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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that involvement in higher education policy research and development is important for college faculty since not doing so leaves the field to others who may not exhibit sufficient objectivity or adequately emphasize the goals of understanding, effectiveness, and efficiency. First, it identifies some general problems of policy arenas, such as oversimplification of complex problems, interest-group activity, undue power of dominant personalities, shifting focuses of attention, scarce resources, and changing social and economic contexts. Following, examples of campus-based policy investigations in the area of higher education finance are cited. The paper concludes that academics doing good policy-related research on higher education need to be connected to government and administrators with more direct policy responsibilities. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

If Not Us, Who?:
Thoughts on Policy-Related Work by Higher-Education Faculty*

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If Not Us, Who?:
Thoughts on Policy-Related Work by Higher-Education Faculty

When we come to the question of higher-education faculty's role in public or institutional policy, we enter a domain overrun by metaphors: trees without fruit, shipyards in the desert, pitifully small mirrors with a thousand cracks... the list goes on.[1] In my lighter moments, I think we might even make a lively parlor game out of this, each of us producing our own sobering, yet cleverly oxymoronic, vision of this domain. Without gainsaying the fun we might have, it seems important to explore whether, in the end, we ought not quit this business entirely. That is the point, at least as I see it, of this session. Should we abandon our efforts in the policy arena, or is there some small shred of value there that we'd best preserve?

I argue here that yes, that value does exist. It continues to seem sensible to me that we devote some of our attention as analysts of higher education to questions of policy. The heart of my argument is that not doing so leaves the field to others who, although often supremely committed and knowledgeable, will not always exhibit sufficient objectivity or adequately emphasize the goals of understanding, effectiveness, and efficiency.

The Argument

Policy arenas, regardless of their specific policy focus, tend to be marked by oversimplification of complex problems, by interest-group activity, by dominant personalities, by shifting focuses of attention, by scarce resources, and by changing social and economic contexts (Kingdon, 1984). Each of these characteristics holds true in postsecondary education as a policy arena, and each suggests a role for activity by university-based researchers in that arena.

First, there is a tendency toward the *oversimplification of complex problems*. This stems from several aspects of policy arenas: the lack of technical training of analysts employed by governments, the backgrounds of state policymakers themselves (usually the law or business), the power of populist imagery in educational policy, and the nature of political discourse, which tends to be aimed toward the crisp, dramatic, effective rhetorical thrust. As can be noted from perennially heated discussion about tuition levels, each of these characteristics are certainly present in higher education policy making. Their effect is positive in some respects, but not all. One way researchers can contribute to consideration of difficult issues is by elaborating on their complexities. Perhaps in doing so they can help assure that the risks as well as the benefits of a seemingly clearcut policy initiative are fully understood.

Second, although *interest groups* are not always the dominant forces in policy change in this arena,[2] they do play a role in choosing subjects for consideration and in studying those subjects. While their values may be agreeable and their analysis intelligent and well presented, no one would argue that interest groups have neutrality as a prime goal. Faculty with research interests in policy may be somewhat more

[1] The first and third metaphors are from Keller (1985), while the third is from Weiner (1986).
[2] E.g., see Moynihan's (1975) recounting of the federal Higher Education Act's history.

sympathetic to and aligned with the academic norms of neutrality and seeking the truth no matter where that might lead.[3]

Third, *dominant political personalities* can shape the agenda, discussion, and action in higher education. Governors like Ronald Reagan and Pat Brown in California, Mario Cuomo in New York, and more recently Zell Miller in Georgia (creator of the Hope Scholarships) step into the arena armed with sizable constituencies, speaking and persuasion skills, and political goals. Analysis fits into their activities mainly as it tends to favor their viewpoints. Absent the leavening of more neutral, measured study, their cases may carry the day. The social good may be served by that leavening. Of course, politically based arguments delivered by strong personalities may well be defensible regardless of the level of analysis underlying them (Wildavsky, 1979). Still, it is hard to argue that such a pattern always holds, and analysis helps buttress the role of other factors in decisions.

Fourth, the public and its political representatives characteristically exhibit *shifting focuses of attention*. As Kingdon (1984) has suggested, the policy arena has some similarities to "organizational anarchy" in complex organizations, in that there is no necessary order to the subjects for discussion, the players in discussions, the solutions considered, or the outcomes of discussions. What is "hot" one year or month may be "cold" the next, regardless of the social needs involved (witness the saga of national attention to healthcare in the mid-1990s). When university faculty with ongoing policy interests and evolving expertise in particular subject areas become involved, one result may be improved constancy in attention to policy issues.

Fifth, *scarce resources* are a fact of life in the policy arena, as elsewhere. There is never enough time or money for the analyses necessary to fully understand an issue, or a policy choice. University faculty have a broad social charge to teach, serve and expand knowledge. The specific application of that charge lies in good part at faculty's discretion. By adding to the pool of those studying social and educational issues, faculty can meet the requirements of their positions while serving the larger good.

Sixth, and finally, the *changing social and economic contexts* of higher education imply a need for ongoing monitoring and analysis. State governments' ongoing fiscal difficulties have hit public universities especially hard: spending on postsecondary education took the worst hit of all state spending categories in the early 1990s (Gold, 1995; Breneman, 1995). Although there has been something of a rebound from that pattern recently (Schmidt, 1998), criticism has continued to come from within as well as outside the public postsecondary sector. As John Brandl, a policy researcher, University of Minnesota professor, and veteran state legislator in Minnesota, has argued, "the automatic deference that society and politicians used to have toward public universities has eroded" (Healy, 1996, p. A19). What is more, alternative providers such as the University of Phoenix have mounted credible challenges to the hegemony of traditional higher-education institutions. In this context, multiple voices are imperative. To sit back without being involved in assessing what this context means for institutions and systems, when higher

[3] See Clark (1983).

education is not only our area of expertise but also our area of livelihood and an enduring and significant social institution, would be naïve and unwise. Of course, this kind of involvement may seem awkwardly self-interested, but that risk may be worth taking.

In sum, we return to the question of who, exactly, should be doing research on higher education policy. My core point is that we, as folks who spend perhaps as much or more time than others thinking on how this enterprise arose, works, succeeds, fails, and endures, should be at the table when decisions are made concerning it. When we are not there, for whatever reason, the result may be lessened quality of deliberations and, ultimately, reduced chances for effective policy.

Some Examples of Success

Perhaps the most obvious arena for faculty research having influences on policy is that of finance. There one finds numerous influential analyses by campus-based investigators, including those by Hansen and Weisbrod in the late 1960s on the individual and social benefits and costs of states charging low or no tuition for higher education, those by a variety of respected analysts in 1968-70 for the Reauthorization of the U.S. Higher Education Act of 1965, those by Earl Cheit in the early 1970s on emerging financial problems on campus, those later that decade by George Weathersby and Greg Jackson on student-aid and institutional funding, and those funded by Carnegie in the 1960s and 1970s on a variety of financing issues. In addition, in the domain of equity and the law, work by Michael Olivas has been well known, and the work of Alexander Astin and others was cited frequently (if not always accurately) in the case of the state of Virginia's funding of the all-male Virginia Military Institute.

Admissions, Disclaimers, and Caveats

I cannot leave my argument without some qualifications. First, the case I make here is not quite so presumptuous as my title might imply. Clearly, others besides higher-education faculty can do solid research and inform policy in postsecondary education. We are far from alone in our capacity to be of assistance. My worry is solely that if we are *not* in the pool of those doing policy work on higher education, the quality of that work as a whole might suffer.

Second, I certainly do not mean to imply that we should all strive to become involved in policy research, nor even that we should agree that the efforts of those who *are* involved represent productive uses of our collective time. I merely mean to suggest that we as a community have something valuable to offer, and that those so inclined may serve professional, local (e.g., pedagogical, political), and larger needs by doing policy-oriented research.

Third, despite my listing of successes above, I cannot argue strongly on the basis of history. Our track record in this domain is not especially impressive, either in our products or in the effects they have had on policy makers or policy. There are too few instances of clear research-to-policy paths.

Fourth, we are not always especially welcome in the policy domain. Policy makers as individuals tend not to be especially analytic in the *academic* sense: their trust is more often in their political instincts, their political analyses, and their political experience than in abstract thinking. Action is often valued over open-ended rumination. Relatedly, words and argumentation are used in ways differing starkly from academic traditions. As a result, policy makers tend to limit funding for analysis and research, and under fiscal or political duress often are quick to cut such funding from policy implementations.

Fifth, we as faculty may often be out of our epistemological league in the policy domain. Just as policy makers may tend to oversimplify policy *issues*, those from higher education may tend to oversimplify policy *making* itself. The process tends to be arcane, messy, and indeterminate. Usually, it is not susceptible to straightforward conceptualization and analysis. For example, it is rare to find a policy-related issue or domain where one disciplinary perspective, such as that of economics or sociology, can be used exclusively. Thus, theories must be heavily contingent and nuanced, and nimbly employed if employed at all.

Sixth, the raw materials for policy research are rarely robust. Data availability tends to seem rich at first glance, then highly disappointing on further examination. Often, sample sizes are small because the units of analysis tend to be counties or states or schools, and there never seem to be enough of those for sophisticated statistical work. Respondents for more qualitative work often have political or economic interests which shape the nature of their responses to analysts, no matter how neutrally questions might be posed or how convincingly anonymity might be offered.

Seventh, compared to researchers, policy makers tend to ask different questions and have different needs. Theirs is a world less attentive to understanding or explaining something than to counting, averaging, controlling, limiting, or forecasting something. Often, they tend to have what accountants and economists might call a "transactions" focus, targeted mainly on volume assessments and quality control. Sometimes, policy makers adopt more of a management-analysis focus. Only rarely does their attention move fully into the domain of asking the "why" questions dear to academics.

Finally, we come to the question of social/political values and interests. Very few of us ascribe to the notion that our scholarly research is wholly neutral on that front. A few more of us, perhaps, would agree with the idea that our work is at least *intendedly* neutral socially and politically. Still more of us might ascribe to the notion of consensual validity, i.e., that the process of peer review brings our efforts closer to objective science. Still, in our choice of topics and in the ways we do our work and in the ways we report the work in our journal articles and books, our values and interests usually remain evident. Moving outside the scholarly world removes some of the factors that encourage neutrality, and can bring questions of values and interests even more to the fore. Reviewers of the work tend not to be our scholarly peers but those in the policy and political arena. Funders of the work tend to come from those same camps. Those drawn into the arena cannot expect to keep their social and political views distant from the work at hand. The pressures for doing work confirming certain values and interests, and challenging certain others, are

strong. The policy arena, then, is a world where yet another set of values, those neutral, truth-seeking values associated with academic life, are sure to be tested.

I suspect these points are attractive to those on the other side of the debate here, and to the undecided in our profession. In fact, the list seems rather convincing even as I proceed with this essay. I think nonetheless that there are strong and ultimately convincing points to be made on the other side.

Conclusion

The current Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education, David Longanecker, once commented to me (see Hearn, 1997) about the advantages academics have in doing good policy-related research on higher education, and of the need to connect faculty more productively to those with more direct policy responsibilities:

> "Academics, consultants, government-based policy analysts, and institutional researchers have a lot to learn from each other. Generally, we in government don't get to use technical research skills that we learned in graduate school, because the audience wouldn't understand. There is a strong need to translate into lay terms. Also, the demands we face are often for less sophisticated, more descriptive work. On the other hand, academics could benefit from more contact with policy folks. Academics don't often do important policy work, because they are not interested in the same issues as policy officials. But academics are coming closer to doing good policy research than consultants and institutional researchers, who have been forced into doing simpler research. Academic researchers are more critical now, because they alone have the time and resources for basic research. I wish our linkages with academics were better, so they could be addressing the things important to us."

Those in our field might therefore work harder to disseminate their findings more widely, not only to other researchers but also to administrators and policy makers. Higher education study is not and will most likely never become a full-fledged "discipline" in the manner of economics or psychology. We have a charge to be truth seekers, but we also have a charge to serve. As workers in a field of study focused on a critical societal institution, we can best maintain professional viability and vitality through healthy connections to the many constituencies which are concerned with the field, and which it concerns.

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