

From Perceived Adversary to Critical Friend to Partner in Reform:

A Policy Professional's Reflection on Her Experiences as a Policy Researcher and Change Agent in California's Higher Education Community, 2006-2013

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In the office of IHELP (Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy) at Sacramento State, an institute with the mission to enhance leadership and policy through research, we read the official email blast with disbelief and trepidation. A colleague had forwarded us the e-missive that California Community College system officials had sent to each and every faculty in the then-109-college system, complete with "talking points" to help those contacted by the media to attempt to discredit our most recent research.

We were supposed to be the "white hat" guys, the IHELPers, placing the blame for low completion rates in the community college system squarely on the infrastructure of state policies, not on the shoulders of the dedicated administrators, faculty, and others who serve our state and our students well through their work in this system. Our report, in fact, conveyed our convictions in its very title and subtitle: *Rules of the Game: how state policies create barriers for student completion in the California Community Colleges*. We understood that a wide range of policies force colleges to focus on how many students they serve, and how they spend their money far more than on how many students succeed and what outcomes they achieved from the money they spend.

A few weeks earlier, another research institute had been the first to report completion rates in the community college system, which had until then fended off such computations on the grounds that completion was an invalid measure of success for community colleges. The press release that accompanied that earlier report had struck a negative tone – seemingly

blaming the faculty and staff of the colleges for the poor outcomes.

Our study not only employed superior methods for computing completion, but also absolved the colleges of blame, reflecting our belief as policy professionals that statutes and regulations set the "rules of the game," which rational individuals working in all institutions naturally follow. If colleges are funded based on course enrollments in the third week, for example, how can we blame them for maximizing third week enrollment? If colleges face strict limitations on what they may spend on student services, how can we fault them for not providing adequate support to students who need a lot of it? If large numbers of students pay no fees to enroll in courses, how can we expect colleges to ensure that students will plan carefully before enrolling in or dropping out of classes? If under-staffed colleges are made to follow onerous protocols before they can exercise academic judgments about setting prerequisites for college-level courses, how can we fault them when under-prepared students fail to complete college courses? The answer that we gave in our report was: we can't blame the colleges; blame should instead be aimed at state policies – at the rules of the game. Those of us seeking different outcomes should work to change the rules.

So imagine our surprise when we saw that the system officials had skewered our report. The email blast across the system included these statements to underscore their objection to our use of "completion" to examine student outcomes in community colleges:

- "This is another typical 'university view' of our

community colleges written by people who have no experience in our institutions.”

- The authors seek to “remake community colleges into another elite university system.”
- “It is clear that the authors have little or no understanding of our colleges or our students and their work is not helpful...”
- “The study is insulting to community colleges.”

Flash forward almost exactly five years to a press release from the Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, which recounted the Chancellor’s testimony to a joint committee of the California legislature at which he praised the California Community Colleges Board of Governors’ unanimous endorsement of the final recommendations of the Student Success Task Force:

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – California Community Colleges Chancellor Jack Scott told a joint legislative committee today that recommendations developed by the Student Success Task Force will help more students reach their educational goals on time and help close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students in the 112-college system.

“This is a comprehensive plan that will result in more students completing certificates and degrees and transferring to four-year institutions,” said Chancellor Scott, who oversees the nation’s largest system of higher education. “Completion matters. It matters for students – whose earnings increase as they become more educated – and for our state as a whole. Our economy is increasingly demanding college-educated workers.”

For me, as Executive Director of the Sacramento State Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy and someone without the thickest of skin, the professional journey across those five years has been painful, frightening, challenging, inspiring, rewarding, humbling, and exciting – in approximately that order. The story that I am about to tell is my individual story, but it offers lessons to other academics with a penchant for bringing research to bear on policy. One lesson has already been illustrated: prepare to be misunderstood. Others will be pointed out as the tale unfolds.

It is important for me to say that I feel privileged to have directed IHELP during a period of substantial change that bodes so positively for the future of California. I have the utmost respect for those in the community colleges who have worked through the “careful what you wish for” scenario of wanting the colleges to receive more attention and respect from policy makers but fearing attention that is unaccompanied by sufficient knowledge of community colleges, their missions, and their challenges.

As I reflect on my experience as a policy professional working to improve student success in the community colleges, I see three distinct phases over which my professional role, vis a vis the community colleges, has evolved: from perceived antagonist to critical friend to partner in reform. In each stage the role of our research in influencing public policy has been different. Across the three stages I have learned a great deal about being a policy professional. Although these stages of development may not parallel the stages of development in the relationship of all researchers inclined toward policy, the lessons learned may be worth sharing.

A Perceived Antagonist - or being “Shulocked”

The political environment into which we released our Rules of the Game report was especially charged because the community college system was sponsoring a ballot initiative to carve out its own protected funding within the Proposition 98 K-14 funding guarantee. A system leader told me that even though he understood we were blaming policies, not colleges, the general public would not make that distinction and the system could not afford to let any apparent criticism of the colleges go uncontested. Hence the email blast, the general designation of me as enemy of the community college system, and the coining of the phrase “to be Shulocked” - meaning attacked by an enemy. Ironically, being viewed as one with the capability to Shulock someone gave me plentiful opportunities to get out and explain our research and its motivation – an essential ingredient in making policy research useful and influential if readers are counting lessons learned during this tale.

I traveled up and down the state, by invitation, giving presentations to, in effect, defend myself.

Unfortunately, I discovered that some in the audience had not read our reports, but had simply been prepped to feel attacked and insulted. In an effort to discredit our completion rate finding, for example, I was routinely accused of not realizing the most basic fact about community colleges – that many students enroll for purposes other than to earn a certificate or degree or transfer. That was an easy one: I would refer to the graphic on the first page of *Rules of the Game* that displayed the 40 percent of entering students we had determined were indeed not seeking a credential and had omitted from our computation.

More difficult for me was to convince hostile audiences that my motivation for studying the community colleges was to highlight their importance to California and point to ways that better policies could produce better results. From its founding in 2001, IHELP's mission has been to focus on community colleges as a partial antidote to the disproportionately skewed policy attention given to UC and CSU, which together serve but a quarter of the state's public enrollments. But as a CSU faculty member, my motivations were understandably suspect within the community college world. Why would I, in my work at IHELP, want to steer policy attention away from my own institution and fix it on another institution?

Herein lies a big lesson for me and, I suspect, for others. Anyone interested in doing educational research and bringing its light into policy making on the front lines must be prepared to have allegiances questioned. Education in general, especially higher education, has a long history of turf warfare that extends to the policy arena as well.

My greatest challenge, and as it happens, best memory from this stage, was the keynote address I was invited to give to an annual summit of academic senate leaders from all of the colleges. Drawing on all that I had learned from a recent series of workshops on communication, I appealed to the faculty leaders on the basis of shared values and shared goals, and concluded with what I thought was a compelling vision of the future role and stature of the colleges that they could help bring about. The first person to be called on in the Q and A said (and I recall the exact words years later): "You're not at all like I expected you to be."

The lesson I took from this was that policy

researchers cannot rely on their work being mediated effectively to intended audiences. Nor can they rely on audiences reading policy briefs, however short and compelling. Although there is a crucial role for publication of full and complete research reports, to make a real difference, policy researchers must get out and make their own case as directly as possible. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to do so, and in the case of the Academic Senate, much credit is due to the then systemwide senate president, who felt that faculty needed to be exposed to our research, however controversial it was at the time.

I am happy to be able to say that, during this period, our work contributed to the framing of a different kind of policy discourse around student completion, and we at IHELP helped call attention to how vital the community college system is to the future economic and social health of California. Yes, we had made specific recommendations about the policies that needed to be examined, but the time for specific policy discussions would come. The system had circled the wagons to protect against unwelcome intrusion by outsiders who were not trusted to have good intentions. It would take more such outsiders and courageous insiders, whose numbers were growing, to press ahead with the new policy conversation before specific policy reforms might result.

A Critical Friend - or Getting "Rehabilitated"

Over the next few years our institute released some new research, in which we tried hard to adopt a more positive tone, having developed more highly attuned "tone radar," and to apply the edict of communication professionals that "what you say is not necessarily what they hear." It may have helped me attain what people referred to as my "rehabilitated" status with the college system that our newer work was easier to interpret as positive and even helpful. We documented the intermediate "milestones" that students reach in community colleges as well as the academic behaviors that predict successful forward progress. This line of research allowed us to offer recommendations about the kinds of college practices as well as state or system policies that would likely help more students succeed. It also called attention to the progress that students do make – rather than the failure of so many to finish. In this

period we also examined the state's community college transfer policies, broadening our focus to include the California State University, and further emphasizing the extraordinary role that the community colleges play in educating Californians.

Gradually, I got less anxious at the prospect of walking into the Chancellor's Office building in downtown Sacramento – a place that had felt like hostile territory for a while. Our reports became standard reading for those engaged in the student success agenda, including the Futures Commission of the League for California Community Colleges, the foundation-funded leadership training program for the colleges, and the Student Success Task Force, a high profile effort that was established via legislation to consider ways to improve student outcomes. The strongest indicator of my rehabilitation was when I received a phone call from then-Chancellor Jack Scott inviting me to serve as one of five external members on the Task Force.

The commitment of the Task Force to student success was manifest, and it produced an impressive set of recommendations, which were unanimously approved by the Board of Governors. Some of the recommendations were promptly incorporated into legislation, sponsored by the Chancellor's Office and enacted into law. Other aspects of the student success plan are being implemented administratively. The Task Force report was highly reflective of the positions we had taken in our research, and the views of the several national experts who were invited to present to the Task Force. The system was catching up to the leading states in embracing the student success agenda. In view of the size and complexity of the California community college system, its decentralized governance structures, and the myriad stakeholder groups with stakes in the status quo, I was personally surprised and professionally delighted with the outcome.

This second phase of my professional role vis a vis the colleges saw the possibility open for the consideration of how different policies might encourage different outcomes. Disagreements were about means to the end, not about the end goal of improving student completion of college certificates and degrees. Activity was growing across the college system to find better ways to help students succeed – better approaches to

helping students acquire needed basic skills, better internal data collection, more proactive support services for students, and more focused use of resources on students who seek college credentials. Serving on the Student Success Task Force was instrumental in my evolution from perceived adversary to critical friend in part because Task Force members found themselves considering many of our ideas, and in part because I found myself more convinced than ever that the system was committed to re-booting some critical aspects of its operations to produce better results.

If there is any lesson in my Task Force experience, it is this: regardless of the size of the playing field, those among us who want to use educational research as a tool to shape better policies for schools and students must do more than publish research reports and speak to audiences about their findings. At some point, they must become civically engaged and participate in a substantive way in policy-making processes. My experience happened to be at the state level. Others could have these experiences at the county or district or even school or community levels.

A Partner in Reform

As a professor of public policy, my understanding of, and commitment to, policy as a tool for reform stems from a belief that policies create incentives and that, particularly when finances are involved, rational people – students, faculty, and staff alike – respond to incentives. This is what motivated our initial work on community college student success, generally. We became convinced that the policy infrastructure created incentives that were misaligned with the goal of completion. In 2010 we extended that line of inquiry, turning our attention to the career technical education (CTE) mission of the colleges. Our hypothesis was that the policy infrastructure for the college system was inadequately supportive of CTE, reflecting the system's strong and historic commitment to its transfer mission. This lack of alignment of policy with the CTE mission, we surmised, was preventing CTE from flourishing and meeting the workforce and economic development needs of the state.

Over the last year I have developed a strong partnership with the vice chancellor for workforce and economic development at the Chancellor's Office who

has an ambitious agenda to reform the operation of her division to “do what matters for jobs and the economy.” Coming from outside the system, from industry, she has a strong sense of how to accomplish reform administratively, but she is looking to IHELP to assist her in elevating the stature of CTE within the system and identifying policy change options that would create conditions more supportive of the change she seeks. She invited me to testify with her to the Board of Governors on our research to “tee up” CTE issues for emphasis. Later, she invited me to participate in her opening plenary session to the annual conference of CTE educators in the system to alert them to the kinds of policy recommendations we are likely to make.

What a change from the time when the system feared our research to a time when she, and others, are waiting for our recommendations to provide a menu for possible system-sponsored legislation. I recently participated in a Capitol briefing at which we presented our research-in-progress to an audience of legislative staff and others interested in CTE. The deputy vice chancellor, also on the panel, publicly referenced my transition from “critical friend” to “partner.” She explained that her division was pursuing administrative changes as best they could under current policies but that they viewed policy alignment as critical to taking their reforms to scale. A college president on the panel echoed that sentiment, describing the heroic efforts she has put in place, but decrying the lack of state support, via fiscal and other policy, for these efforts.

Numerous faculty and staff from across the college CTE community assisted us as informal advisors in this work. Through conference calls, interviews, and surveys for providing reactions to draft policy documents, they helped us understand these highly complex issues. There was a great mutual benefit to this partnership. IHELP gained substantive knowledge, credibility, and support for our recommendations. The CTE community gains by having us raise the profile of their mission and advocate for policies to better support it. Whereas the first stage of our work saw a reframing of the policy discourse to “student success,” and the second stage saw a search for ideas to modify practices and policies that allowed us to have a literal seat at the table, the third (and current) stage is seeing us more directly set the agenda for policy reform as it affects one significant

aspect of the college system. We turned our attention to CTE soon enough so that when the new vice chancellor sought help understanding how state policy could help her cause, we had something already underway and could become a partner in policy reform.

To be sure, this is my story and the story of IHELP during a period of policy upheaval in California. But it is also a story with lessons for others interested in educational research and policy. Most important, it stands as testimony that policy researchers can find a seat at the table and ultimately become partners in policy making if the research is sound and the researchers can communicate it effectively. Throughout the five years of this story, the potential for our research to affect policy would have been destroyed had anyone been able to discredit it – and surely some tried. So perhaps the most important lesson of all is that the prerequisite for a researcher to be a player is the quality of the research. My story certainly underscores the critical role of communication. Policy researchers must expect to be misunderstood and mistrusted. They need to find ways to represent themselves and their findings so those who might benefit from policy changes recognize the value in the findings. To build effective skills affording both quality policy research and effective communication, leadership programs at the doctoral level have emerged showing promise of building a robust scholarly community committed to change.

Not at All “Academic”

My own doctoral study has proven invaluable to my professional journey. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the role of policy analysis in legislative decision making. This topic was more than an academic interest to me as, prior to my doctoral study, I had worked as a legislative analyst, using what I learned in my public policy Master’s program to craft rational recommendations to influence the California Legislature’s fiscal policy decisions. I had observed how legislative decisions seemed to be made in spite of, not because of, supposedly rational arguments. At the same time I observed that there had been a huge growth in the policy analysis industry, with scores of new graduate programs and legions of policy analysts being hired at all levels of government. The typical policy program would advertise itself as

teaching students how to “solve policy problems.” In my experience, policy problems were not really “solved” and the “solvers” – the legislators and other “clients” of the policy analysts who were producing the supposed solutions – were not consulting policy analysis before taking a position. Furthermore, academicians studying “research use” in the social and policy sciences had not found much ground for support for the profession. I resolved to investigate this “paradox of policy analysis,” whereby it was not being used. However, our society continued to produce more of it.

To make a long story short, my answer, confirmed with statistical results as applied to the US Congress and honored with a disciplinary award, was that policy analysis is, in fact, used but not in the way that researchers sought to document or that policy schools advertised to recruits. It is used as a means to increase and shape understanding of issues and problems, not necessarily to solve them. It is used to frame issues in ways that can mobilize new populations to get involved, which can lead to different outcomes that otherwise would have occurred. It is used to justify some issues winning the competition for space on the policy agenda and getting attention that would otherwise be lacking.

Even though I was a working professional when I wrote my dissertation, I could never have imagined at the time how relevant my doctoral research would become in my professional career. Since the founding of IHELP in 2001, I have tried to put into practice what I have learned about making policy research useful. While I learn more and more with each passing year, the signal lesson of my dissertation has been borne out in my work on community college student success. By choosing to study topics that matter greatly, forging ahead despite controversy, setting high standards of research quality, producing accessible and actionable research products that reflect great care in defining and framing issues appropriately, and engaging actively with the policy community, we have amassed a body of useful policy research.

I looked up my presentation to the Academic Senate and every one of the items I put forth as a “policy change agenda” has been, or is being, substantively addressed by the community college system. Did this happen because IHELP produced a series of research

reports that offered those recommendations? Certainly not. I do think that our work, over time and in concert with complementary work from inside and outside the state, helped California lawmakers and educators better understand the educational problems facing our state, the role of the community colleges in addressing them, the urgency of taking action at the policy level, and the kinds of actions that might be taken. I feel immensely fulfilled by this last decade as a policy professional that has allowed me to participate in a movement that should have a lasting legacy for California.

About the Author

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