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**CONNECTING
RESEARCH AND
STATE POLICY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR
ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS
AND INTERMEDIARY
ORGANIZATIONS**

by Laura W. Perna
James S. Riepe Professor,
University of Pennsylvania
Past President, Association for the
Study of Higher Education

JANUARY 15, 2016



Policymakers want to implement policies that measurably improve higher education attainment AND academic researchers want to produce research that policymakers can and will use to that end. But, despite these overlapping interests, academic research too frequently remains disconnected from state policy. Policymakers often struggle to apply findings from available research while academic researchers often struggle to frame their work to yield findings that address the knowledge needs of policymakers and their staffs. Policymakers are often unaware of potentially relevant research that is available and academic researchers do not always effectively make relevant research findings available to policymakers.

Differences in incentives, approaches to objectives, and operational time horizons contribute to a durable disconnect between academic researchers and policymakers. Academic researchers are incentivized to publish articles in academic journals, a process that may delay the dissemination of research-based findings until months or years after the research has been conducted. Academic researchers are trained to identify implications for theory, emphasize the many contextual forces and limitations that influence results, and employ research designs that require extensive time to implement and complete. Political realities may limit policymakers' use of available research on any given issue. In contrast to academic researchers, policymakers tend to operate within a short time horizon, seeking to advance or modify policy when a window opens. Whereas academic researchers strive for objectivity, policymakers may have predilections or open biases toward positions that are consistent with the preferences of their constituents; the availability of sound research may be just one of many justifiable considerations.

Intermediary organizations can play an important role in connecting academic research and policymaking, as these organizations tend to conduct and/or sponsor their own research projects and translate research findings to policymakers. Intermediary organizations include associations of state policymakers (e.g., National Governors Association, National Association of System Heads, National Conference of State Legislatures, State Higher Education Executive Officers), regional organizations (e.g., New England Board of Higher Education, Southern Regional Education Board, Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education), associations of public colleges and universities (e.g., American Association of State Colleges and Universities), and other organizations that seek to help state higher education policymakers identify, understand, and apply research-based evidence (e.g., Complete College America, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Lumina Foundation).

With the goal of identifying ways to improve connections between academic research and policymaking, Lumina Foundation convened a small group of academic researchers and leaders of intermediary organizations. From this convening came a number of recommendations. These recommendations are designed for academic researchers and the leadership of intermediary organizations who share the goal of improving postsecondary attainment in the United States. This brief summarizes these recommendations.

Recommendations for Academic Researchers

Academic researchers who seek to better connect research and policy should:

1. Conduct research that addresses the knowledge-needs of policymakers;
2. Package the results for policymakers and intermediary organizations; and
3. Develop structures that promote connections between academic research and policy.

Conduct research that addresses the knowledge-needs of policymakers

Policymakers want research that answers such questions as: What works? Did a policy achieve its intended goal? What are the effects of a new policy? What are the policy trade-offs?

Identify what works: Academic research tends to identify policies that do not work or describe the principles of an effective policy. Since research is almost always context-bound and conditional, academic researchers are often uncomfortable making clear, declarative statements about what works. Researchers tend to stress complexities (e.g., the interactions among policies, the influence of context) rather than identifying the particular pathways that policymakers can adopt. Policymakers want to know the policies and practices that will produce desired outcomes.

Identify whether a policy achieved its goal: Academic research often considers a host of outcomes that may, or may not, reflect a policy's stated intent. Policymakers want to understand whether a policy achieved the goal that it was intended to achieve.

Identify the conditions under which a policy works: Academic research has devoted relatively little attention to design and implementation questions. Policymakers need to know the answers to such questions as: How might the effects of a policy vary based on different levels of funding? How can a policy be effectively communicated to those who must take the actions needed to fully implement the policy? Policymakers want to know how a policy should be designed and implemented in order to achieve particular results.

Identify outcomes of new policies: Academic research tends to be "backward looking," examining policies that have already been implemented. Policymakers want to know the specific outcomes that might be created by a new policy and/or policy innovation. Research simulations may be one useful approach for meeting this knowledge need.

Identify the policy trade-offs: Academic research tends to examine the effects of a particular policy on a specific outcome, in isolation from other policies and outcomes. Policymakers want to understand the cost-effectiveness of particular policies, as well as the comparative advantages and disadvantages of an array of potential policies.

Address gaps in knowledge and emerging issues: Policymakers are looking to learn what they don't already know. Particularly important is developing greater knowledge of issues on which the policy community does not agree and emerging issues (e.g., outcomes-based funding, outcomes of certificate programs; tuition and financial aid policy for adult students).

Provide research-based recommendations: Academic research tends to emphasize conclusions

from research that meets “the gold standard” of experimental designs and that is “statistically significant.” Policymakers are looking to make decisions that reflect a predominance of research-based evidence. Research syntheses that draw from a range of study designs (e.g., experimental, correlational, ethnographic, and others) to reveal core lessons may be especially helpful to the policymaking community.

Package the results of research for policymakers

Academic research has value, but in order for policymakers to use it, the results must be accessible and concise. Intermediary organizations can promote this connection.

Recognize the value of academic research: Policymakers often believe that academic research is more trustworthy than many other sources of information that are increasingly available. Policymakers are skeptical of evangelical or zealous approaches that consistently advocate a single policy response. Academic researchers should capitalize on the value policymakers place on objective, impartial, well-reasoned and well-grounded approaches.

Use intermediary organizations: Intermediary organizations want to use research-based insights in the discussions that they regularly have with policymakers. Intermediary organizations tend to rely on research by their own staff, particular research centers, and/or a small number of academic researchers. Academic researchers should communicate research results with intermediary organizations who can then provide a bridge to policymakers.

Make research results available: Policymakers and staff at intermediary organizations are capable of understanding research results but have limited access to scholarly journals. Typically scholarly journal articles can only be accessed by individuals affiliated with a traditional college or university. Academic researchers should consider disseminating results in outlets that are more universally available (e.g., *Education Week*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside HigherEd*, *Change* magazine).

Provide a concise summary of research results: Policymakers and staff at intermediary organizations typically have limited time to read and digest journal-length publications. Policymakers and staff find short, easy-to-read summaries (1 page; tweets) with links to additional information, helpful in quickly identifying relevant research.

Develop structures that promote connections between academic research and policy

Academic researchers tend to engage in practices that are institutionalized and rewarded. Academic researchers should consider the structural mechanisms that can encourage academic researchers to devote attention to the policy problems that policymakers seek to address and incentivize connections between academic research and policy.

Reward academic researchers who connect research and policy: As rational actors, academic researchers emphasize activities that are rewarded in tenure, promotion, and merit-pay processes. Tenured academic researchers should encourage refinements in academic reward systems to explicitly recognize not only publication of scholarly articles in peer-reviewed outlets but also the utilization of academic research findings by policymakers and intermediary organizations.

Invite intermediary and policy organizations to attend academic conferences: Typically only academic researchers attend and participate in conversations at most academic/scholarly research conferences. Academic researchers can develop greater understanding of policymakers' knowledge needs by systematically inviting the participation of representatives from intermediary organizations and policymakers.

Encourage journal editors to more widely disseminate research results: Editors of academic journals also have an interest in connecting research findings to policymakers (and other potential users). Journal editors can advance the use and impact of academic journal articles by disseminating research results in short, concise summaries (e.g., tweets, blogs, 1-page summaries). Journal editors should consider the possibility of partnering with other organizations, as appropriate, to disseminate these summaries.

Recommendations for Intermediary Organizations

Although academic researchers can take a number of actions to better connect research and policy, intermediary organizations can also productively promote these connections. Particularly important are activities that target the next generation of academic and policy researchers. One potential partner for such activities is professional scholarly associations such as the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

Potentially fruitful activities for intermediary organizations include the following:

- 1.** Incentivize the production of policy-relevant academic research through funding priorities. The (now discontinued) ASHE-Lumina Dissertation Fellowship was one initiative that signaled the value of this type of approach.
- 2.** Sponsor activities that encourage meaningful interactions between academic researchers and policymakers. The (now discontinued) Associates program, led by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, promoted this type of interaction between mid-career professionals. Other current efforts include the Scholars Strategy Network at Harvard University and New America's Postsecondary National Policy Institute. Related activities could also be incorporated into the structure of the annual meetings of scholarly associations.
- 3.** Sponsor media- and policy-relations training and other related activities (perhaps at the annual meetings of scholarly associations) that prepare academic researchers to communicate results to policymakers.
- 4.** Incentivize journal editors to effectively translate and more widely disseminate results of academic research by providing financial support for objective, third-party writers who can clearly and concisely communicate policy-relevant results.
- 5.** Encourage the development of state-specific research-policy expertise among academic researchers and encourage availability of state unit-record data systems for research purposes.

Acknowledgments

This brief is a product of a February 19-20, 2015 convening that was sponsored by Lumina Foundation and co-led by Elizabeth Gutierrez (Lumina Foundation), Laura Perna (University of Pennsylvania), and Michael McLendon (Baylor University). Danette Howard, Vice President of Policy and Mobilization of Lumina, provided critical leadership and support for this initiative.

Held in Washington, DC, this convening used the September 2014 issue (edited by Perna and McLendon) of *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* as a launching point for discussion of how to better connect the findings from academic research and state policy. Convening participants discussed the following questions: What are the questions that policymakers need to have answered in order to improve higher education outcomes, equity, and affordability? What is the role of academic research in addressing policymakers' knowledge needs? How can researchers make research more accessible to state policymakers? What can state policymakers and others do to encourage researchers to stimulate the production of high-quality, policy-relevant research? This brief summarizes the author's interpretations of the issues discussed. Scott Thomas, current President of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, provided useful feedback on an earlier draft of this brief.

Resources

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Facilitators

Laura Perna

*James S. Riepe Professor, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education
Past President, Association for the Study of Higher Education*

Michael McLendon

Harold and Annette Simmons Centennial Chair and Academic Dean, Southern Methodist University

Convening Participants

Julie Bell

*Education Program Director, National
Conference of State Legislatures*

Cheryl Blanco

*Vice President, Postsecondary Education, Southern
Regional Education Board*

Rachel Fishman

Senior Policy Analyst, New America Foundation

Stella Flores

*Associate Professor of Public Policy and Higher
Education, Vanderbilt University*

Alisa Hicklin Fryar

Associate Professor, University of Oklahoma

Nick Hillman

Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Dan Hurley

*Associate Vice President for Government Relations and
State Policy, American Association of State Colleges
and Universities*

Scott Jenkins

*Program Director, Education, National Governors
Association*

Julie Johnson

Vice President of Strategy, Complete College America

Dennis Jones

*President, National Center for Higher Education
Management Systems*

Stan Jones

President, Complete College America (CCA)

Tom Kecskemethy

*Executive Director, American Academy of Political and
Social Science*

Michael Klein

*Executive Director, New Jersey Association of State
Colleges and Universities*

David Longanecker

*President, Western Interstate Commission for Higher
Education*

Rebecca Martin

Executive Director, National Association of System Heads

Kelle Parsons

Policy Analyst, National Governors Association

Amanda Rutherford

PbD Candidate, Texas A&M University

Robert Shireman

Executive Director, California Competes

Michael Thomas

President & CEO, New England Board of Higher Education

Scott Thomas

Dean, Claremont Graduate University

Dustin Weeden

Policy Specialist, National Conference of State Legislatures

Katie Zaback

*Senior Policy Analyst, State Higher Education Executive
Officers*

Lumina Foundation

Courtney Brown

*Director of Organizational Performance and Evaluation,
Lumina Foundation*

Heather Collins

Intern, Lumina Foundation

Elizabeth Gutierrez

Director of State Policy, Lumina Foundation

Danette Howard

*Vice President of Policy and Mobilization,
Lumina Foundation*

Julie Peller

Director of Federal Policy, Lumina Foundation

Zakiya Smith

Strategy Director, Lumina Foundation