

The Politics of Knowledge

Why Education Research Does (or Does Not) Influence Education Policy

Frederick M. Hess

The American Enterprise Institute

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The collected papers from this conference are available online
at www.aei.org/event1455.

Considering the Politics in the Research-Policymaking Nexus

Kenneth Wong
Brown University

The Challenge of “Two Cultures”

- As C.P. Snow observed almost half a century ago, “There is a sharp difference in the intellectual and moral temperaments” between science and government. Snow described the “two cultures” as follows: “To be any good, in his youth at least, a scientist has to think of one thing, deeply and obsessively, for a long time. An administrator has to think of a great many things, widely, in their interconnections, for a short time.”

Politics of “Two Cultures”

- Given the “two cultures,” to what extent and in what manner can researchers exercise influence in the policy making process? What is the incentive structure for policy makers to use and not use research in their decision making?
- This paper focuses on the **political side** of the research-policymaker nexus. Too often, researchers pay little attention to the political dynamics in the policy making process.
- Electoral interests, distribution of power, and partisan-oriented agenda must be taken into consideration in understanding the use and influence of research in the policy process.

Electoral Interest and Policy Direction

- Political Self Interest: Concerns for re-election determine politicians' allocation of time, use of political capital, choice of words in media events, selection of information, affiliation with groups and organizations, alliance with other public officials, and cast of votes in the decision making process.
- Sense of Institutional Mission: Aspire to leave behind a policy legacy. Elected officials are motivated to address the collective good, such as revitalization of economically depressed communities, improvement of public schools, raising the quality of life, and making the government more efficient to serve its clients.

Electoral Interest and Policy Direction: Mediated by Federalism

- Functional Division of Responsibilities: Federal government addresses redistributive issues, while local government focuses on economic growth issues
- Federalism as Policy Laboratories: State and localities as sources for policy innovation

Weak Incentives to Use Research in Policy Making

- Pluralist Democracy Limits Expert Influence
- Timing is Everything
- A Decentralized System of Education Creates Data Barriers
- Intra-Organizational Politics
- Inertia of the Status Quo

When Research Gains Policy Attention

- Networks of Researchers: Examples are the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution and the Harvard Civil Rights Project
- Policy Window for Alternative Perspectives in the Context of Paradigmatic Shift: An example is the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, *A Nation At Risk*

When Research Gains Policy Attention

- Marketing Research
- Governmental Actor as Partner
- Demand-Side Politics: In the climate of growing public concern for education accountability, the NCLB-driven policy agenda sends a clear signal to the public that student achievement matters

Beyond the Two Cultures: Broadening the Incentives for Policy Makers to Use Research

- Enhance Rigor and Credibility of Research
- Separate Advocacy Claims from Research Evidence
- Mediate Divisiveness Among Researchers on Substantive and Methodological Issues

Beyond the Two Cultures: Broadening the Incentives for Policy Makers to Use Research

- Draw Lessons from Other Policy Arenas
 - National Institutes of Health: Congressionally approved, categorical institutes offer possible options for accountability, strategic priority, credibility, and specialization
- Public Education Faces paradigmatic shift: Researchers and Policy Makers now face new opportunities and challenges to connect the “two cultures”

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