

# FLORIDA POLICY PROJECT

BEST PRACTICES, BETTER OUTCOMES

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## Better Government: Establish Florida University Research Partnerships

Florida’s university system is rich with expertise, experience, and extensive research capabilities. The legislature should harness the value of Florida’s six research universities by creating mechanisms to tap into their expertise. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education identifies five state-funded universities (Florida International University, Florida State University, the University of Central Florida, the University of Florida, and the University of South Florida) and one private university (the University of Miami) as Research 1 Institutions that generate “very high research activity.” These universities generate high-quality evidence that provides public service to Florida and its residents.

The research universities have thousands of faculty members with expertise in a wide range of topic areas, and many have established centers and institutes targeting research in specified areas.<sup>1</sup> However, it is challenging for the legislature to access this evidence, particularly given the time-sensitive policymaking environment, as much of it is published in academic journals that are challenging to access.

Several states have taken steps to build ongoing partnerships that facilitate knowledge exchange between universities and policymakers. For example, North Carolina has established the Office of Strategic Partnerships within the Governor’s Office to identify the research needs of policymakers and agencies and arrange for university studies on these topics. The legislature has provided \$1 million annually to this effort. The Office of Strategic Partnerships issues requests for proposals from university researchers to undertake studies on designated topics and manages the contracting process. In recent years, these studies have examined issues such as the most effective approaches for addressing tobacco use, youth foster care and transitional services, veterans’ health care, and water quality (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2023). For example, one study evaluated North Carolina’s system for providing re-entry services to released prison inmates to support reintegration into the community and reduce recidivism, and identified steps the legislature and providers could take to improve program effectiveness (Harvell & Simoncelli, 2021).

Similarly, several states including Texas, Rhode Island, Colorado, and Michigan, have created “policy labs” within universities to perform similar studies. These labs work with policymakers to identify issues of interest and conduct research to answer key questions in these fields. Many labs specialize in using administrative databases to examine outcome trends and how clients interact with multiple agencies, identifying opportunities to improve public policies (Arnold Ventures, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> The State University System’s *Centers and Institutes Inventory* lists over 500 approved entities.

Another approach several states have taken to build these partnerships is to sponsor policy labs within universities to identify issues of interest and conduct research on key questions. States such as Georgia, Texas, Rhode Island, Colorado, and Michigan (Arnold Ventures, 2019) have created such labs. For example, the Colorado Policy Lab examined the educational outcomes of children in the state's foster care system and found that the frequent changes in foster placements of these children resulted in them having to change schools an average of 3.46 times during grades 9-12, significantly affecting high school completion rates, with only a third of the foster care children graduating from high school, compared to 75% of other students. In response, the Colorado Legislature amended state law to reduce these educational disruptions (Arnold Ventures, 2019). The Texas Policy Lab consolidated several state databases to identify factors correlating with juvenile reoffending, identifying opportunities for targeting early intervention services to reduce recidivism (Rice University, 2022). Further, the Georgia Policy Labs are assessing whether Georgia's Hope Scholarships, which are similar to Florida's Bright Futures program, have a positive impact on entrepreneurship in the state (Georgia State University, 2023).

## **Recommendations**

1. The legislature should create and fund the Office of Strategic Research Partnerships within the Governor's Office to identify and collaborate with state universities. This would enable the legislative branch to obtain timely high-quality evidence to better inform its policy and budget deliberations. Doing so could provide legislators with much reliable information to inform their tough choices.
2. Create the Florida Policy Lab to promote partnerships with the state's research universities to undertake studies on issues of critical legislative concern. This could be done by issuing annual requests for research proposals to universities. The Policy Lab would be charged with creating policies and procedures to undertake these studies.



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