

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.

policy study centers—the Land Tenure Center and the Institute for Research on Poverty—over a 25-year period.

I was on the initial organizing and planning committee for both of these centers, but I never had any significant program role in either one. So, like a cheerful grandfather, I have been able to follow their careers with both pleasure and pride, claiming a little remote credit for their achievements and taking no blame for any problems they have encountered.

What special talents has the university base brought to the study of policy in these two centers?

Not detachment. The people I have known in these two Wisconsin policy centers would not for a minute claim to be dispassionate. They believe that they are working in areas that really matter. Most of those involved in the Land Tenure Center believe that this world could greatly improve the structure within which it maintains and uses its land resource. Most of those I know in the Poverty Institute are just as passionately convinced that having large numbers of people living below the poverty line is not just economically unwise, it is morally wrong.

But both groups bring a priceless gift to offset their passion. They study policy issues with a respect for facts, a capacity to analyze problems, a readiness to explain and defend their conclusions, and a willingness to consider that they might be wrong.

These may sound like platitudes, but I was impressed with their validity as I watched Poverty Institute scholars working in that extensive and really quite revolutionary study of the negative income tax (NIT). The central question of the NIT was (in my view, at any rate), Do welfare dollars make people lazy?

Everybody in that study hoped passionately that the results would finally kill the myth that public welfare destroys individual initiative. Yet they designed a study that was intended to put their hopes to a tough and rigorous test. They watched the results with a lot more intellectual curiosity than missionary zeal. And in the end they were more cautious than either journalists or politicians in describing what they had learned.

University social science centers are hardly unique in maintaining this standard of scholarly integrity. They do offer some other unique contributions, however. One is the marrying of research and graduate student training in the same organization. Thoughtful scholars all over the world envy the American university's capacity to do this. In many countries research and graduate education are two different missions for different and separate institutions.

We gain in several ways from that mix:

- Graduate assistants are not really inexpensive labor. But there is a symbiotic relationship that makes them particu-

larly productive as part of a faculty-student policy research team. Bright and creative graduate students put a great deal of themselves into their work, instead of being limited to carrying out orders. They also challenge orthodoxy and tradition in ways that older people may find it hard to do. Those qualities are impossible to build into an equation of "fair wage rates."

- A durable university policy center makes further use of the graduate student relationship to create a broad and lasting alumni network of people who share its policy interests. All across the country and world there are mature scholars who are turning their attention to income distribution or to land tenure, because as graduate students at Wisconsin they worked in one of these policy fields.
- Of course these circles of former graduate students are still further enlarged by a loose network of other interested scholars who know they can call or write or visit Wisconsin for library materials, progress reports on what others are doing, and the names of people all over the world who share their interest.

In a similar vein, university-based policy research centers have been able to promote multidisciplinary work and multidisciplinary thinking. A great many things go wrong when only a single discipline has been involved in policy analysis. The Poverty Institute has been ever so much richer for its marriage of social work and other disciplines with economics, and the Land Tenure Center has found that anthropologists and historians and sociologists and legal scholars can immensely enrich what economics can contribute to resource policy.

Most of all, these university-based policy research centers have offered much-needed continuity. Among donor and granting agencies there is invariably an ebb and flow of attention that would kill any organization not well cushioned against it. Both the Land Tenure Center and the Institute for Research on Poverty have been targets of ideological critics, though both have survived with their reputations unscathed. Much more of a threat has been the money crises they have faced when their work was temporarily out of fashion with important external funding groups.

But fad and fashions come and go, and good scholars have gone right on marshaling facts and making analyses and refocusing attention, and sooner or later the carousel has come back around and they have been back in style.

Yes, I am a firm believer in university-based policy centers on topics important to the future of humanity on this planet. Some cautions need to be observed but I think the history of the Institute for Research on Poverty supports the argument that the pluses for an enterprise of this kind far outweigh the minuses, and the risks are dwarfed by the benefits. ■