

Political and Academic Linkages in Public Sector Policymaking

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Abstract

Decision making in the public sector encompasses many topics of interest to the academic researcher—environmental issues, health and human services, budget planning, and so on. Expertise in data collection and analysis is critical to the policy-making process and can be provided by academic researchers. But the “real world” policymaker and the “ivory tower” academician often have difficulty working together. Both parties have been reluctant to venture into each other’s unique worlds. Conflicts in values, goals, and methods often unnecessarily inhibit the forging of strong work relationships. As a result, both parties may miss opportunities to establish relationships that can be mutually beneficial in providing subject material for academic research and stronger public policy. This article discusses the reasons for this problem and suggests ways in which successful partnerships can be designed.

Introduction

Decision making in the public sector can be a fascinating area of academic inquiry. The topics involved are interesting to discuss, challenging to examine, and relevant to a wide range of groups—public and private, academic and nonacademic, political and nonpolitical. Public policy is made, however, in a politically complex, but not always empirical, world. Public policy decision making may be ignored by the academic world or dissected and reviewed from the isolation and safety of the academic “ivory tower” rather than the political front line of the “real world.”

Subjects of public policy may be difficult to study objectively and difficult to quantify for empirical analysis. What can be easily quantified for academic study may be of little interest to the public policymaker. Such problems tend to discourage the academic researcher. The practical politician or bureaucrat, who is often looking for quick answers to complex social and political problems, may be equally frustrated with the academic approach to research, rejecting the assistance of academic researchers who possess both knowledge and skills that are important in developing

successful policy. These problems have led the academic and the politician to develop an unproductive distrust of each other. Each believes that the other can never truly understand the foundation and function of his/her world. Though interested in the same issues, the residents of the “ivory tower” and the “real world” may fail to coordinate their efforts.

In 1975 E. S. Quade defined a public policy decision as one made by society for itself, or for society by its elected representatives—governmental decisions that have material effects on citizens other than those directly involved in the decision-making process (Quade 1975). These decisions encompass topics of great importance that reach into the very heart of communities, topics such as care of children and the elderly and allocation of limited public resources to related resource offices.

Though public policy decisions have continued to gain in importance and visibility, the capacity of efficient decision making has not kept pace. As a result there has been a substantial increase in public dissatisfaction with the results of the decision-making process in the public sector. Ernest Boyer noted in the 1990s that there has been a parallel growth in dissatisfaction with America’s colleges and universities, which he saw as “. . . suffering from a decline in public confidence and a nagging feeling that they are no longer at the vital center of the nation’s work” (Boyer 1996, 15). Since that time, public and private colleges and universities have increasingly begun to promote the idea of “engagement.” Engagement calls for the community to access external knowledge and resources and credible expertise (Fear et al. 2004). This expertise can, in turn, be used productively by policymakers in their decision making. Spanier (2005) notes that such opportunities also enrich student experience by bringing research and engagement into the curriculum and “offering practical opportunities for students to prepare for the world they will enter” and become productive citizens of the local and global community (p. 7).

Quade argued in 1975 that the purpose of policy analysis is to help public policymakers resolve the issues that they face, to provide information through research and analysis, to isolate and clarify issues, reveal inconsistencies, and generate new alternatives (Quade 1975). Some years later, in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Ernest Boyer called for a renewed look at academic scholarship to address this purpose. Boyer called for a scholarship of discovering knowledge, integrating knowledge, sharing knowledge, and applying knowledge (Boyer 1996). His

proposals promoted the concept of “scholarship of outreach and engagement” as way of renewing and reinvigorating institutions of higher education. This movement reflects a growing interest in broadening and deepening the public aspects of academic scholarship (Barker 2004). Boyer argued that for our nation’s colleges and universities to remain centers of intellectual and civil progress they had to become more “vigorous” partners in the search for answers to our country’s most pressing social, economic, and even moral problems. In other words, they must commit themselves to the “scholarship of engagement.” Spanier suggested that this approach puts knowledge and expertise to work on the problems that communities face every day (Spanier 2005). Further, this approach encourages scholars to find creative ways to communicate with the public and public representatives and work toward the “public good”

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(Barker 2004). For the first time, scholars see themselves as community citizens as well as scholars. Their expanded view of their research efforts has benefits for both the scholars and the community policymakers. As Semali and Maretzki (2005) suggest, the concept recognized that “. . . local people do know a great deal about the environments in which they have lived for generations and that this knowledge must be taken into account in . . . development of policies” (p. 105). Colleges and universities could begin to “build from within” by utilizing their scholar/citizen members to bridge the gap between the “ivory tower” and the “real world” (Burack 2005).

Over the past decade significant progress has been made. In some institutions, particular centers or units have been devoted to promoting the public policy–academic connection. In others, efforts have been more generally spread across the institution throughout the various schools and departments. Some college and university units have established task forces and Web sites (Spanier 2005). Engaged research is more inclusive, communicative, interdisciplinary, and democratic in nature, in that experts are less likely to separate themselves from the public in need

of their expertise. Those who participate in this type of research are more likely to offer themselves as facilitators, mediators, evaluators, interpreters, technological advisors, and so on within their communities, and to add “service” to their professional portfolios. The interdisciplinary element of such relationships has become even more critical as communities mobilize to address issues of terrorism and homeland security, since these issues are by their very nature interdisciplinary in scope. Harnish and Bridges (2004) argue that such interdisciplinary approaches are critical.

Many such partnerships have been forged in the so-called hard sciences—in Baltimore to provide health care services to the uninsured and underinsured, as community programs to advance health care, to create programs to enhance tourism and train managers, and so on (*AScribe Newswire 2005; Houtkooper et al. 2001; Cohen 2004*). Programs are also developing in the social sciences and as an important component of academic programs, such as “service learning programs” at Duke University (*Wojciechowska 2005*). Maurrasse (2001) suggests that partnerships should be developed with governors and legislatures, corporations, educational institutions, and medical institutions—a “have ivory tower, will travel” attitude.

Policymakers are beginning to understand and appreciate the wealth of knowledge and skills that academics bring to the “policy table” and are learning to trust and consult them more often. But these new partnerships are not without difficulties. The differences that remain between the two worlds and how they approach an issue of great public importance inspire questions that must be answered in the course of partnership between academicians and policymakers.

What happens to research for the sake of research alone—research that seeks to advance understanding rather than answer an immediate question? Must this type of research in academia be abandoned in favor of research that addresses only specific and immediate policy questions? No. The ultimate purpose of policy analysis in the eyes of the policymaker is to address the issue on the plate. Policymakers are rarely interested in addressing issues in the distant future, though they are learning more about the value of extended planning. Is pure research dead? No. This type of research should be done, and academics should continue to do it. In fact, it is a myth that policymakers do not value

this type of research. Those who are interested in this type of research must be encouraged to continue, for it cannot be known when the policymaker may need this information, when the subject of this research may find its way to the immediate policy agenda.

Who will fund public policy research done by the academic?

This is a difficult problem. Some institutions have begun to use the “soft money” approach in public policy research, whereby research units seek out their own funding for research projects. This is problematic. Who will control the outcome—the researcher or the contracting entity? Ethically, the academic cannot and must not frame results to fit the agenda of the contracting entity. But without funding the research may not be done at all. Policy choices could be recklessly made, without benefit of any reliable information. In the absence of an independent funding source, free of ties or obligations regarding the research outcome (the preferred option), clear and consistent guidelines for research projects must be developed. These guidelines must stress ethics and must be agreed to by both parties up front. These guidelines must stress independence for the researcher’s sake and protection of the data collection for the sake of the contracting entity. The researcher must recognize the importance of protecting any data collected in the research and securing appropriate permission before using said data in any publishing effort. Both participants are at risk. Researchers risk loss of academic freedom, and those seeking the research risk loss of privacy and protection of the information. As noted by David Bollier (2002), some universities are seduced by the siren call of the market and “. . . are cashiering some core values and subverting the vitality of the academic commons. We need to begin a far more robust, far-ranging dialogue about this troubling trend” (p. 6). Boyer argued early on that colleges and universities must continue to vigorously protect their political and intellectual independence (Boyer 1996). But they must also adhere to ethical ideals. Public policy agencies must protect the clients with whom they work, to ensure that information, individual or aggregate, is not improperly used in academic research. Academics must understand that it is sometimes difficult to obtain the valid data needed for scholarly publishing in such research efforts. Also, research designs used in field settings may be non-experimental or quasi-experimental or may provide sample sizes that are too small. Such problems limit

successful publishing for the academic (*Houtkooper et al. 2001*). The academic seeking involvement in such projects must understand these limitations and be prepared to accept them before beginning.

What professional protection do faculty researchers have in participating in engaged scholarship? That is, how can they be sure that their work will not be misappropriated or misused? Is their intellectual property protected by copyright or from misuse by politicians? This is a complicated legal question and requires further discussion. Dialogue needs to continue in this area to ensure that faculty work in the public domain is received with respect and professionalism and that the work will be used as intended—as a decision-making tool in public policy. The possibility that information may be misused and misinterpreted by the unethical politician, or the unethical academic, continues to be a concern. As deMolina (*1996*) concludes, work must continue in developing a “bridge of common understanding.” Both parties must recognize the importance of their task, clarify objectives and individual responsibilities, and work toward building a mutual respect and trust.

What inherent differences in structure and process—between the two worlds—might hamper progress? The political and academic environments are completely different cultures. Such differences are reflected in history, operational structure, and leadership style. Both environments also experience regular leadership changes. Academics sometimes have multiple research agendas. Given these circumstances, is it possible to construct anything more than a temporary bridge between the two worlds? The short answer is yes—but building such a bridge takes time, effort, and a perspective that is not within the experience, or desire, of every member of either community. Academics may have difficulty working within the boundaries of a “real life” context, and policymakers may feel frustrated with the scholarly approach of those in the academic environment. Some policymakers and academics will be better suited to this task than others. It is these individuals who will lead the way for others. Important factors that will contribute to success include dedicated participants and regular communication. As Fear and colleagues (*2004*) note, the politics of engagement includes inevitable misunderstandings and the normal intellectual and ego struggles that are

associated with engaging in a shared pursuit. Common goals and a desire to achieve something together must be stressed by both parties.

How will faculty be evaluated, for tenure and promotion purposes, for scholarship engagement activities? As Boyer noted when he first wrote of the scholarship of engagement, “almost every college catalog in this country . . . lists teaching, research, and service as the priorities of the professoriate.” But, he suggested, at evaluation time, service is hardly mentioned. Even worse, faculty who spend time with such projects may, in fact, jeopardize their careers. This is changing. Colleges, public and private, at all levels are beginning to appreciate the importance of faculty work that reaches out into the community. More must be done to encourage this trend. Outreach and engagement conferences and journals that promote the exchange of ideas and information on outreach efforts play an important role in the movement’s progress. Joint efforts in addressing issues such as family violence, AIDS, education, poverty, and health—efforts under way in many colleges and universities across the country—must receive the attention of politicians and college presidents and deans. Faculty must know that their work in this area is valued for promotion and tenure by their administration and by their colleagues in broader academia. Evaluation schemes for promotion and tenure that include outreach efforts must be developed and implemented.

Clearly there are definite advantages and disadvantages to conducting this type of research. It is an area of inquiry that is not for the faint of heart!

Advantages:

- Policymaking in the public sector (legislatures, executives, and courts) is not a heavily explored area, and thus is new, fertile ground for the academic seeking to “go where no one has gone before.” It provides a wide range of topics for investigation and calls for creativity and a commitment to civic engagement.
- Research in the public policy field often allows academics to actually see the fruit of their labor—that is, to see a new policy, procedure, or program in action. This factor alone may tip the scale in favor of choosing this type of research for some academics.

- Research in public policy gives the academic the opportunity to work with people in a wide range of interest areas and fields. The work is hard and seldom boring.

Disadvantages:

- State policymakers often still regard the academic world with suspicion. Academicians have a similar view of politicians. Such attitudes, while rarely grounded in fact on either side, can act as strong barriers to effective working relationships.
- A major impediment to research in public policy is the frequent lack of reliable official records or the inability, due to legal privacy concerns, to access needed records. While many records are indeed public, others, such as juvenile records, remain closed. Public policymakers may lack the financial resources or the professional expertise for proper record keeping, or political obstacles may make it difficult to obtain needed records. Such factors can be discouraging for the researcher. Also, researchers may meet with organizational resistance to reviewing key records if they have not been successful in developing key relationships with staff and policy officials or are unfamiliar with the agency's procedures.
- The academic conducting research in public policymaking faces the possibility of losing control of the research agenda or being influenced or even pressured to omit or reinterpret findings. Generated information may be misused by policymakers to promote a personal political agenda, particularly if the media are involved.
- Generalizations from data may be difficult due to small sample sizes or subtle differences among jurisdictions, states, or geographical areas.

While the disadvantages are numerous, they are not insurmountable, and the advantages are significant. The following strategies can be helpful in forging a positive working relationship between academic and public policymakers.

- Seek to understand the legislative, executive, or judicial process of the entity you are studying. While simplistic, this advice is often ignored. Introductory information can easily be obtained through texts, handbooks, and visits with key personnel.

- Develop and nurture good relationships with key personnel early and keep relationships healthy and active as the research program continues. Fear and colleagues (2004) propose the development of a healthy culture of engagement, where openness and the sharing of responsibility are encouraged. He suggests that “healthy cultures grow mature and are sustainable” (Fear et al. 2004, 150). Establishing good relationships with legislative, executive, and judicial staff and key legislators and judges can increase understanding of the process considerably and help avoid problems in accessing needed information. Be sensitive to public policy pressures and timelines, which may not always coordinate with academic calendars. Such pressures cannot easily be avoided, so it is often the academic who must adjust.
- Know and screen information sources. Interest groups and lobbyists can be excellent sources of information, but the information they provide must be kept in context and must be carefully screened. Legislative staff members are also excellent sources, but their information may reflect the political process. Establish the credibility and professional values of your chosen source.
- Establish your own credibility in the academic community, as well as the political community. Prepare information for presentation to both environments. While academic papers are appropriate for conferences and journals, they are rarely useful to the fast-paced policy world. However, people in both worlds value professionalism, hard work, and ethical behavior.
- Work on presentation skills for the policy world—keep it short, simple, and focused on the issues.

Boyer concluded near the end of the twentieth century: “I’m convinced that in the century ahead higher education in this country has an urgent obligation to become more vigorously engaged in the issues of our day. . . .” (Boyer 1996, 17). Fear and colleagues concluded in 2004 that “engagement” should be defined as “the mutual deepening of capacity to respond and collaborate” (p. 139). Issues such as child development, health care and nutrition, education, criminal justice, homeland security, construction and operation of public policy agencies and public emergency disaster and relief plans require response and collaboration in the making of good public policy. These important

issues need the work of our best and brightest. Many of our “best and brightest” are found in our nation’s institutions of higher education, where “scholarship” has often not been synonymous with “public service.” But, as Ron Simpson concluded, “. . . scholarship does not reach its ultimate value until it is shared with the sponsoring public” (*Simpson 2000, 12*). Lending their expertise to issues such as those discussed above gives those in the academic world an opportunity to see their scholarship translated into action. While the relationship between the academic world or “ivory tower” and the public policy or “real world” can be a complicated one, it is important that these two worlds communicate, cooperate, and collaborate—for the benefit of both worlds and of society as a whole. Engagement is about partnership. Politics may make strange bedfellows, but public policy research partnerships between policymakers and academic researchers make strong and potentially powerful alliances. We must continue to explore these partnerships.

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