

Section 5: The Role of Universities in Social Science Research

Helping at the margins

by Barbara Newell

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Robert Lampman, in his article “Can and Should Universities Help Government with Policy-Oriented Research?” describes the cool reception Joseph Kershaw received from Chancellor Robben Fleming in the fall of 1965, as the idea of the Institute was germinating. I think on this point, Lampman underestimated the negotiating capacity of our chancellor. If memory serves me, before Kershaw ever arrived on campus, Fleming had already handed me the following challenge, which I paraphrase:

Barbara, Wisconsin has a great tradition of policy analysis and government service. The Madison campus has an outstanding cadre of researchers dealing with welfare issues, each working in his/her own sphere. Yet, social problems do not fall neatly along discipline lines. Policy development and evaluation can only be effective if it is approached in a multidisciplinary way. Let us see if we can bring faculty efforts together in a synergistic way.

It was from this position of strengthening the multidisciplinary character of university research and teaching that I was sent to explore alternative structures for what turned out to be the Institute for Research on Poverty.

As a guideline for the establishment of any link of a university with any outside institution—U.S. government or otherwise—it is a must to start with the study of how the proposed link will affect the basic teaching and research mission of the university.

I underscore that Fleming was interested in university change, and indeed, the dollars that flowed from the Office of Economic Opportunity did underwrite, bribe, cajole university change, at least for a while. Social work, home economics, law, political science, sociology, economics—all relevant disciplines—were assumed to be partners in the War on Poverty. Support of faculty research and graduate student training not only permitted reality testing of theoretic

cal work, but forced evaluation in a setting enhanced by the experience of other disciplines. As a result of the Institute, what was taught and how it was taught, changed.

Perhaps because of my own discipline and that of all the directors, my perception is that the work in economics has, over time, shaped much of the public image of the Institute. Yet one of the fundamental aims of the Institute was to include groups on campus that were intellectually isolated. In fact, one of the most significant revolutions the Poverty Institute instigated was in the area of Home Economics. In their research, graduate program, and professional training, the Wisconsin home economists have been pathfinders as they have addressed issues of poverty’s impact on the family and nutrition. In human terms, the payoff has been great. Is it still the mission of the Institute to reach out to the relevant but isolated? Has the dream of a multipronged approach for policy issues been maintained?

From a national perspective on poverty research, Henry Aaron claims academia has been unable to hurdle the disciplinary barriers. In his 1978 study for the Brookings Institution, he expresses the concern that all social science research by its nature understates policy complexity.

In order to permit simplicity and elegance, problems are separated into components that can be managed and understood. . . . The impulse to isolate individual influences, to make complex social and economic processes statistically and mathematically manageable through abstraction makes it almost impossible to identify policies that may be necessary, but not sufficient, to achieve some objective. . . . A rather vague assumption of such interrelatedness marked early political rhetoric about the War on Poverty but was wholly absent from the precise, but partial, analyses of its effectiveness performed by social scientists.¹

If Henry Aaron is correct in his critique of academic disciplinarians, then we had better be more modest about our potential to advise policymakers and try once again for greater disciplinary inclusion in our research design.

I go further on issues of inclusion to remind the educational establishment of the need for greater diversity among the scholars involved in research. Poverty in America is an increasingly female phenomenon. Are those who are helping to set the research and policy agenda sensitive to the needs of blacks and women? The inclusion of home econo-

Lampman on the Role of Universities
in Social Science Research

“Can and Should Universities Help Government with Policy-Oriented Research?” *Focus* 7:3 (Fall 1984).

We can agree, I suppose, that making public policy requires social science research, and we can observe that a considerable amount of such research does go on in the federal government. But should the long arm of Uncle Sam reach out to the universities and motion them to engage in social science research that is relevant to—or useful for—governmental decision-making? The government does, of course, have alternatives. It can hire its own researchers, including faculty members on a short-term basis, or contract with private companies that hire researchers. Why should it seek to get universities to accept and administer funds for academic research? . . .

I would argue that government (especially the federal government) can reap dividends from investment in academic social science research that is long-term and broad-based. For this to work out most successfully it must be part of a general effort to encourage scientific and rational modes of public-policy decision-making. In other words—and this I regard as my most significant point—if government is to benefit from universities, it must run the risk of changing the frame within which political decisions are made. Let me spell that out a bit.

If universities are to play a bigger part, government must elevate the role of researchers in government. These people are the ones who are best-equipped to play a mediating, interpretative, and translating role between university specialists and policymakers (including interested private citizens). They are the ones who can bring research findings to bear on government problems in the frame of the planning, programming, and budgeting system, wherein a goal is specified, and alternative means to approach the goal are arrayed in terms of cost-effectiveness as established by the research. After a decision has been made by informed policymakers, the results of the decision are monitored under arrangements which, ideally, are written into the legislation, and the benefits and costs of the decision are evaluated after the legislation has gone into effect. And that scientific audit then becomes a part of the basis for decision in the next decision-making cycle.

It is that optimistic view of the contribution that universities can make to rational public decision-making—and I would note that this is consistent with the land-grant university philosophy of knowledge in the public service—that leads me to argue that the federal government should support social science research. In some instances that research support will be most effective if channeled to a multidisciplinary team of researchers concentrating on a selected topic and addressing it in a problem-oriented way. But that group must be equipped to draw on the basic research going on around them and to communicate to others—including their students—the disciplinary significance of what they are doing. Only if that is the case, and only if the research is subjected to scientific criticism by those in the disciplines, will the government be getting its money’s worth. And for this to occur, there must be an arm’s-length relationship between a government operating agency and the university. The university should select the research personnel and should insist that research findings be unclassified. (pp. 9–10).

mists and social workers assured input from some female researchers and an examination of the institution of the family. Perhaps if those most viscerally involved in social change are involved in identifying research and policy issues, the long-run impact of research will be less “profoundly conservative” to use the term of Aaron and Lampman. Although Aaron makes no “affirmative action” argument, I find his quote from Nietzsche telling.

“It makes all the difference in the world whether a thinker stands in personal relation to his problems, in which he sees his destiny, his need, and even his highest happiness, or can only feel and grasp them impersonally with the tentacles of cold, prying thought.”²

While those of us involved in the birth of the Institute were knowingly promulgating university change, we were also very conscious of the need to preserve those characteristics of a university which assure intellectual independence and which meet the financial needs of the institution. The roll-over funding provision of the Institute grant, which provided

assurance of an extended period of notice if funding was to be cut off, was of particular significance in protecting the university. Only with planning lead time could university resources, especially senior faculty, be rallied to serve government research needs. Fleming’s insistence on rollover funding was understood by Kershaw, who came from the academy, and it was this concurrence which was pivotal to the establishment of the Institute. Funding from multiple sources, which the Poverty Institute now enjoys, is, I realize, a hassle; but it is also a partial safeguard for academic independence.

Looking to the future, Lampman’s paper includes the idea of university researcher as program auditor. I agree such evaluations are critical for effective government programming. The institutionalization of university research in the evaluation process would help to assure that there would be research input in policy making. However, as a starter, I would hope that the power of the university would be used in evaluating new program thrusts and not get bogged down in repetitive routine.

Additionally, if we do not look out, policymakers will be delighted to push off problems that will put the researcher in the daily political crossfire. If this happens, then there will be no one available to step back and, with dispassion and with the credibility of a disinterested party, view social policy in the broad context.

Even if we do not join the daily hassles, social science research will always be politically volatile. As special-interest think tanks and lobbying groups proliferate, the role of the university becomes even more difficult, but the need for careful analytical, multidisciplinary work of intellectual integrity becomes all the more critical.

Lampman makes the point that such service is particularly needed at the federal level. I am of the belief that, at the moment, much of the “action” is at the state level. Perhaps the problem of the waning “enthusiasm” of the academy for social issues, which Lampman laments, is because of its focus on Washington. States have shown amazing flexibility and willingness to experiment on a broad range of social programs. The old dream of using the fifty states as social laboratories is alive and well. State agencies have few alternatives to the university for research and evaluation expertise, and land grant universities are state institutions. The university community could join with the increasingly active Commission of the States to share results.

I agree with Lampman and Aaron that there has been a dissolving of scholarly consensus on the effects of social programming (particularly, as it relates to economics, but not all social science fields). It is exactly at such moments of intellectual confusion that multiple approaches and rethinking of basic assumptions are most helpful for the policy initiator. Multiple state laboratories can be most helpful in this process.

Our role as researchers is to raise questions, warn of unintentional consequences, propose policy alternatives, provide standards of evidence and statistical baselines for future evaluation, and deepen understanding of complex problems. To most problems we have only partial answers and like the rest of society are swayed by fads and prejudices. Much of our work follows, rather than precedes, the judgments of policymakers. Perhaps our concern about past failures of policymakers to use social science research is because we hold too high expectations for research. In a society where the initiatives of the body politic are supreme, we can only help at the margins. But such assistance can be critical.

While we neither can nor should oversell our wisdom, there is nonetheless a compelling urgency for involvement. As long as one in five children today are being raised in want in this land of plenty, no one, not even the monks of the University, can turn their backs on the problem. ■

The value of university-based policy research centers

by Bryant Kearl

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Every legislator and every bureaucrat is concerned with predictability. Individuals and interest groups may differ widely in the values they cherish and the direction they think society should be heading. But they all share an overwhelming interest in being able to foresee the consequences of different policy choices. Since predictability of outcomes is, after all, what science is all about, I have no difficulty about the moral and practical value of using social science in the public policy process.

A tougher question deals with the areas in which university-based policy research centers have a comparative advantage and the strategy they need to follow in maximizing their contribution and minimizing their risks.

Controlling risk

A university inevitably makes itself vulnerable when it moves into policy areas. Practically every argument about academic freedom has revolved around questions either of artistic judgment or social policy. It is a guarantee of trouble to set up university-based institutions that are explicitly designed to probe into delicate and value-laden areas. Not everyone would agree about either the practicality or the feasibility of my three rules for risk control. I believe that social scientists can cross even the most hazardous mine fields so long as

- They are competent as scholars, with a solid disciplinary base and at the same time aware that important policy questions demand multidisciplinary insights.
- They operate under a structure and method of support that gives them reasonable latitude in setting their own research priorities.
- They are free to publish their results.

The contributions of university centers

My views on these matters draw on my unique opportunity to follow the experience of two University of Wisconsin

¹ Henry J. Aaron, *Politics and the Professors: The Great Society in Perspective* (Washington, D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1978), pp. 156–157.

² *Ibid.*, p. 167.