Food safety

In a 5-year project on food safety, Pew successfully argued to Congress that food safety rules should be upgraded and subsequently urged the relevant government agencies to enforce the rules. This was the first major upgrade of food safety rules in about 50 years.

Pew is currently following up on this work by exploring a project on meat and poultry safety rules, which have not been updated in about 70 years.

Hiring practices

Pew's staff is composed of associates, senior associates, managers, and project directors. Among the junior staff, there are associates (1+ years of experience) and senior associates (5+ years of experience). Senior associates are assigned to states, where they develop state-level expertise and help with technical assistance, among other things. Among the senior staff, there are project managers (less senior) and project directors (more senior). Project directors are responsible for many lines of work, including overseeing large projects, working with funders, and dealing with the press.

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