



RESEARCH BRIEF

A Laboratory of Sound Innovation: Project Relate's Research Advisory Group

Volume II • 2015

The foundational project within Project Relate is the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI). Since the beginning of the project, leaders have maintained a strong commitment to grounding innovative activities on a foundation of sound research, to evaluating them in order to make mid-course adjustments and assess the results.

As a part of this commitment, in 2001 Project Relate invited around a dozen national and state marriage and family scholars and educators to serve in an advisory capacity, with many continuing over the past decade (see list on back page). Additionally, the group has diversified over time to include policy leaders, researchers, sociologists, and special guests representing expertise in low-income families, fatherhood, child welfare, and more.

At each two-day annual meeting the Research Advisory Group (RAG) members gather to discuss relevant issues impacting the nation and the state, hear reports from staff about the progress of its activities, visit some of the programs to observe and talk with clients and staff, exchange ideas about how to improve the program or conduct new studies, and engage in discussions about current field research, debates, policy implications, and measures of success. In between these annual meetings individual RAG members are engaged in many different activities designed to guide and assess Project Relate as it moves forward. These thought leaders continually spur thinking and help Project Relate align programs with current research and practice.

PROJECT RELATE RESEARCH PRODUCTS

- 2001** – Statewide Baseline Survey on Marriage and Divorce
- 2003** – OKDHS Office of Planning, Policy and Research, “How Public Policies Affect Marriage and Work Incentives”
- 2003** – Oklahoma State University “Help Seeking Study”
- 2003** – Pilot Study of PREP® in Correctional Centers
- 2004** – Project Relate Leading the Way: History and Current Strategies, Project Relate
- 2005** – Survey of Medicaid Recipients
- 2005** – Survey with TANF Recipients
- 2007** – “PREP Inside and Out: Marriage education as an intervention for prisoner reintegration”, University of Denver
- 2008** – Process Study on the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, ASPE
- 2008** – Building Strong Families Implementation Study
- 2008** – Supporting Healthy Marriages Implementation Study (not yet released)
- 2008** – Implementation of ‘Within My Reach:’ Providing a Relationship Awareness and Communication Skills Program to TANF Recipients in Oklahoma, National Poverty Center

Select reports can be found on ProjectRelate.com

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Examples of their contribution made by the RAG to date include:

- **Baseline Survey.** In 2001, RAG members designed and supervised a baseline state survey of OK households. The Project Relate survey later served as a model for several other state marriage surveys (e.g. Utah, Florida, Texas). The findings, published in 2003, helped guide Project Relate strategic plan and continue to inform the development and adaptation of services. For example, the survey indicated that Oklahomans marry at much younger ages than the national average (2.5 years younger), which places them at higher risk of divorce. This finding led to the development of the high school based program, which is now implemented in all Oklahoma schools with Family and Consumer Sciences programs in order to better prepare and equip young people to be successful in their relationships, including future marriage. In addition, thirty-four percent of Oklahomans reported they considered their marriage to be in serious trouble at some point and 72% of those receiving government assistance would consider participating in relationship education. These findings led to a decision to partner with existing social services organizations already serving low-income individuals and couples in order to offer additional services addressing healthy relationships and marriage. Further, Project Relate added a targeted intervention for married couples with high-needs, providing weekend retreats for adoptive and foster couples, those caring for children with special needs, and other financially vulnerable families.
- **Redefining the key measure of success.** At the outset, and based on the limited body of research related to family structure and child well-being, the goal of Project Relate was to strengthen marriages and reduce the divorce rate. Over time, RAG members identified several limitations of using the divorce rate as the key measure of success for Project Relate, and suggested instead that an overarching objective should be to increase the proportion of children living in healthy, cooperative, stable marriages. Benefits to children should be the guiding principle of Project Relate's intellectual framework, activities, messaging and goals.
- **Designing program adaptations for high need populations.** RAG members have had ongoing influence in adapting the PREP® curriculum, adding new material and adapting the delivery format to meet the needs of specific groups and settings such as high school students, new parents, incarcerated individuals, adoptive and foster parents caring for special needs children, and African American and other minority couples. For example, the PREP curriculum was translated, and delivered by Spanish speaking workshop leaders to make the program accessible for Hispanic couples. Simultaneously, the curriculum developers have made adaptations to the curriculum format and content, continually updating it to be relevant to additional population groups.
- **Creating a dynamic social laboratory of high expectations, high performance, and innovation.** The close communication and strong relationships created between the RAG and Project Relate management team creates an unusual synergy which is rarely seen in social programs. Each year, innovative ideas emerge from research and then those ideas are quickly tested and translated into action. These ideas are further refined, improved, and studied.
- **Establishing a bridge to the wider academic world.** Through publishing articles in academic journals, writing blogs and giving informal presentations, the RAG members document and share what is being learned in Oklahoma with their research colleagues and interested others. They thus add weight and credibility to an initiative initially regarded by some public officials and others with considerable skepticism. Importantly the RAG has helped establish Oklahoma's reputation as a pioneer state laboratory contributing to the developments of sound family policy at state and national levels.

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Project Relate related publications by RAG members

The following are based on Project Relate baseline survey, other Project Relate related studies, and/or included a discussion of Project Relate findings.

Current Members of the Research Advisory Group

Paul Amato, Penn State University	Sarah Halpern-MeeKin, University of Wisconsin-Madison	Howard Markman, University of Denver
Bill Coffin, Institute for Family Studies	Steve Harris, University of Minnesota	Theodora Ooms, Couples and Marriage Policy Consultant, Bethesda MD
Philip Cowan, University of California, Berkeley	Ron Haskins, Brookings Institution	Galena Rhoades, University of Denver
Carolyn Cowan, University of California, Berkeley	Alan Hawkins, Brigham Young University	Scott Stanley, University of Denver
Ron Cox, Oklahoma State University	Howard Hendrick, Accenture	Bradford Wilcox, University of Virginia
Kathy Edin, Johns Hopkins University	Pam Jordan, University of Washington	

Former Members

Norval Glenn, University of Texas (deceased)	Christine Johnson, Oklahoma State University	Marcia Smith, Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault
Rolando Diaz-Loving	Steven Nock, University of Virginia (deceased)	
David Fournier, Oklahoma State University		

Doss, B. D., Rhoades, G., Stanley, S., Markman, H., & Johnson, C. A. (2009). Differential use of premarital education in first and second marriages. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23, 268 - 273.

Einhorn, L., Williams, T., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., & Eason, J. (2008). PREP Inside and Out: Marriage education for inmates. *Family Process*, 47, 341 - 356.

Halpern-MeeKin, Sarah (2012), High-school relationships and marriage education: A comparison of mandated and self-selected treatment. *Journal of Family Issues December 33: 1688-1712*

Hawkins, Alan J., Stanley, Scott. M, Cowan, Philip A., Fincham, Frank D., Beach, Steven R.H., Cowan, Carolyn P., Markman, Howard J., Daire, Andrew P., (in press). A more optimistic perspective on government-supported marriage and relationship education programs for lower income couples: Response to Johnson (2012) *American Psychologist*

Hawkins, Alan J. and Ooms, Theodora (2012). Can marriage and relationship education programs be an effective policy tool to help low-income couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships? A review of lessons learned. *Marriage and Family Review*, 48:6,524-554

Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(1), 117-126. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.20.1.117

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., Amato, P. R., Markman, H. J., & Johnson, C. A. (2010). The timing of cohabitation and engagement: Impact on first and second marriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 906-918.

Whitton, S. W., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., & Johnson, C. A. (2013). Attitudes Toward Divorce, Commitment, and Divorce Proneness in First Marriages and Remarriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75, 276-287. doi:10.1111/jomf.12008

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ I believe that Project Relate is the **single most important policy initiative in the country at this time.** ”
— Ron Haskins

“ It's been so impressive to see the evolution of Project Relate—like a rising tide of water that seeks out the crevices and spaces and fills them in and then moves on to higher and higher levels. The **innovation and dynamic nature of this group is what keeps me coming back every year.** ”

— Paul Amato

“ I'm a huge fan of Project Relate. It has the **highest quality of implementation** I've ever seen. It's breathtaking. It's a laboratory of good ideas. If you are not careful you say something in this room, and you will hear about how it was implemented in the next year. ”
— Kathy Edin

“ I come from the reddest state in the union—but the RAG represents the **full range of experts** from liberals to conservatives and we're just a big happy family. This meeting is the highlight of my year professionally. ”
— Alan Hawkins

“ What I've grown especially to appreciate about Project Relate is that the tracks matter a lot more than the trains. **There are such serious and thoughtful processes put into developing and carrying out the program** (tracks). There is confidence that one can broaden the reach and build better trains. ”
— Scott Stanley

“ I come from D.C. and it's so exciting and refreshing to see the mutual learning that goes on here in Oklahoma, breaking down the usual silos between government agencies, researchers, practitioners and community leaders. **Project Relate clearly bases its actions on evidence.** What's more, the people here are so nice and friendly ... and they really care about the people they serve. ”

— Theodora Ooms