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ABSTRACT

This paper rebuts four common assumptions underlying criticisms of higher education policy scholarship and policy making. The first assumption, policymakers agree on the nature of policy problems and therefore on the kinds of research needed, is rebutted by noting that actually, there is no way to identify and research all possible future policy issues. The second assumption, policy scholars are not now engaged in policy-relevant research, is refuted by noting that an informal survey shows a continuing high production of policy-relevant research. The third assumption is that policymakers are not now influenced by policy scholarship. Actually, social and policy research is integrated into the policymaker's entire store of information and thus difficult to trace to specific policy changes. The fourth assumption, that increased attention by policy scholars to producing and disseminating policy-relevant research would improve policymaking, is also refuted. Actually, the approaches and interests of research scholars and policymakers may often be quite different. These four assumptions are seen to support the existence of "two cultures," policy scholarship and policymaking, whose insights may inform each other but are not dependent on each other. An appendix lists the author's laws of policy scholarship. (Contains 26 references.) (DB)

Policy scholars are from Venus; Policy makers are from Mars

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Policy scholars are from Venus; Policy makers are from Mars[1]

George Keller has used "trees without fruit" (1985, p. 7) as a metaphor to depict the sterility of the relationship between higher education scholarship and policy. I love metaphors. The best of them are simple, charming and powerful, and this one is a classic. But simplifying complexity can be dangerous, and this linear perspective of a nonlinear world appears to suggest that the only purpose of trees is to bear fruit, and only fruit that is visible (preferably edible?) is of value. In reality, trees and fruit serve multiple and often conflicting purposes. Trees may provide shade, food, beauty, lumber, refuge, protection against erosion and foundations for swings. Fruit serves different purposes for squirrels, worms, bees, trees themselves, and of course humans who may eat an apple, paint it, throw it, use it as a logo, or contemplate the nature of the universe as they watch it drop to the ground. Metaphors can obscure as much as they clarify. Is higher education scholarship useful only if it bears fruit, or might it instead provide fertilizer, insecticide, or other critical, if less visible purposes?

Higher education is not alone in criticizing the presumed gap between policy scholars and policy makers. The disconnect appears to be a generalized feature of social research, and the attempt to use knowledge to improve policy has usually been disappointing. (Cohen & Garet, 1975). The common complaint is that "many suppliers and users of social research are dissatisfied, the former because they are not listened to, the latter because they do not hear much they want to listen to" [Lindblom & Cohen 1979:1}. Critics of the scholarship-practice chasm in higher education have been particularly caustic, characterizing research as "stale, irrelevant, ...of little use to policy makers" (Layzell, 1990, p. B1), "lifeless and pedestrian, inward looking and parochial, the product of assembly-line research that has generated few new findings and challenging ideas" (Conrad, 1989, p. 202). It is claimed that "college and university presidents do not consult the literature or use it.... If the research in higher education ended, it would scarcely be missed" (Keller, 1985, p. 7).

These critiques of higher education research are misdirected. They are based more on opinion than data, and uninformed by significant scholarship on social research and social policy. They take a linear and rational view of how research should inform practice, and appear to accept the myth of a one-to-one correspondence between a problem and its solution (Schon, 1971). Nevertheless, the arguments are widely repeated, and enjoy some currency in the field. For example, an ad-hoc group of higher education policy scholars ("Minutes, ASHE Research and Policy Group Meeting", 1996) agreed that research lags behind policy needs, researcher agendas should focus more attention to the questions being asked by policy makers so policy-relevant research can be produced, and research results should be disseminated in formats congenial to policy makers and specify implications for policy.

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[1]I use "policy maker" as a generic term to refer to those actors whom social researchers wish to influence, and "policy scholar" to identify those engaged in social research who wish to influence policy makers.

Misleading Assumptions

In this paper I argue that these critical views rely on four misleading assumptions about higher education policy scholarship and policy making: a) policy makers agree on the nature of policy problems, and therefore on the kinds of research they would find most helpful; b) policy scholars are not now engaged in policy relevant research; c) policy makers are not now influenced by policy scholarship; and d) increased attention by policy scholars to producing and disseminating policy-relevant research would improve policy making. I believe each of these assumptions is flawed, and that higher education policy would be weakened rather than strengthened by asking researchers to define their agendas based on the current interests of policy makers.

Misleading Assumption A: Agreement on the nature of policy problems

It is not easy to decide whether any specific research program is, or is not, policy relevant. The number of policy questions is essentially unbounded, there is no agreement on which data are relevant to which problems, interest groups differ on what the major issues are, and preferences change over time. Three examples will illustrate. First, I reviewed the listing of the top ten policy areas noted by the Association of Governing Boards in each year from 1994 to 1997 [Ten Public Policy 1994; Ten Public Policy 1995;Ten Public Policy 1996; Ten Public Policy 1997}and identified 22 different items over the four year period. Only one item appeared in each of the four years, and twelve appeared in only one of the four years. Of the ten items listed for 1994, four were not listed in any of the following years. Second, the 1997 policy initiatives or agendas of a group of higher education professional associations included 305 individual items (Komives, Endress & LaVoy, 1997). Third, an analysis of almost 800 references to "crisis" in the 1970 to 1994 literature of higher education identifying a "crisis" found that while 60 percent were in ten broad categories, over 300 referred to issues that, while policy relevant, were transient, localized, or idiosyncratic. Each of these examples shows that one person's critical policy issue is another person's irrelevancy, policy issues change over time, and many problems that occupy the attention of policy makers can not be predicted in advance. These are all important issues for policy scholars. It takes time and preparation for policy scholars to develop the knowledge base of theory and practice, and the cultural understandings required to do research in any specific area (El-Khawas, 1995, p. 113).

How can scholars focus on policy relevant research if there is no way of predicting what future policy needs may be? We can be fairly certain that some, but not all, of the issues we study today will be generally relevant at some time over the next twenty years, even if we cannot predict the specific kind of knowledge necessary to respond to them. But there is no way to prepare scholars who can respond to each important policy issue of the next twenty years; the number of potential issues and their myriad subtleties dwarfs the number of potential scholars and their specializations. Even with unlimited resources, policy scholars could not respond to policy makers' satisfaction regarding the policy issues in search of scholarly attention (see for example, (Terenzini, 1996)). Such lists contain only a fraction of the issues that could be developed, and solutions to today's problems may have little to say to us tomorrow. As Schon (1971, p. 47) has observed, "an idea that has come into good currency is no longer appropriate to its situation [and almost never] pertinent to the problems on which one has to work."

Misleading Assumption B: Higher education scholars don't do policy-relevant research.

The suggestion that scholars don't do any policy-relevant research, don't do enough policy relevant research, or don't do enough policy-relevant research in the most important policy areas, is at best curious as two simple indicators will suggest. First, I analyzed (by title) 117 research and symposium panels listed in the 1995 and 1996 ASHE programs and found almost none that some important interest group would not find policy-relevant. Second, over the past 26 years ASHE/ERIC has published ten volumes a year of its Higher Education Reports. I believe that most of these 260 essays are policy-relevant, and the extensive higher education literature which they cite, by definition, must be policy relevant as well. A claim of inadequate attention to policy-relevant research would be unsupportable if most ASHE presentations and most ASHE/ERIC Higher Education Reports are policy-relevant. My analyses are informal at best, and I do not argue that they are reliable or valid. I would willingly recant them upon the presentation of countervailing evidence drawn from some repository of recent higher education scholarship (for example, listings in ERIC for any period of a year or longer).

Perhaps a stronger argument is that policy scholars may not always focus on the problems as defined by the policy makers. However, the ways in which policy makers define a problem is often part of the problem. Scholars who respond to these problems as defined may therefore limit the alternatives considered, focus on immediate realities which may quickly change, thus making results obsolete and leaving the situation worse instead of better.

Misleading Assumption C: Policy makers do not use higher education research.

Higher education research, like other forms of social research, may have a major effect on how policy makers think and on what they do, "but not necessarily on discrete provisions nor in the linear sequence that social scientists expected" (Weiss, 1982, p. 620). Critics of social research appear to assume that the only social research that "counts" as useful is that which is produced by contemporary researchers and focused directly on a policy maker's contemporary problem. They give no attention to policy research that influences social problem solving more generally, or to scholarship of the past that has informed the thinking of the present. Even when policy makers can't identify a specific study they find useful in their work, they agree "they had assimilated generalizations, concepts and perspectives from the social sciences that inevitably colored their understandings and shaped their actions" (1991a, p. 186). This "knowledge creep" occurs as the accumulation of the findings of many studies eventually permeate the policy environment (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979).

Expectations that policy scholarship should have immediate and dramatic effects on policy makers is unrealistic. Complex social systems are resistant to most intended policy changes, and it takes time for knowledge to circulate. New programs or policies are often marginal "weak treatments." They provide only a small increment of knowledge over the huge body of ordinary knowledge possessed by policy makers, which it can modestly reshape but cannot displace

(Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). Social research is only one of the many sources of knowledge that effective policy makers must consider, and as higher education research knowledge is integrated into a policy maker's more general knowledge "research information and ideas filter into their awareness, whether or not they label it as research as they absorb it" (Weiss, 1982, p. 635). The effects of research may take place over an extended period of time "and after numbers of studies have yielded convergent results." Perceptions change as evidence accumulates, and policy decisions "often accrete through multiple disjointed stages [so that] looking for blockbuster impact from research studies represents a misreading of the nature of policy making" (Weiss, 1982, pp. 621,633).

The concept of "usefulness" itself is problematic. Weiss has pointed out that there are at least three types – intrinsic usefulness, intellectual usefulness, and political usefulness (Tangri & Strasburg, 1979) -- and that each type is based on different factors and logics. There is no agreement on exactly what constitutes "use" of research, nor on the ways in which it might be assessed. In the absence of such agreement, "there is a serious question about whether it can be determined when use has occurred" (Shapiro, 1986, p. 176). Although it may be difficult to trace the specific effects of specific contemporary research on the development of specific contemporary policies, policy scholars provide policy makers with background data, conceptualizations and ideas. We incorrectly assume that policy scholarship has no effect if it cannot be demonstrated that today's research is made part of the decision process for today's problems. This assumption confuses the effects of scholarship on specific educational decisions with the effect of scholarship on educational policy. While "individual studies typically affect no particular decisions, research traditions sometimes shape policy" (Cohen & Garet, 1975, p. 24) through their effect on policy climates.

Misleading Assumption D: Disseminating policy-relevant research would improve policy practice.

The belief that wider dissemination of research would lead to a greater impact on policy makers appears eminently reasonable. After all, as Knott and Wildavsky (1991, p. 214) ask, "what could be wrong about transferring knowledge about public policy from those who have it to those who do not?". Their answer is that plenty could be wrong. The interests of the senders and receivers of information may not be identical; policy makers don't suffer from a lack information, but from overload caused by too much information; and simplification of information by the transmitter may reduce the usefulness for the receiver. "How likely is it that policy makers want knowledge but cannot get it? What evidence there is, at the very least, casts doubt on the proposition" (p. 217).

Even if all higher education research was explicitly policy-relevant, it would be unlikely to have any greater influence on policy. This is because research rationality, like managerial rationality, is bounded; different scholars, with different ideologies, research paradigms, and disciplinary emphases frame questions in different ways and report contradictory findings (Hatch, 1998). Scholars whose disciplines have different research styles may reach different conclusions from the same data based on the statistics they traditionally employ (Cohen & Garet, 1975). "If even the very best empirical research can only provide an incomplete picture of reality, how can we expect

researchers who view reality from different vantage points to reach sufficient agreement to take a collective stand?" (Donmoyer, 1997a, p. 2). And if different researchers endorse different policy options and make antithetical recommendations (Donmoyer, 1996, p. 2) how should we expect policy makers to choose between them?

Trying to improve research methods is no solution. Improving methodology does not reconcile differences in interpretation, and by making issues "seem increasingly technical and arcane" (Cohen & Garet, 1975, p. 26) may move the arguments further away from the substantive problems themselves. Better research by scientific standards may be "no more authoritative by any political standard and often more mystifying by any reasonable public standard" (Cohen & Garet, 1975, p. 33). To further complicate the issue, differences in perceptions, beliefs and assumptions are characteristic of policy makers as well as policy scholars. The structures, histories and cultures of the organizations and organizational systems within which policy makers function may also influence how they interpret the implications of research.

Differences in scholars' recommendations or policy makers' interpretations would not be reconciled by having scholars write in the direct and jargon-free style presumed to be preferred by policy makers. It would just make the disagreements more obvious, without providing policy makers with the data and analysis they would need to understand why the recommendations were different. Giving policy makers a Classic Comics version of research findings may be useful for sound-bites, but not for understanding the nuances of difficult problems. Policy makers don't lack either for data or recommendations; what they frequently lack is information and analysis. If scholars use an op-ed style of communication, how can policy makers distinguish their products from those of political columnists? And what are the consequences when poor, less comprehensive, ideologically-based research becomes influential, not because of its quality but because of its rhetoric?

The Two Cultures

The intrinsic differences in the processes of educational policy making and the processes of educational policy scholarship lead to "two cultures" (Levin, 1991, p. 77) or two communities (Shapiro, 1986), of necessity separate and only loosely coupled. Policy scholars do by thinking; policy makers think by doing as they develop greater insights into system behavior, problems, and potential solutions through their activities. Scholars read, write and try intellectually to optimize even as they deal in probabilities; policy makers talk, listen, and try practically to satisfice even as they act to create certainty. Scholars value quiet contemplation; policy makers chaotic activity. Scholarship is static; policy making is dynamic. Scholars weigh the evidence, are sensitive to nuance, consider things first on one hand and then on the other, and view their conclusions as tentative and conditional. Policy makers "have to decide. You have to come down on one hand or the other" (Resnick, 1997, p. 15). Scholars try to create knowledge that can be used in an indefinite future. Policy makers have "limited patience for academic critique... they generally want to know 'what do I do...Monday'" [Donmoyer 1996:2}.

Policy makers cannot be, and should not be, rational analysts who rely solely on intellectual arguments and data to make decisions. Policy scholars, in turn, also have nonrational agendas. By virtue of what they study, and how they study it, they are not merely engaged in a "disinterested attempt to improve policy, but rather a broad-aim social intervention designed to change the basis for decision making" (Cohen & Garet, 1975, p. 40). Policy research can thus be as political as policy making. But at the same time, policy makers can be as scientific as policy scholars. As Chandler observed, both good scholars and effective policy makers base their judgments in part on scientific observation defined as "deliberate search, carried out with care and forethought, as contrasted with the casual and largely passive perceptions of everyday life. It is this deliberateness and control of the process of observation that is distinctive of science" (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979, pp. 15-16). But the perspectives of scholars and policy makers are much different. The soft data which policy makers consider relevant [Mintzberg 1994] may be considered by scholars as fragmentary, anecdotal, impressionistic, and therefore invalid. The valid data towards which policy scholars strive may lead to findings policy makers find irrelevant. Each has different ways of knowing. The scholars may believe that their more structured way of considering problems could improve policy making, but there are "reasons to doubt that relevance and methodological sophistication lead in any regular or consistent way to knowledge which is more relevant for policy purposes" (Cohen & Garet, 1975, p. 26).

The differences between policy makers and policy scholars are in many ways similar to those of managers and planners, as can be seen by substituting the roles in Mintzberg's analysis: "The nature of [policy making] favors action over reflection, the short run over the long run, soft data over hard, the oral over the written, getting information rapidly over getting it right.... The result of all of this is that the [policy maker] understands the need to adapt to what does go on, while the [policy scholar] feels the need to analyze what should go on. The [policy maker] tends to chase opportunities when not being chased by crises, produces plans that exist only vaguely in his or her head, and exhibits an 'occupational hazard' to be superficial in his or her work.....But the [policy scholar] promotes a process that seems overly simplified and sterile when compared to the complexities of strategy making" [Mintzberg 1994:324].

Policy scholars are from Venus; policy makers are from Mars. Policy scholars don't know better than policy makers; they just know different than policy makers. Policy scholars may reject propositions that deny the ground assumptions of their field; policy makers may reject propositions that deny their common sense. What is unusual and interesting to one group is likely to be considered common and obvious to the other. The strength of scholars is they are detached from the problems they study; they know that they must not be distracted by irrelevant details if they are to develop basic principles. The strength of policy makers is that they are completely absorbed by the problems with which they deal; they know that only those imbedded in the daily chaos of seemingly irrelevant details can make sound judgments in a dynamic environment

Policy makers who act contrary to the recommendations of policy scholars may not be wrong. Practitioners and researchers interpret the world using different perspectives and logics, and policy scholars should recognize that policy makers may often know things that they do not.

When scholars bemoan policy behavior that appears uninformed or irrational, they may be ignoring the possibility that policy behavior may be more sensible than policy precepts (March, 1984). Schon and Rein (1994, p. 193) have suggested that policy scholars "should seek first to understand policy practice...to describe and explain the kinds of inquiry in which policy makers engage.... If they disregard what practitioners already know or are already trying to discover, they are unlikely either to grasp what is really going on or to succeed in getting practitioners to listen to them." Studying sensible action may be more useful for policy scholars than is understanding research for policy makers[2].

Conclusions

Policy scholarship and policy making are, and ought to be, two distinct knowledge-producing activities whose insights may inform each other but are not dependent on each other. The notion that "the value of applied research lies in its ability to clarify policy goals and provide objective evidence concerning the appropriateness of alternative means for achieving chosen ends" is intuitively appealing but, as Cohen and Garet have pointed out (1975, p. 37) incorrect. Policy scholarship is more likely to lead to intensified conflict in the short term, even as it may transform the nature of the issues over the long term by setting the value and factual constraints within which policy makers construct plausible programs.

One reason that policy scholarship appears to have little influence on policy makers is our belief in a "'simple' model for research impact which has it that social research generates facts ... and that such facts enable users to make unfettered decisions which will improve social life" (Biddle & Anderson, 1991, p. 6). This naive view posits policy scholarship as an independent variable and policy making a dependent variable. A more realistic view is to consider them both as independent, collateral variables. "Like policy, social science research responds to the currents of thought, the fads and fancies of the period. Social science and policy interact, influencing each other and being influenced by the larger fashions of social thought" (Weiss, 1991b, p. 180). In the final analysis, policy scholarship is only one of the many forces that do, and should, affect policy decisions. "Information and analysis provide only one route because...a great deal of the world's problem solving is and ought to be accomplished through various forms of social interaction that substitute action for thought, understanding or analysis," and even when analysis is the process of choice, it can be provided through means other than professional social inquiry, such as the use of ordinary knowledge and casual analysis (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979, p. 10).

What is important is not that individual studies affect individual decisions, but that scholarly work over time influences the systems of knowledge and belief that give meaning to policy. The lengthy period of time needed before new ideas and concepts become generally accepted and influential means that today's problems are being influenced by yesterday's ideas. Today's ideas,

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[2] Certain laws of policy scholarship, based on the differences between policy scholars and policy makers, are proposed in Appendix 1.

after they have gone through a process of filtering and questioning, will in turn influence policy makers tomorrow. This suggests to faculty the critical importance of how and what we teach, because the values and concepts through which students are socialized today are likely to influence the beliefs of the policy makers of the future.

This paper suggests that there is little scholars can do to make higher education policy scholarship more immediately useful to policy makers. Many proposals to bridge the presumed scholarship-policy appear plausible, but are not supported either by theory or research evidence. For example, would scholarship offer more effective ideas for policy makers if it emphasized generalized rather than specialized knowledge, used qualitative research methods such as symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics (Conrad, 1989), moved toward dense, multifaceted interpretations of what is going on in higher education (Keller, 1985), or developed integrated research agendas (Zemsky & Tierney, 1986)? This is what some policy scholars want to do, but it is not what policy makers say they want or need now. When the critics complain that we give too much attention to little questions, should we be studying bigger questions? There is no agreement on what the big questions are, and no money to study them. Proposals for integrated research agendas cannot be implemented as stated, and would not have the influence on policy imagined even if they could be accomplished. Is a "clear statement of why higher education does the kind of research it does, what the current research approach hopes to achieve, and how researchers expect to attain their goals" (Keller, 1986, p. 130) the answer? How can there be a statement of the purposes of higher education research clearer than a statement of the purposes of higher education itself? Should we try to reach consensus on scholarly findings to negate the criticism that we aren't heeded because we contradict each other and disagree on everything (1997)? To do so would deny the essential nature of scholarship.

We cannot define a higher education agenda for policy scholarship because we cannot know what knowledge will be policy relevant in the future. Instead, scholarship should continue to be driven by personal and professional interests developed in the intellectual marketplace of ideas rather than in a planned marketplace of current problems. I place my faith in what Veblen called the "idle curiosity" of scholars, because I know that their curiosity is usually driven by their desire to make sense out of things that do matter - or should matter - in the real world. Their individual agendas may be small, but this "cumulative piling up of many small pieces of data on many facets of higher education" later permits others confidently to make sweeping statements such as "higher education, taken as a whole, is enormously effective" and provide the evidence to support it (Bowen 1977:14}. Even though small studies do not resolve the debate, they help to frame it. And having a debate informed by (although not resolved by) data is a value which is an educational good in itself.

Perhaps a change of metaphors would be useful. To replace the linear notion of trees and fruit, we might consider as metaphors for higher education policy scholarship the concepts of enlightenment and discourse. Weiss's concept of "enlightenment" (1982, p. 623) implies that "research modifies the definitions of problems that policy makers address, how they think about them, which options they discard and which they pursue, and how they conceptualize their purposes." Cohen and Garet's notion of "discourse" (1975, p. 42) recognizes that both policy

scholars and policy makers are concerned with defining social reality. Policy scholarship is an "effort to interpret and structure the social world by establishing languages and symbolic universes used in comprehending and carrying on social life."

The notions of enlightenment and discourse recognize that policy scholarship may be only loosely connected to policy making. "For those who had hoped for a greater direct influence on policy, it is a limited victory" (Weiss, 1982, p. 623). Limited, perhaps, but a worthwhile trade-off of short-term and ephemeral influence on specific decisions for long-term and pervasive influence on the policy climate in which future problems are considered.

Appendix 1.

Birnbaum's Laws of Policy Scholarship (BLOPS)

Observation on the nature of policy research and policy making suggest six immutable truths which, with characteristic modesty, I have called Birnbaum's Laws of Policy Scholarship, or BLOPS.

BLOP 1. Any scholarly product of any kind may be used to inform some policy decision at some time.

Corollary: No scholarly product of any kind can be assured of influencing any specific policy decision at any specific time.

BLOP 2. For every scholarly product that suggests one course of policy action, there will be another scholarly product that suggests the opposite course of action.

Corollary: The effects of a scholarly study on any policy decision cannot be predicted.

BLOP 3. The specific variables that will be important to the policy maker at the time of a policy decision cannot be known before the decision is actually made.

Corollary: Even if policy makers were able to articulate the exact nature of the research they would find useful at time X, it is unlikely that the same information will be found useful at time X+1.

BLOP 4. By the time policy scholars respond to the interests of policy makers, the nature of the policy problem is likely to have changed.

Corollary: Since policy takes place in a policy environment which is constantly changing, previous research on the identical topic will be of limited relevance.

BLOP 5. Every policy-relevant scholarly product will be found by the policy maker to be lacking at least one key variable which compromises its usefulness.

Corollary: Policy makers will always find the procedures, methods and variables of studies whose findings are consistent with their own ideologies to be inherently more reasonable and rational than those whose findings are inconsistent with their ideologies.

BLOP 6: In the absence of scholarly analysis of relevant data, the effects of a proposed policy cannot be reliably predicted.

Corollary: In the presence of scholarly analysis of relevant data, the effects of a proposed policy cannot be reliably predicted.

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