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Policy Research in Higher Education: Data, Decisions, Dilemmas, and Disconnect

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Kick-off Address

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Abstract

This address dichotomized academic research and policymaking as two separate, distinct, and often conflicting worlds or cultures. Higher education as a field of study was used as a case example illustrating academic research, and state legislative politics illustrated the world of policymaking. Suggestions were made for finding ways of communicating between the two cultures, and specific recommendations were included.

The topic of this address is the ***disconnect*** between research and policy. Each of the four words in the subtitle of this address has particular relevance for policy researchers. Decisions made by policymakers are based on data, often furnished by researchers. Policymakers are oriented to decision making, and as will be discussed in this Address, policymakers have a fundamental orientation to action, to making decisions. Policymakers often deal with dilemmas that are decision situations involving a choice among competing alternatives. It is up to policymakers to sort out the issues and the complexities and hopefully to make the best decision. Finally, and the topic of this Address, why are the worlds of educational research, and policymaking, so far apart, and what, if anything, should be done about it?

The issue of a disconnect between research and policy, while verified in my 30 years of experience as a policy researcher in higher education—was put to the empirical test as I did the library work in preparing this speech. I quickly saw that the research B policy dichotomy has been an issue of continued interest in the research community, and while it exists, less so in the policy arena.

A National Higher Education Data Base

As a way of beginning, I thought you might be interested in my involvement in policy research. I have always been interested in the intersect between politics and higher education. I came to Illinois 20 years ago from New York where I taught at SUNY-Albany and served on the Governor's Commission on the Future of Higher Education. At Illinois State, I worked with a researcher and later became Editor of a report and a national data base of interstate higher education finance data. This data base tracks legislative financial support to all public colleges and universities in the U.S., and is used by governors, legislators, and policy researchers throughout the nation. I have been Editor of the operation for 15 years. In 1995, we went from a hard-cover monthly research report to a World Wide Web Home Page where the higher education data from the 50 states are located. The Web Address of this data base is da, da, da.

This data base originated at the University of Michigan in 1958. Since that time, we have state reports from the 50 legislatures for each of 40 years. Assuming the average number of data points, or cells, is 30 per state, that is a grand total of 60,000 data points or cells. That is a lot of data!

Let me share with you some observations about legislative support of higher education, then I want to continue with the disconnect between research and policy. My 1st observation is that "so goes the economy, so goes higher education." This observation comes from two decades of working with these data. I have found an ample reservoir of legislative good will for higher education, despite criticism about a lack of accountability in higher education, productivity that is problematic, and lack of tangible outcomes in many instances. In my 15 years working with these data, there have been only three years when higher education really suffered from lack of legislative support. The clear reason for this was struggling state economies. The most recent year this occurred was in 1992 when the aggregate state support of higher education in the nation was ***less*** than it had been the previous year. In 1992, states were reeling from the effects of a national recession and the continued attempts by the federal government to shift policy initiatives to the states, witness health care and welfare reform. When states have adequate resources, measured by the amount of revenue flow from taxes into the state treasury, then higher education is in the position to benefit.

The second most important variable for higher education is not revenue capacity, but, rather, a variable termed "lawmaker willingness." This means the extent to which legislators and the governor are willing to spend money for higher education. In order to answer this question for higher education, you need an understanding of the structure of state government budgets. Briefly, 2/3 of all state budgets are devoted to the following areas of expenditure, in order of priority going from largest to smallest. First, there are public schools that easily are the largest item in state budgets. The second largest item ***used to be*** higher education, but since 1994 it is health care, followed by higher education. In last place are corrections and aid to families with dependent children (welfare). Together, these five areas capture approximately 2/3 of all state budgets.

In the nineties, however, some interesting things have been happening to state budgets. Court decisions, legislative mandates, and other sources of pressure have resulted in four of the five major areas of state government spending being mandated, and, since the most recent wave of public school reform, this now includes K-12 schools. Of the five major areas of spending, only higher education is discretionary. There are no court decisions or legislative mandates requiring legislatures to support higher education at any level of expenditure. Whether or not legislatures support higher education depends completely on their discretion.

People in higher education generally do not realize these aspects of legislative reality. So, therefore, when a university president or college dean goes to a legislative budget hearing and essentially says "You legislators must realize that we need this money, we've always gotten it before from you, and we need it even more this year." This argument is not at all effective. What would be more effective is a higher education representative who goes into the legislature and says "Legislators, we need a million dollars to bring our science laboratories up to standard and if we can do this, we can graduate 15% more science students who are in demand for jobs at corporations x, y, and z." In other words, higher education needs to make its case in legislatures based on mutual benefit, not merely its own self-interest.

This line of argument leads to my 3d and final point regarding trends in state higher education support. Higher education has entered a period when its future will depend on its ability to spend resources wisely, to reallocate resources to areas of strength and demand, and away from areas of weakness and lack of demand. Terms such as strength and weakness are from strategic planning. They don't have to be judgmental. On the contrary, they can be measured. They include student demand, measured by manpower forecasts, need, and student enrollment. Another major variable is cost, and costs can be calculated using personnel salaries, fringe benefits, administrative overhead, and indirect costs such as building maintenance, lighting, heating, and air conditioning. Two other variables found to be important in strategic planning are centrality and quality. Program centrality means the relationship between the program and the mission of the institution, so a high-cost science or professional program in an institution having no mission to support that kind of program is questionable. Quality, despite its inherently "soft" nature, can be measured by such attributes as contribution to the community, money generated by research contracts and grants, and awards won by faculty and students.

The point of this is the need for higher education, now, to show its worth, to prove its merit and value to its supporters which include state legislators and governors.

The Research B Policy Disconnect

There are scores of examples, in everyday legislative life, illustrating the gap between researchers and policymakers. While it was evident that this disconnect caused problems for specific individuals, I was not sure about the generalizability of the problem. Was it a recognized issue in the higher education research community? In the political arena? What were the consequences of this disconnect, for academic researchers and for policymakers?

A former Presidential Address delivered at the American Educational Research Association shed light on the issue, along with three Presidential Addresses of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. The 1988 AERA Presidential Address by Richard Shavelson was entitled "Contributions of Educational Research to Policy and Practice: Constructing, Challenging, Changing Cognition." One year later, Clif Conrad's ASHE Presidential Address was entitled "Meditations on the Ideology of Inquiry in Higher Education: Exposition, Critique, and Conjecture." Six years more recent, in 1995, Michael Nettles' ASHE Address was entitled "The Emerging National Policy Agenda on Higher Education Assessment: A Wake-Up Call." And, in 1996 Pat Terenzini spoke on "Rediscovering Roots: Public Policy and Higher Education Research."

What do these four presidential addresses, and other literature, tell us about the disconnect, or gap, between the worlds of educational research and policy? As important, what, if anything should we do about it?

The AERA Address by Shavelson focused on what he termed the "mind frames" of educational researchers, policymakers, and practitioners and on the apparent fact that educational research had not fulfilled its role in school improvement (Shavelson, 1988, p. 4). Shavelson explained that sometimes expectations for research are unrealistic. Furthermore, such expectations can be unreasonable when there is a belief that policymakers will use research results to ensure that benefits, such as "good educational outcomes," will accrue to everyone equally and uniformly. Such expectations promise too much. Shavelson offered that more important benefits of educational research were in challenging and changing how policymakers and practitioners think about problems and potential solutions.

In his 1989 ASHE Presidential Address, Conrad criticized the field of higher education for viewing itself more as a discipline than a broad, applied field of study. As such, inquiry in higher education had become oriented to scholarly peers, more than to practitioners and policymakers. A stakeholder-centered model of inquiry, according to Conrad, would reexamine its research agendas and modes of disseminating knowledge. Developing generalized knowledge, rather than narrow, specialized knowledge should be encouraged, and a broader range of research methodologies should be encouraged that go beyond "a traditional positivist paradigm" (Conrad, 1989, p. 209). Acquiring or producing information through extensive descriptive studies tends to be an exercise only in fact gathering.

Conrad recommended that the following types of inquiry be utilized more by higher education:

- Problem-centered inquiry utilizing interdisciplinary research, such as public policy studies.
- Integrative inquiry using such tools as secondary analysis and meta-analysis
- Interpretive inquiry which attempts to generalize using tools such as qualitative analysis
- Future-centered inquiry where normative scholarship using, for example, philosophical approaches, speculates and idealizes about future scenarios (Conrad, 1989, pp. 206-8).

Two other ASHE Presidential Addresses dealt with the world of policy making. Nettles encouraged higher education leaders to become involved in the public policy process regarding developing new academic standards and assessment of educational progress (1995). Terenzini's ASHE Address was particularly useful because he chastised higher education for becoming preoccupied with "a singular conception of research," thinking of itself as a social science discipline rather than a multidisciplinary, applied field (Terenzini, 1996, p. 7). He claimed that there had developed a "gulf" between higher education research and the policy communities. Higher education researchers increasingly communicate only with themselves; we are publishing material designed more for promotion and tenure, rather than helping policymakers solve real-world problems of practice. Terenzini advocated that the higher education research community should encourage policy-relevant research, open two-way lines of communication between researchers and policymakers, and write for journals of practice and policy, not merely journals emphasizing theory and research complexity.

An even more aggressive posture regarding higher education research was taken by Layzell, who called it "stale, irrelevant, and of little use to policy makers" (Layzell, 1990, p. B1). He claimed that this research focuses excessively on methodology, and the language of research is too technical, esoteric, and filled with jargon. As a result, higher education research tends not to be utilized by policymakers, even in decision making on issues where they need information and advice. Rather than go to researchers, policymakers turn to neighboring states or peer states for advice on what works and what does not.

In an frequently-cited article pertaining to research about higher education, George Keller termed it "unintelligible triviality" (Keller, 1985, p. 7). While he admitted that higher education does not suffer from too little information, the problem is that narrowly-conceived statistics are plentiful, but scholarship and thoughtful commentary are practically non-existent. More recently, Keller asked if higher education research needed revision, and he suggested that there were two prevailing problems with this research (Keller, 1998). First, Keller said that higher education research was dominated by positivist, quantitative approaches. Second, higher education research has neglected policy and planning and, thus, has become less useful to the decision makers who, ironically, have the need for policy research.

Research and Policy: Are the Differences Fundamental?

Next we examine the question of whether there are fundamental differences between higher education research and policymakers' needs.

We turn to an article by a Michigan state legislator who had been a professor at Michigan State University. He zeroed in on language differences between academicians and politicians. He cited an example of a small college asking for legislative support for economic development funds: a request for $150,000 to "hire two new faculty members and one secretary to work with the local business community." A major university, on the other hand, requested $1.5 million to "improve the interface between basic research and private sector high technology initiatives through enhanced technology transfer" (Sederburg, 1989, p. 32). Tongue in cheek, Sederburg hypothesized that the language gap between academia and the legislature increases with the size of the university and the number of deans involved in making budget requests. Higher education faculty, noted Sederburg, value rational argument and the power of ideas. Legislators deal with three dimensions of reality: program substance, comparisons with competing institutions, and politics.

Next, it is noted that some scholars, such as Leslie and Beckham, suggest that more than a research-practice gap, there is really a "dualism between research and practice" (Leslie and Beckham, 1986, p. 126). Further, they said that we need to discover the range of useful knowledge involved in the practical problems of decision making and policy. By uncovering this knowledge, we will identify more precisely the nature of the problems of practice. In so doing, we can examine the extent to which present research methodologies and study designs are a "match" for solving real problems.

In a study of the criteria used by policymakers' in making decisions, the Harvard researcher, Carol Weiss, identified the decision criteria of research quality, action orientation, conformity to user expectations, challenge to the status quo, and practical relevancy (Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1977). Research quality was the most important criterion, and consisted of a cluster of items, such as technical quality, statistical sophistication, objectivity, quantitative data, internal consistency, data support for the recommendations, the comprehensiveness of explanatory variables, generalizability, validity, and addition to knowledge. She also devised what were called truth tests and utility tests. When applying a truth test, policymakers ask "Is the research trustworthy? Can I rely on it? Will it hold up under attack?" The utility test, on the other hand, looks at whether or not the study provides explicit and practical directions on issues that policymakers can take action on, or what could be called an "action orientation."

We come to the question of the difference between researchers' and policymakers' worlds. Shavelson analyzed it as "mind frames" that are shaped by work cultures. He cautioned that"our mind frame does not easily translate into the policymaker's." Researchers' mind frames are cautious, careful, somewhat narrow, risk aversive, comfortable in working alone, and research results are cumulative or multiplicative. Policymakers, on the other hand, are goal driven, more risk taking, and action oriented.

Wirt and Mitchell, writing about the political uses of social research, argued that policy has origins in matters of interest, not truth. Policymakers are called to action, more than to knowledge and understanding. Further, perhaps the greatest single difference between social scientists and policymakers is "their contrasting perspectives of time" (Wirt and Mitchell, 1982, p. 5). Social scientists have comparatively long timelines, they are skeptical, and avoid rushing to judgment. Policymakers deal with diverse, intense, and difficult pressures, but above everything else they must take decisive action.

More than simply a difference in perspective, language, or use of time, other scholars have labeled academia and politics as truly opposite cultures (Leslie and Routh, 1991). As Table 1 shows, the differences between the cultures of academic research and policymaking are striking. Using a broad range of descriptors, one finds literally opposite orientations of the two worlds.

Recognizing the striking differences between academia and policymaking, one would have to conclude that the differences are fundamental. Therefore, what are the consequences of these differences for each world?

The Consequences of Living in Different Worlds

The initial issue for consideration, regarding the consequences of academic research and policymakers living in different worlds, is the extent to which each needs the other. If the two cultures have no need for each other, and if there are no consequences of operating in distinctly different, or even incompatible worlds, then the differences have little consequence.

Clearly, academic research needs policymakers if only for financial support. At both federal and state levels, the funding of scientific research, academic programs, and research centers and institutes is dependent on the willingness of lawmakers to provide public money. Even in private institutions, public money funds a significant amount of research. It is difficult to imagine academic research being able to survive without legislators' approval of appropriations bills that allocate funds to institutions, programs, and research centers.

Do policymakers need academic researchers? Less so than the other way around, but one way to identify the extent to which policymakers need academic research is to determine the value that policymakers place on the information they receive from researchers. In this area, academic research comes up short. One study examined the relative influence of different groups on policymakers. Of 18 groups included for consideration, educational researchers ranked 3rd from the bottom (Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt, 1986), but not quite as low as textbook publishers. Most other groups ranked higher as sources of information, and these included lay groups and noneducator interest groups. When policymakers need information, they turn to other states, to colleague legislators or legislative staff, and even to experienced lobbyists.

Given that policymakers can use the products of educational research, although they seem to turn to sources other than academic researchers, and given that researchers need policymakers for financial support, where might be the common ground for establishing some kind of working relationship?

Searching for Common Ground

Perhaps the best place to begin to seek common ground is with the issues, themselves. Scholars have explained that academic research tends to be crafted on carefully controlled topics of limited scope, and that the methodology of research is given emphasis. Academic researchers might begin by seeking a different balance between topic and method. The topics might be reconceptualized into issues of broader import, even if secondary analyses and meta-analysis techniques are used in order to elevate topics to a higher level of breadth of scope. At the same time, research methodologies might receive a bit less attention. Therefore, the means would be de-emphasized while the ends would receive greater attention.

Next, virtually all of those who have commented on the gulf between the worlds of academic research and policy have identified language as a problem. Researchers communicate in complex, technical language that makes excessive use of statistics. Policymakers, and more broadly the lay public, have difficulty understanding such language. Researchers might try to write for essentially a lay audience. Language should be made more simple by deleting highly technical terms and statistics not readily understood by a non-technical audience.

Academicians might utilize the device of a précis or executive summary that could be used for lay and policy audiences. Supportive "technical reports" could be included as detailed background.

Leslie and Routh cautioned that the differences between these two cultures likely will not be eliminated or even overcome, except by taking small steps that limit and structure the exchanges between the two sides. Examples would include creating a unit, such as a policy research unit in a university or state department, that could work with both academics and policymakers and help bridge the gap between the two. Another example would be to sponsor an individual from one culture who could be assigned a temporary position in the other world, then return and help with communications to bridge the gap between the cultures. One friend of mine, a university research professor, was assigned a two-year visiting scholar position in a state education department in the state capital. During her assignment, she worked on policy papers for the state department, and after returning to the university she helped establish communications links between the state department and the legislature. The "other" environment might be scanned by identifying information sources used by those in the other environment and becoming familiar with their content. Still other suggestions are to keep relationships less formal and to encourage collaboration between researchers and policy staff.

Summary

In summary, what about the future? What recommendations might be made in regard to the two worlds of academic research and policymaking? First, I believe that it is productive simply to recognize that academic researchers and policymakers live and work in essentially two different, not totally compatible, worlds.

Second, does there need to be any rapproachement between the two worlds? Academic researchers need policymakers financial support, and the outcomes of academic research stand to benefit the policy world. The problems are that the languages of the two worlds, the operating assumptions, and communications vehicles and styles are quite different. Academic researchers, it seems to me, might begin to think about ways to adjust their communications modes so policymakers, as a targeted audience, will perhaps be more receptive to the researchers' messages and communication modes. Policymakers will come into line if their own self-interests are served by research results.

Third, and finally, as former AERA President Richard Shavelson told us, researchers can help the world of practice not only by their research results, but also by the ways in which researchers think about problems and speculate about potential solutions. This is the promise of the world of academic research, not only the hope that research results will actually solve the problems of the real world, but also in framing questions, reflecting on problems, and pointing toward solutions. And this promise more than justifies the time that you and I might spend reflecting on this issue and the effort that we put into bridging the gap and reducing the disconnect between academic research and policy.

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