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## **Tools of State: Using Research to Inform Policy Decisions in Higher Education**

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# Tools of State: Using Research to Inform Policy Decisions in Higher Education

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## Abstract <sup>1</sup>

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For many decades, states and the federal government have used both qualitative and quantitative studies to inform policy decisions, yet there have been longstanding concerns among qualitative researchers that their work is treated as second class. Policymakers in states and federal agencies treat policy research studies as tools of state—instruments to be used by policy makers—a practice in conflict with the moral stance of many qualitative researchers. Recognizing this problem, in this paper I provide guidance for constructing quantitative and qualitative research to inform policies on equity in preparation for, access to, and academic success in higher education without undermining the researchers' quest for truth.

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**Keywords:** communicative action, social justice, policy research, higher education

# Las Herramientas del Estado: el Uso de la Investigación para Fundamentar las Decisiones Políticas en Educación Superior

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## Resumen <sup>1</sup>

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Durante décadas, los estados y el gobierno federal han utilizado los estudios cualitativos y cuantitativos para fundamentar sus decisiones políticas. Aún así, los investigadores cualitativos siempre se han mostrado preocupados de que su trabajo fuese considerado como de segunda clase. Los legisladores de los estados y del gobierno federal han utilizado la investigación en políticas como herramientas del estado -instrumentos para ser utilizados por los legisladores- una práctica que entra en conflicto con la postura moral de muchos investigadores cualitativos. Al identificar este problema, proporciono una guía para la construcción de investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa para basar las decisiones políticas de igualdad a fin de conseguir la mejor preparación, acceso y éxito en la educación superior, sin socavar la búsqueda de la verdad por parte de los investigadores.

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**Palabras clave:** acción comunicativa, justicia social, investigación en políticas, educación superior

Working in collaboration with government agencies seeking to change educational policy and improve educational outcomes is a particularly interesting challenge for educational researchers. When conducted from within higher education, this type policy research should maintain the quality standards of academic research, including independent judgment and interpretation of findings. For more than three decades—as a government employee, professional in a private firm, professor, and director of a university policy center—I have been involved in both quantitative and qualitative research that has provided information for policy decisions and in support of educational reform. This is an artful process that requires both adherence to the principles of quality research and an understanding of the roles information plays in policy decisions. This article I provide a framework for understanding the multiple roles of researchers working in partnership with government officials engaged in educational change using illustrative examples from my own experience and concluding with guidance for aspiring policy researchers.

### **Framing Research Partnerships**

While it is possible, if we hold to social contract theory (Rawls, 1971, 2001), researchers and policymakers share an institutional interest in promoting the public good through fairness for citizens, contemporary political realities suggest that this is not always possible. Policymakers and policy researchers have fundamentally different roles: the policymakers' role is to promote politically viable agendas, while researchers often promote education science through theoretical frames and evidence. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers can face challenges in doing research under contract with government officials. There is an inherent inequality of power in relationships where government agencies pursuing a political agenda actually fund research.



## **The Problem of Unequal Power**

In the 1970s when the institutionalist view (based actions on institutional missions and expert judgments) held and the large government education programs were still being developed, there was more of a separation between the planning and evaluation functions in government, which made it easier to maintain role differences because evaluation units in government shared an interest with researchers in objective assessment. However, with the creation of the U.S. Department of Education in 1980, planning and evaluation were consolidated in offices of planning, budget, and evaluation that shared an interest in promoting political agendas. These offices within government agencies have different missions than the National Center for Educational Statistics or the Institute for Education Science (formerly the Office of Educational Research and Improvement), the major federal agencies that fund educational research in the United States.

Most of the research funded by government agencies is contracted to private firms. There is a bind for researchers working in these private organizations because of the implied threat of losing contracts if their work does not convey the message the funding agency wants to hear; in essence, there is an implied contract that governs the research. Researchers in university-based policy centers are also frequently engaged in research for state agencies with an interest in specific research agendas. Generally, work in these types of situations is conducted on a task-order basis as “sole source” mini-contracts developed based on a history between researchers and contracting officials. Employees sometimes move back and forth between government and research organizations, further complicating role differentiation. Private organizations employ many graduates of research universities and have become a relatively secure career path because of the knowledge and skill of the managers of these firms.

It can be exciting to engage in research for a government agency pursuing an agenda, especially if the agenda aligns with the researcher’s academic and policy interests. However, researchers who engage in these arrangements should not lose sight of the fundamental reasons for

research in democratic societies. The aim of research should not be to promote agendas but to provide information. In *The Idea of Justice*, Amartya Sen (2009) discusses the importance of diversity of interpretation and inputs: “A person’s voice may count either because her interests are involved or because her reasoning and judgment can enlighten a discussion” (Sen, 2009, p. 180). Regarding the role of judgment, Sen argues: “the person’s perspective and the reasons behind it bring important insights and discernment into an evaluation and there is a case for listening to that assessment whether or not the person is a directly involved party (this can be called ‘enlightenment relevance’)” (Sen, 2009, p. 108).

Sen makes this argument as part of a reconstruction of the theory of justice that focuses on using advocacy and analyses to address injustices. Consonant with this view, my argument is that while researchers must be objective with respect to the role of evidence, they also have an obligation to overcome the functionalist tendency to overlook injustices in favor of pursuing policy agendas and intents.

### **Reframing the Researchers' Role**

The unequal power relationships between government funding agencies and foundations and researchers complicate efforts to maintain an objective position in funded research, especially when issues related to inequality and injustice are embedded within the agendas being promoted by the public officials who fund the research. Sen (2009) also suggests where we might find a framework for discerning the role of power in policy:

Habermas’s treatment of public reasoning is, in many respects, broader than Rawls’s, as Rawls had noted...Habermas has made a truly definitive contribution in clarifying the broad reach of public reasoning and in particular the dual presence in political discourse of both ‘moral questions of justice’ and ‘instrumental questions of power and coercion’ (Sen, 2009, p. 324-325).

Previously, I have applied Habermas's concepts of public reasoning to public policy, professional development, and moral reasoning (St. John, 1994, 2009a, 2009b). Habermas (1984, 1987, 1990) articulates theories of action based on forms of communication. In fact, Habermas is generally considered the best critical theorist of the 20th century (Macey, 2000). Habermas's basic distinction is between two forms of action: strategic (goal directed) and communicative (oriented toward building understanding). His critiques of strategic action further distinguishes action that is instrumental, performed as a matter of routine or application, and action that is aligned between setting and achieving goals. For strategic action that is goal directed, he distinguishes between open strategic action with a discussion of goals, and closed strategic action that assumes authority-based goal setting. As researchers, we have goals and usually work with theories, so it is virtually impossible to avoid some form of goal-directed action.

In contrast, communicative action is a process of focusing on building understanding of problematic situations rather than achieving goals (Habermas, 1987). Habermas equates communicative action with post-conventional moral reasoning (Habermas, 1990), a process that involves discerning why problems exist (assessment) and both identifying and evaluating strategies for resolving injustices and inequalities. In contrast, pre-conventional moral reasoning involves the misuse of power (i.e. the asymmetry of power or quid pro quo). Habermas further discusses how, in the evolution of societies, the discernment of power abuses can lead to new policies and laws that aim to correct the problem. He argues that conventional moral reasoning is the process of thinking about—and discussing—moral reasoning as consonant with the legal process. He illustrates how the process of using communicative discourse that discerns why certain forms of action are problematic or result from the abuse of power can lead to new laws and regulations that forbid these forms of action.

In *College Organization and Professional Development* (St. John, 2009b), I discuss the development of sexual harassment policies in higher education during the 1980s and early 1990s as an illustration of how communicative action evolves in practice. It is easy to see why this might be a form of action that is hard to realize within the research

process. It is easier to study whether action is strategic or communicative than it is to enact communicative action within a research project because of the focus on democratic problem solving. Based on study of discursive practices in various educational contexts, I adapted Habermas's frame of discourse to distinguish forms of professional action, or praxis, and organizational support that emerged from these analyses (St. John, 2009a).

Table 1

*Habermas's Frames of Discourse Adapted to Examine Government and Researcher Roles in Policy Studies*

<b>Frames of Action</b>	<b>Government Roles</b>	<b>Researcher Roles</b>
Instrumental Frame & Basic Research	Agency develops, administers, and evaluates programs; encourages evaluations to inform budget and policy decisions.	Basic research orientation, adapted for assessment and evaluation research as requested by government agency.
Closed-Strategic Frame	Agency undertakes new strategies to alter course of program or policy; seeks information to support policy initiatives.	Researcher adapts methods to address questions raised by government agency; findings subject to review and approval.
Open-Strategic Frame	Agency undertakes new initiatives to address recurrent challenges; researchers engage in open discourse to examine current policy; projects test alternatives to the status quo.	Researchers adapt methods to explore issues related to new initiatives; research subject to reviews, interpretations may be collaboratively constructed.
Communicative Frame	Government agencies seek to address systemic injustices and in equalities in outcomes; policymakers collaborate with researchers to explore and test new approaches to addressing challenges; solutions subject to budgetary and policy constraints and public review	Researchers support for action inquiry in education agencies, including quantitative and qualitative operational analyses; support evaluations of collaborative experiments that address injustices and inequalities within the system.

*Source:* Adapted from St. John (2013).

Habermas's discursive frames can be refined to depict the government and researcher roles in the research relationship. Table 1 poses hypothesized relationships between government agencies and researchers, based both on Habermas's concepts of discursive relationships in relation to power and the history of the use of educational research in government policy. This framework applies to the contracted relationship between government agencies and researchers. There is also a broader policy discourse in openly democratic societies in which both researchers and government officials have the opportunity to make their cases in the press. With the open press, it is possible for researchers to influence government policy through research publications and opinion pieces in major newspapers and on blogs. However, in closed systems government is not likely to fund research that takes an oppositional position; rather government agencies are likely to use research to find confirmatory evidence to support their positions. In this context, research that openly examines alternative positions is rare, unless it is undertaken by independent researchers or funded by a foundation or agency seeking open discourse. The four frames are described briefly below with reference to historical contexts.

In the *instrumental mode*, a government agency develops a program and uses research for the purposes of assessment and evaluation. Roles are well defined and each of the actors performs in a conventional manner. This form of relationship prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s when the federal government was engaged in building major educational programs through the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* and the *Higher Education Act*, and the revision of programs through the periodic amendment process. During this period of history, a systems approach was used by government (Weathersby & Balderston, 1972) and critiques raised doubts about the implied notions of rationality in program development (Wildavsky, 1969, 1979). This process is still used in assessment and evaluation studies conducted under contract with government agencies.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration undertook the revision of federal programs through the budget process. For example, in federal student aid the administration shifted the balance by constraining funding of Pell Grants and letting loans expand to become the primary

source of student aid (Hearn, 1993; Hearn & Holdsworth, 2004). The policy discourse was contested this period, as senior administrators in the U. S. Department of Education argued that colleges and universities were wasteful and raised tuition to increase revenue from federal student aid programs (Carnes, 1987; Finn, 1988). During this period, the U. S. Department of Education used research contractors to document their claims. This *closed-strategic mode* of government-sponsored research has continued, but is now subject to criticism (Becker, 2004; Heller, 2004).

There is also a possibility a government agency will enter into an *open-strategic* arrangement with an independent research organization. The Legislative Analyst Office in California, when under the leadership of A. Alan Post, operated this way (Public Policy Institute of California, 2008). At times, the federal Government Accounting Office plays this role in Congressional debates. The Indiana Education Policy Center at the University of Indiana maintained this approach in the 1990s and early 2000s. After Lilly Endowment funding for the Policy Center ended, the state allocated line-item funding to continue the budget analyses (Theobald, 2003). Courts also occasionally seek neutral analyses of this type for major cases (St. John & Hossler, 1998).

Finally, it is possible that an *open communicative mode* can be established between researchers and government agencies when seeking to solve complex problems in educational policy. For example, Gómez, Puigvert and Flecha (2011) describe a decade of research project in European countries that used open, critical communicative methods to bring voices of diverse groups into policy process. Such projects also demonstrate a transformative function, illustrating how to overcome polarity of political views to craft new courses of action. My argument is that engagement in communicative research requires both environmental conditions supporting openness and researchers knowledge and skills in research and communicative discourse. I view such organizational and skill development as a capacity building process than can occur overtime as a part of the maturation of the researchers' stance, knowledge, and skills over time.

The political polarization between neoliberal arguments about rights and neoconservative arguments of reeducating tax payer costs—frequently undermines openness in research on and exchange

about policy problems in the United State. Further, the dominance of education science, as methodologies the emphasize replication of behaviors thought to be effective, further undermines the prospective of communicative action. For example, Gómez, Puigvert, and Flecha (2011) describe a decade of research projects in Europe that used open-critical communicative methodologies to bring diverse voices into policy processes. These projects demonstrate a transformative function in education policy and practice, transcending polarized positions.

Unfortunately, with the political polarization in the United States along with the dominance of education science in education policy and research, there has been only limited evidence of policy research using communicative methods. Yet there are examples of periods when policy researcher has informed Exchange within policy deliberations, creating new opportunities to improve equity in opportunity while also addressing matters related to efficient use of tax revenues. For example, Hearn and Anderson (1989, 1995) documented changes in policy in Minnesota as a result of a sustained period of collaboration between researchers and policymakers. Based on review of this and campus-level change, I proposed an inquiry-based approach to policy intervention that encouraged bottom up change in state policy in higher education finance (St. John, 1994, 1995). Eventually, as Director of the Indiana Education Policy Center, I had the opportunity to test this approach in reading reform in schools (St. John, Loescher, & Bardzell, 2003) and campus efforts to improve access and reduce gaps in degree completion (St. John & Musoba, 2010).

This paper applies this development framework as a way of illustrating how communicative action can be used at the intersection of policy research, government decision making and the transformation of educational practice, using my own experiences as illustrative examples. In selecting this introspective method, I critique my own efforts to enact the ideal within processes that were asymmetrical with respect to power relationships. The situations I encountered—and my own actions—frequently came up short of the ideal of communicative action. I discuss how difficult it is to realize the democratic ideals of communicative action in the research process, especially when working with policy makers, more as a self-critique informing development of my own



approach to research. I do not assume that my research provides a model for other, but rather aim to illustrate how researchers might development knowledge and skills to engage in communicative action within policy processes.

### **Illustrative Examples of Contexts for Policy Research**

Below I use illustrative examples from my own experience of situated contexts of policy research. My intent is not to critique the intent or motivation of government officials, but to illustrate the different contexts of research for both government agencies and policy researchers. My hope is openness about the contexts for policy research can inform aspiring researchers about the situations they may face in the course of their work.

### **Instrumental Contexts and Basic Policy Research**

Researchers learn the research process when completing doctoral dissertations and seek to replicate the process as they engage in the study of new issues. Typically, the doctoral dissertation is a complete research project that demonstrates all components of the process. In some fields, like economics, three papers are used instead of a complete dissertation. In qualitative research, the single topic dissertation is still typically the preferred method because of the complexity of a complete qualitative study. It is also possible for qualitative researchers to complete books, either based on their dissertation or their research after the dissertation was completed.

Students completing doctoral dissertations should, at a minimum, have a full understanding of the steps of research—defining a problem, framing the research, developing methods, analyzing data collected, and providing new understandings in relation to framing assumptions—as they apply to a specific topic. An understanding of these steps is necessary for a new researcher who engages in action-oriented studies of policy and practice.

Often dissertations are generated from the advisors' research. My



dissertation advisor, George B. Weathersby, encouraged his students to complete dissertations using his research projects. I worked on his study of the Developing Institutions Program, funded under Title III of the Higher Education Act. The project examined the impact of institutional and student funding (Weathersby, Jacobs, Jackson, St. John, & Tyler, 1977). As part of my dissertation, I developed a staged theory of structure complexity with corresponding managerial and information needs. The research validated the sequential nature of the original scheme (St. John, 1980, 1981), and was proposed and tested in comparative studies (St. John, 1980; St. John & McCaig, 1984; St. John & Weathersby, 1980). The models logic was structural and assumed continuation of computer mainframes and centralized information systems, a limitation that first became evident from analyses of adaptive uses of micro-computing in the Far East (St. John, 1987). In retrospect, this framework was overly prescriptive and did not accommodate the adaptive nature of organizational change.

As a dissertation advisor, I have often encouraged my doctoral students to generate their dissertations from projects they worked on with me, and many have been published. Under the organizational umbrella provided by a senior researcher, graduate students can generate independent dissertation research, as was my experience. Through these circumstances early career researchers can gain experience understanding with the elements of research, along with an understanding of the role of the funding agencies in framing research.

### **Closed Strategic Contexts for Policy Research**

Knowing the steps of research is necessary but not sufficient for research on policy and practice. In the early 1980s, after stints with state and federal agencies and a year as a visiting lecturer at an Australian university, I joined a private firm engaged in policy research. The era of government trust in basic scholarship for assessment and evaluation of government programs—the type of environment I experienced as a student—had given way; studies were closely monitored by government agencies. Results could only be released when the funding agencies agreed on the findings. There were opportunities to collaborate on

quality control (St. John & Sepanik, 1982) and information system studies (St. John & Robinson, 1985) that used case studies. These publications carried forward understanding about the uses of technology and information systems and provided some positive benefit from the federal investment in information system redesign. But by that time it was abundantly evident that political power, wielded by both government agencies and lobbyists, could substantially undermine rational approaches to planning, even when adaptive strategies were proposed. However, it was also evident that information on federal strategies could inform adaptive change in colleges and universities.

Later, after shifting to a policy research firm, I conducted studies on higher education costs that were intended to inform Congress during the debates about student financial aid. At times, we were directed to adapt studies to look at colleges with presidents who had been critical of the Reagan administration. We were under pressure to find wasteful practices, to confirm claims that government expenditures on student aid were the cause of rising prices and increasing federal and student costs. We conducted numerous qualitative and quantitative studies. I tried to write reports in fair and balanced ways, but reports were often hung up in protracted review processes because of the government's interest in having them reflect the administration's position. I did have one quantitative paper on loans released by the administration (St. John & Noell, 1987), but I declined the request from a journal to publish the paper. After I left the private firm and took a university position, the report on college costs was released with modest alterations after a staff member took over final revisions (Kirshstein, Tikoff, Masten, & St. John, 1990). I had resisted making changes that would place the blame for rising college costs on colleges, either because of excess waste or attempts to capture increased revenues from federal student aid, two claims that federal official had made previously (Carnes, 1987; Finn, 1990).

When I became a professor, I had the freedom to publish from the reports that had been submitted under contract (St. John & Noell, 1987). I wrote several articles using the case study data: one examined how private liberal arts colleges had used contemporary methods—enrollment management, strategy planning, and pricing that

considered scholarships and tuition as part of the budget process— to transform troubled financial conditions into stable, competitive positions (St. John, 1991); another used mixed methods to examine how pricing behavior had changed in colleges (St. John, 1992).

During this period, I adhered to the objective stance of research when framing these and other articles and disseminated the findings of the cost studies into the public domain. I was adhering to basic standards of policy research in spite of a closed government environment that had not wanted a full analysis of organizational behavior and adaptations to changes in federal policy.

### **Open Strategic Contexts for Policy Research**

Although I understood the difficulty of maintaining openness in contracted policy research, I accepted the position of director of the Indiana Educational Policy Center at Indiana University in 1997. Before I accepted the position, the Center had received a three-year “termination” grant from Lilly Endowment which wanted to convert the Center to ongoing status (post-foundation funding). I was aware of the challenge of converting to a university research center funded by government rather than underwritten by a foundation. This was a big cultural shift in the Center that had a tradition of neutrality in policy research.

Before moving to Indiana University, I had published on the critical-empirical approach to policy analysis (St. John, 1994), so I had a foundation for taking a critical open approach to policy research and had made this argument when I presented my research approach as part of the interview process. We moved forward, building research partnerships with government agencies. My aim was to include evidence of inequality in education and bring this concern to policy studies that focused on traditional, achievement-oriented outcomes.

At the time Indiana was starting a new grant program for schools to improve early reading. The first project I took on as director was on early reading programs, a series of studies that used literature reviews, case studies, surveys and qualitative analyses. Part of the project focused on using research, especially reviews and case studies, to

inform professional development for teachers. We critically examined research on different types of reading programs; conducted and analyzed surveys to evaluate how teaching practices related to improved reading and reduced failure (i.e. holding children back and/or referring students to special education); and conducted case studies that informed us about the ways different types of reading programs fit within school contexts. We developed guidebooks for teachers and provided professional development to encourage teams from schools to plan for their new reading programs. The project team also got involved in reading school proposals, rating their coherence relative to what we had learned from case studies and surveys about making components of reading programs fit together in schools.

Our book, *Improving Reading and Literacy in Grades 1-5: A Resource Guide to Research-Based Programs* (St. John, Loescher, & Bardzell, 2003), provided schools with frameworks for developing comprehensive and cohesive early reading programs. Rather than advocating any particular reading model, we reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of many existing methods, curricula, and interventions and provided research-based guidance for educators about how to adapt these methods within schools to develop their own strategies. We proposed an approach that helped schools balance methods of phonemic awareness and decoding with the critical literacy skills children need to comprehend and write about new areas of content, a necessity for middle and high schools.

Through this open process we could communicate with schools about the ways research could inform their efforts to seek funding for reading interventions. We also had the freedom to publish our research. However, the reading interventions in Indiana and other states at the time were goal directed, focused primarily on improving reading test scores. In all of our studies we examined the impact of school curriculum, teaching methods, and interventions implemented on the percentages of students completing each grade (i.e. reducing holding students back and special education referrals), along with improving average scores for students taking state reading exams. We argued that both excellence indicators (i.e. reading scores) and keeping more students on track were important. Subsequent evaluation research

indicated that the state had narrowed the gap in reading scores for minority compared to majority students (Spradlin, Kirk, Walcott, Kloosterman, Zaman, McNabb, Zapf, & Associates, 2005).

Based on these experiences, I conclude it is possible to conduct studies in an open environment through collaboration between researchers and government agencies that both enables the agency to move toward its aims and results in research that is of generally acceptable publishable standards, but it is not easy to do so. On the reading studies and others conducted in Indiana, researchers, legislative staff and agency personnel maintained open-minded positions with respect to possible directions and practices, especially when discussing how research might inform policy and funding decisions. At the time, there was a mixed-party legislature, but we maintained open discussion about policy tactics, including research, framing of studies, and pondering of the meaning of findings. While there we often crafted executive summaries to align with political initiatives in the states, there were no attempts to influence study findings or researchers' interpretations.

### **Communicative Discourses and Policy Research**

Communicative action differs fundamentally from strategic action's predisposition toward goal-direct strategies. Research encouraging communicative action must, in my view, enable individuals and organizations to choose their own goals and strategies based on assessments that build their understanding of the challenges they face with respect to inequality in student opportunity. It is unusual for government agencies to maintain this communicative stance, an extreme openness, given the emphasis on improving achievement in schools and completion rates in higher education. My argument has been that to identify barriers to access, we must step back from the usual assumptions about how strategies link to outcomes by considering why problems exist in the first place (St. John, 2003, 2009a, 2009b, 2013). Because of their orientation toward control of action, it is difficult for government agencies to sponsor research programs with an open agenda.

In my experience, the best example of a project with a commitment to encouraging communicative action was the Indiana Project on Academic Success (IPAS), a research and professional development project funded and supported by Lumina Foundation, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education, and Indiana University (St. John & Wilkerson, 2006). Research support and professional development opportunities were provided for colleges and universities that participated. Research done by the IPAS team for the campuses included both persistence studies using the state data systems, giving many people their first look at persistence data, and focus group interviews to support the change process. The analyses of focus group data provided new insights for campus teams about the ways students experienced their programs. This combination of data provided a resource campus teams could use to propose new initiatives to their administration. The teams were encouraged to pilot test their ideas, partly to develop a culture focused in learning.

An open environment was created, with different researchers and campus teams addressing a wide range of challenges. Some of the campuses used the support to evaluate past intervention programs, others followed the full action inquiry process introduced by IPAS, and a few jumped right to selecting practices thought to be “best” (Daun-Barnett, Fisher, & Williams, 2009). One of the colleges that finished the full cycle, a community college, gained approval to try out an orientation program which was eventually adopted not only by that campus, but also by other campuses in the state system (Hossler, Ziskin & Gross, 2009). A private university used the support to evaluate a leadership program for students with undeclared majors, a process that was brought to scale resulting in improved retention rates for the entire university system and eliminating the gap in degree completion rates for African American students compared to majority students (St. John & Musoba, 2010).

While some faculty and administrators used their technical assistance from IPAS to promote initiatives in which they were already engaged, they used the support to identify new approaches that could be taken to scales in their systems (St. John & Musoba, 2010). For example, one campus in Indiana’s new community college system pilot tested the

orientation program, an innovation that was adapted across the state (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009). An evaluation completed for another team of scholars after I left the IPAS project also found substantial evidence of improvement in student retention (Hossler, Gross, & Ziskin, 2009).

### **Tools and States**

While theories of communicative discourse emphasize openness to divergent views of social problems, the practicalities of government action now often undermine this ideal (Sen, 2009; Habermas, 1984, 1987). Yet when there is openness—either through government action (as was the case with the reading project described above) or through foundation support for innovative projects (as was the case with IPAS)—it is possible to actualize transformation in some programs and practices. But such innovations are subject to the isometric forces of regulatory practices perpetuated by schools, colleges, and government agencies.

In an earlier period when there was a distance between evaluation functions and planning, it was more common for researchers to have the academic freedom to execute evaluation and assessment research without inappropriate government influence on the interpretation of findings. In this old model, research was treated as a tool of state, and the independence of researchers permitted appropriate application of methods. With the emergence of strategic initiatives as reform strategies in both government agencies and institutions of higher education, there is a greater temptation for policymakers to overtly influence research interpretations as they attempt to build their rationales for new agendas. This creates serious problems for researchers who seek to engage diverse groups in finding new solutions.

Researchers who continue to raise concerns about inappropriate methods and falsification of conclusions often feel at risk in the culture of contracted policy research. These political forces are somewhat easier to contend with in centers within research universities than in private corporations, at least in my own experience. However, the uncertainty of funding and the implied threat to future livelihoods of researchers who deviate from central control remains, even in university centers.



## **The Potential for Transformative Change in Education**

The dominant, systemic, control-oriented approaches to reform can reduce the academic freedom of educators and researchers to address critical social challenges when they emerge in education. The alternative is to both: 1) use the information generated by accountability schemes as part of the local change processes; and 2) engage in communicative action supporting and informing these adaptive change processes.

First, using a communicative approach researchers and educators can collaborate in processes that use information generated through accountability systems to inform local transformation. Typically, tracking data are used for evaluation and accountability; it is assumed that if required actions are implemented, desired outcomes will be achieved. But more typically, when requirements are followed as scripts they lead to new problems. A transformational orientation involving educators and researchers in problem solving can result in adaptive changes at the local level that overcome recurrent patterns of dysfunction. These processes involve researchers providing technical support to practitioners to solve a problem, rather than to promote notions of reform advocated by the researcher or a central agency.

Second, communicative processes involve changing the nature of exchanges between central authorities and both educators and researchers involved in building better communities of practice at the local level. When central authorities use strategic methods, they expect compliance. Opening these processes to ideas from below helps create a more dynamic change process. Building a trustworthy communicative relationship is a difficult process: it involves openness about defining problems, setting new goals, and testing new approaches. It takes trust between central authorities and groups at the local level to engage in exchange involving data sharing, redefining rules to fit problems that emerge, and so forth. Thus, an authentic communicative orientation is rare among administrators in central agencies because they feel pressure to report based on the agency's political interests. However, there are periods within the history of some states in which such conditions have been met and usually corresponding evidence of transformation (St. John, Daun-Barnett, & Moronski-Chapman, 2013).



Still, using communicative action to promote transformational change remains an ideal difficult to actualize. But there is reason for hope, especially as a new generation of researchers emerges. I refer to this type of research engagement as “actionable research” (St. John, 2013). While action research typically involves practitioners as researchers, *actionable research* has a broader definition that also includes qualitative and quantitative research that supports and informs bottom up change in organizations seeking to improve social justice. Using this approach, researchers derive satisfaction from having their scholarship used to inform change rather than to promote a particular idea or notion. While this type of research can be used to build theory, as has been the case in the emergence of the theory of academic capital formation (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010; Winkle-Wagner, Bowman, & St. John, 2013), but the intent of the research is to inform reform through social problem solving.

### **Guidance for Aspiring Policy Researchers**

While some researchers may find it attractive to engage in the politics of research-informed reform and may even buy into the agendas of reformers, they should not overlook their obligation to use appropriate methods in designing and executing research. Government agencies, private firms, and institutions of higher education need fair and accurate research to address the inequalities that can be created by political and educational systems.

This should not be interpreted as an argument that it is impossible to engage in high-quality qualitative research that informs government efforts to reduce inequalities in educational opportunities and access. In fact, there are many allies of quality research in foundations and government agencies that fund research. Rather, the purpose is to inform qualitative educational researchers about the hazards of the profession and encourage them to navigate careers of integrity, conducting high quality research that informs policy discourse and moves it closer to the ideals of democracy. The remainder of this manuscript addresses a few issues that merit consideration by researchers who engage in policy research or hope to do so.

1. *Seek Guidance from Seasoned Researchers:* This is not an argument to work with old white guys; seasoning relates to quality of experience more than age. Researchers who are involved in funded research programs require dependable graduate students to collaborate on their research, just as students need opportunities to learn the craft. Yet the demands of funded research should not define the topics students choose for their research. External funding is often needed for research on policy matters, but it is important that graduate students not be subjected to political influences when crafting their dissertations.

2. *Integrity is Essential in the Research Process:* There are many pressures on policy researchers, just as there are in academic work. Policy researchers frequently work on short deadlines, while academic faculty face pressures to publish in quality journals. Academic researchers engaged in actionable research face both sets of pressures, but this does not excuse shortcuts. The one defense a researcher has in a conversation with a funding agency when confronted by efforts to influence findings is the quality of the work. The quality argument does not buy much time, it can create friction, and it can even undermine continued funding, but it is the researcher's most important source of academic capital. When engaged in research supporting actionable reforms, I insist on meeting the standards of peer review; this strategy can protect researchers from undue interference from funding agencies. In applied scholarship supporting reforms in policy and practice, I have concentrated on improving the quality of my research, whether it used quantitative, qualitative or mixed data.

3. *Build Trustworthy Relationships:* Tierney's (2006) analysis of trust between the public and universities is highly relevant to the development of a sustainable research program. Whether conducting policy research in the university or the private sector, building a trusting relationship with collaborating agencies is crucial. Trust depends on the quality of the scholarship, the ability to deliver on time, and, especially, the ability to listen to funding agencies and reviewers in the vetting process. The fact that funding agencies have interests that might influence the way research is conducted, framed, or interpreted is not a problem if the exchange is open and the quality of the research is not compromised. Most frequently, researchers gain access to funded

projects by responding to a request for proposals (RFPs). Government agencies or foundations would not issue RFPs if they did not need high quality research that can withstand the scrutiny of external review.

*4. Research Partnerships Provide Appropriate Organizational Mechanisms for Research Supporting Reform:* There are now many examples of centers that have been set up to partner with public and educational agencies. The Indiana Education Policy Center had a sound partnership with state agencies, including the state department of education, the legislature, the governor's office, and the commission for higher education. These organizational arrangements were built on a history of trustworthy research, making it possible to create some stability in the research organization that supported educational policy decisions in the state. It is easier to develop a quality research program that supports reform in schools and higher education when there are appropriate organizational arrangements so this task does not fall to an individual professor or independent researcher.

*5. Craft Projects that Promote Communicative Action:* There is a very substantial need for research that fosters democratic discourse within educational organizations. Such discourse is needed to address systemic injustices and organizational policies that replicate inequality and deny opportunity. The major challenges for researchers who value communicative exchange are to create organizational foundations for transforming educational systems and expand opportunity and reduce inequality; both must be accomplished without jeopardizing the quality of the research. It takes a career to build the academic capital to promote educational justice through democratic research; such idealist notions of action and research are hard to achieve and often fleeting when realized. I encourage a next generation of researchers to take on these challenges.

## Notes

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