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Using Postsecondary Research to Influence the Policy Process

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chapter 4

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Education, as a professional field, has a large body of research that is focused on practical solutions to pressing problems of policy and practice. Because education is such a universal in our society—almost everybody has been a student at one time or is a parent of school students—the media take wide notice of research in the field. Problems in education, and the inquiries that propose to address these problems, are often reported on and dissected by the press.

Higher education, as a subset of education more broadly, is not immune from this scrutiny. While participation in college is not as universal as K–12 schooling, the most current data from the US Department of Education show that approximately 70 percent of high school graduates attend some form of postsecondary education within a year of graduation (National Center for Education Statistics 2016). Thus, research about our nation's colleges and universities often attracts as much attention as that focused on elementary and secondary education.

My own areas of research, which have focused primarily on questions of college access and success for historically underserved populations, have been particularly suited to connection with policy and practice. Upon starting my career, I chose these questions because I found them intellectually interesting and challenging, and I believed they were questions that could address important policy issues. I also discovered as my career moved forward that these were topics that were of great interest to policymakers, the media, policy organizations, foundations, think tanks, and college campuses.

From early on, I was interested not just in conducting research for its own sake and that would be of interest only to other scholars, but in asking questions and providing answers that could influence policy. I had the opportunity in graduate school to train with and be connected to scholars who often bridged the worlds of academia, policy, and practice, so I had mentors who modeled this behavior. It was an easy transition for me to understand how my own work, as it developed, could similarly help have an impact on the real world.

It has also been very satisfying to see how my research has connected with and been able to influence policy and practice. While we would like to think that public policy decisions are driven strongly by academic research, the reality—particularly in the educational arena—is that many important decisions are made without consideration of what the research would recommend. Thus, scholars who wish to use their work to help influence policy have to be patient, persistent, and willing to accept small and infrequent victories.

While I have never labeled myself a "public intellectual," I have taken pride in trying to translate my own research beyond the research and policy communities into a broader realm. This is often done through op-ed or commentary articles (I have published over fifty of these during my career), as well as being available for interviews by journalists and the trade and general press.

Identifying Relevant Topics

As I have often advised my own dissertation students, the best questions are ones about which the researcher can feel great passion. It is generally easiest to motivate yourself if you are interested in the topic and believe it has important significance. One of the advantages that most faculty enjoy is the freedom to pursue questions that interest them, rather than those that are chosen by outsiders. This freedom allows us to choose topics that we find the most interesting, as opposed to those that primarily support the organization in which we work.

At the same time, however, there are practical considerations that most researchers need to consider. First and foremost, while it is important to have an interest in the topics that you are pursuing, it is equally—and some would argue even more—important that the topics be of interest to others as well. It is critical that faculty, especially early in their career as they are working toward tenure, engage in academic communities and take the necessary steps to achieve academic relevance and success. To do so, faculty members must consider how valuable their research will be to journal editors, conference organizers, book publishers, and funders.

In my own research, while I have generally started with questions in which

I have had a strong intellectual interest, and that I believed were of interest to the academic community, I have also considered how important the questions are to others outside of the academy. As I am thinking about a potential research topic, I often ask myself such questions as

- What types of organizations in the worlds of policy and practice may be interested in this research?
- Will this topic be likely to attract the attention of the media? If so, will it be the general press or only specialized publications, that is, those focused on education in general or higher education specifically?
- Will university administrators on my own or other campuses be interested in the study?

Answering these questions is easier if the researcher engages with these constituencies on a regular basis and in a meaningful fashion, and understands how these constituencies use academic research to help further their missions. Ways to do this include the following:

- Attending conferences of non-academic organizations and connecting with individuals in policy and administrative positions.
- Working with your university's news office to identify topics that are of interest to the media and using it to connect you with reporters to discuss these topics.
- Talking with administrators on your own campus (or others) to understand the most pressing questions they face in their work.
- Condensing and summarizing academic research in ways that make it more accessible to lay readers. This can mean boiling a thirty-page journal article down to a one- or two-page research brief couched in much simpler and accessible language.

Informing versus Advocating

In my own work, I have at times considered myself to be an advocate for policies that I believed, based on the research that I and others had conducted, would help to promote more equality of opportunity in postsecondary education. In acting as an advocate, I have always been cautious to ground my advocacy in research, so that I could demonstrate to the organizations with whom I was working—both government agencies and non-governmental organizations—that the positions I was taking were more than my own opinion, but were based on strong, empirical research.

In recent years there has been much attention given to the issue of bias in academic research. While education generally has less funded research than many other fields, particularly in the sciences, concerns have been raised about the influence of non-commercial sponsors in our field and the growing role that these sponsors may play in shaping educational policy debates. For example, Reckhow and Snyder (2014) examined the role of foundations in sponsoring research on education, with attention to whether foundations used their research funding as a mechanism for influencing educational policy debates. Utilizing social network analysis, Reckhow and Snyder examined the connections among these philanthropic foundations, particularly those that were relatively new to education funding. They concluded, "Philanthropists have acted as patrons for new voices in education politics, funding increasing numbers of national advocacy groups. However, the concept of patronage does not fully capture the role of foundations in education policy advocacy. Philanthropic support for jurisdictional challengers suggests strong alignment of funding for research, advocacy, and implementation to advance a policy agenda" (193). The same argument could be made for research funded by other types of organizations, whether they be groups that advocate for certain sectors of education (e.g., charter schools, for-profit colleges, public research universities) or those that represent specific stakeholders in education (e.g., employee unions, service providers).

When these foundations and other organizations fund the research of academic scholars, it can call into question whether the work has an explicit or implicit bias at its genesis. In order to maintain the objectivity of the research, it is critical that academic researchers avoid any perception, whether because of the funding source or for other reasons, that the work is anything less than fully objective.

Having said this, there should be no reason why a rigorous research study conducted by a member of the academy should not be used to influence the policy process. In my experience, policymakers, in the legislative branch of state or federal governments and in executive branch agencies, do not make decisions solely by analyzing the findings of academic research studies. But they do on occasion incorporate research findings into the crafting of policy. One example from my own work can help illustrate this.

The Tennessee Lottery Scholarship Program

In 2002, the state of Tennessee was considering creating a merit-based scholarship program for college students based on the Georgia HOPE scholarship program. Tennessee's goal was to increase college access and postsecondary attainment in the state, which like most of the South, lagged behind that of the rest of the nation.[1] The Tennessee legislature created a task force to study the idea, supported by staff from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), the state's postsecondary coordinating board. Other scholars and I were asked by THEC to meet with the task force and share findings from research we had conducted on merit-based scholarships. While I was paid by THEC for my work for the task force, THEC was neutral in its position; it did not hire me to promote one position or another with respect to whether the state should create a merit-based scholarship program.

I had recently co-edited a report on state merit scholarship programs for the Civil Rights Project (CRP) (Heller and Marin 2002). The research conducted by the scholars in this report was largely consistent in the finding that existing state merit scholarships disproportionately excluded poor and racial minority students from participation because of the criteria used in awarding the grants. In addition, THEC provided me with data on the racial and socioeconomic distribution of students by test score and grade-point average (GPA) in the state.

Based on the findings in the CRP report and my analyses of THEC data, I advised the task force that if it modeled its program on Georgia's HOPE program, it would benefit primarily white and wealthier students in the state. Other scholars with whom the task force consulted, including some who had contributed to the CRP report, provided similar advice. The reason for this conclusion was that the academic achievement criteria used for awarding merit scholarships are generally highly correlated with race and socioeconomic status. White, Asian, and wealthier students tend to have higher grades and test scores as compared to African American, Latino, and low-income students. Scholarships awarded using these criteria will thus disproportionately reward students who already have the highest college-going rates. Other researchers and I argued that if the state hoped to increase postsecondary participation and attainment over the long run, then it should focus the scholarship dollars on those students who currently had the lowest levels of participation.

In the end, the task force recommended creation of a lottery-funded scholarship that was modeled largely on the Georgia HOPE scholarships. However, it did recommend one key difference that I believe was largely influenced by the academic research the panel heard. Unlike the Georgia scholarships, which had the same criteria and scholarship amounts for all students, the Tennessee program established levels of award based on high school GPA and ACT scores. Students with lower levels of academic achievement (a high school GPA below 3.0, for example) who would not have qualified for the Georgia program would still receive some funding in the Tennessee model. In addition, students from families with incomes below $36,000 (which at the time was approximately the median income level in the state) would have their scholarships topped-up with an additional $1,000 in grant aid.[2]

I considered this a small but important victory. Counter to what had happened in other states, the Tennessee task force had explicitly reached out to academic researchers in creating the new scholarship program and used their analyses in crafting the new program to help make it more equitable and more likely to help the state reach its goal of increasing postsecondary participation and attainment rates in the state. While the task force did not accept all our recommendations, it implemented enough of them that the program was crafted in a way to better help the state meet its goals.

Postsecondary education research can help influence the worlds of policy and practice. Academic researchers have to ensure that their work is well designed and executed, is free of biases, and can withstand the scrutiny of rigorous peer review. Studies achieving this standard can also withstand the scrutiny that is likely to be heaped upon them when they are brought to the worlds of policy and practice.

University-based researchers should also remember that an academic study will in most cases not make its way on its own into debates among practitioners and policymakers. It is incumbent upon the researchers to seek out opportunities to connect with outside groups and promote their scholarship in ways that make what are often dense, complex, and difficult-to-understand concepts accessible to lay readers. Making the effort to do this takes time and energy, and often will not be rewarded in the promotion and tenure process. But it can very satisfying to see one's work have a real impact on higher education institutions and students.

NOTES

1. Data from the 2000 Census showed that 19.6 percent of Tennessee adults held a bachelor's degree, as compared to 24.4 percent in the nation as a whole. Thirty percent of the 18- to 24-year-old population in the state was enrolled in college in that year, compared to 34 percent across the country (US Census Bureau, 2016).
2. For more on the creation of the Tennessee program, see Ness and Noland (2003) and Heller (2004).

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