

One arena which is occasionally identified as a potential source of innovative and improved public policy formation and evaluation is the university and its various departments of social and policy sciences. In the face of apparently intractable social and economic problems, there have been repeated calls for academics to become more relevant, to step down from the ivory tower and to address problems of immediate interest. Research institutes and centres have been created in an attempt to involve more completely the university in public discussion and to provide policy advice to government. Yet few public servants and politicians comprehend either the potential or the limitations of significant university involvement in policy analysis. Faculty members too are often at a loss on how they might best assist public policy; indeed, there are some strong biases within the university against such involvement. At times the result of university interaction with policy planners is mutual frustration.

If it is assumed that government restraint will have an adverse impact on the policy formation process by reducing its commitment to in-house research and analysis, can the university help? Should the university help?

The pitfalls to policy research in a university setting

It is well to begin with the difficulties, for the basic message of this paper is one of optimism and it is always salutary to end on a high note.

Public servants and politicians often misunderstand universities. This state of ignorance exists despite the fact that most politicians and public servants have been educated at university, and indeed many prominent public officials have had long associations with academic institutions. One

This is a revised version of a paper presented by Greg C. Mason, director, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Manitoba, to the 1983 annual conference of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, August 31, 1983, Regina, Saskatchewan. The author wishes to acknowledge the many useful suggestions of Paul Thomas. The final responsibility for all opinion remains that of the author, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Social and Economic Research or the University of Manitoba.

important confusion is that by its very nature the university is ill-equipped to respond rapidly to the day-to-day research needs of a large government department. The academic year imposes a lock-step cycle from which university faculties find it very difficult to extricate themselves. For example, it is very common for a government department to issue requests for proposals (RFPs) in early April, shortly after the budgets have been finalized. These proposals arrive just at the moment when academics are most harried. Little wonder that the response is low; but it is a mistake to assume that there is no interest in doing this work. Certainly, while many academics are disinterested in short-term contract research (or any research for that matter), there is a small but significant number who would respond were the timing better. Even those faculty who do submit and are successful on a contract competition face significant problems. Often announcements of the award of a contract are made well into the summer when research assistance is difficult to locate and preparations for a new year are underway. Thus a significant impediment into the involvement of faculty in applied policy research is a "simple" problem of timing. However, a decade of watching and participating in the policy planning process leads me to pessimism that this will improve much in the future. If anything, the planning of research activities within government is becoming more chaotic and frenetic and often is really little more than crisis management.

Many public servants and politicians are bewildered and fearful about what to expect from university-based research; nascent attempts to entertain a dialogue frequently end in futility and the consultative process is quickly aborted. Academics often emerge from these "consultations" with a feeling that government is muddled, while the public servants and politicians are amazed that the supposedly well-educated university researcher has difficulty in perceiving the nature of the policy problem. Those departments which have been successful in using academics, such as the recent budget planning exercise undertaken by Lalonde, engage in a substantial period of consultation. The first meetings are rarely fruitful; the process must be nurtured and cultivated, but all too frequently it is aborted quickly and each side retreats to its comfortable myths about the impossibility of the process.

The typical academic is isolated from policy discussions, and is starved for the detailed information from which trends and directions may be adduced. The premature abortion of consultations is wasteful at the best of times, and encourages the further isolation at the worst.

An important problem confronting the consultative process is that most academics have a disciplinary orientation. A great flaw in the social sciences is the artificial compartmentalization which separates the various disciplines. Students are encouraged to ally themselves early in their career to a particular field to the exclusion of all others. Aside from limiting

perspective, this process encourages the academic to rely excessively upon a rational, objective model of policy formulation. In the process a realistic appreciation of the limits to a methodology is lost. Academics have a naive faith in particular disciplines, and increasingly take up extreme positions from which they find it difficult to recover. The recent battles between monetarists and post-Keynesians is an excellent example of this process – a battle which produced much more heat than light in the policy arena.

There are a number of specific structural features of universities which can impede fruitful cooperation on policy analysis. For example, each academic discipline tends to have a hierarchy, in which the theorist is the high priest. Policy papers, applied research, and especially contract research undertaken for government, are placed relatively lower in terms of promotion criteria. Few public servants comprehend the importance of publishing to an academic and his or her need to produce academically respectable research. In some cases, university departments are slowly recognizing the value of published contract research and allowing it to be considered as evidence of scholarly progress, but substantial improvement is still needed. Occasionally, federal government departments impose a refereeing examination on submitted work which would put academic journals to shame; certainly, contract research which passes this scrutiny and is published should be given credit towards promotion.

There are a number of structural problems which impede policy and applied research, especially with respect to contracts-based investigation. For example, most universities impose an overhead charge, above and beyond the administrative charges contained in the work (typing, supplies, et cetera). Universities have been slow to justify these charges, and in many cases appear not interested in making such an explanation. Understandably, there is concern that contract research, especially in the social and policy sciences, will deter the university from its appointed destiny. Another contentious issue is the payment of stipends above and beyond the nominal faculty salary. The resolution to such problems is slowly emerging. For example, teaching release in lieu of actual payment is one possibility. However, again it is unlikely that this could be arranged for short-term projects.

Finally, the potential for conflict with the private sector consulting firms cannot be ignored. Some federal departments strongly imply contracts should be awarded to a private sector firm, and can only go to a university if there is insufficient expertise available in the consulting industry. Clearly there is significant scope for discretion, and many departments appear to have adopted an informal policy of preference toward locating contracts in the private sector. Also, these private firms have been much more aggressive in utilizing the host of informal persuasive mechanisms (business lunches) to induce research work to flow their way. Academics naively seem to feel that their "obvious" quality will be perceived and appreciated

without any selling. Many researchers in the university harbour mistaken notions about the supposed inferiority of research undertaken by the private sector. True, much is shoddy, but in the same way that the government is acquiring significant expertise, so too is the private sector hiring highly trained social scientists. Many of the Ph.D.'s denied positions within academia are finding their way into the private sector and producing a core of highly competitive and competent researchers which poses a serious threat to the university's claim that it is a unique locus of social insight and technical competence.

The fact the university must publish its research automatically disqualifies it from much of the work done by a private firm. A significant portion of government research is considered confidential (much more than is actually so) and therefore not deemed suitable for a public institution. Also, for the reasons noted above, universities just cannot provide the response time often imposed upon government research. Once again, much of the frenetic nature of policy research is an illusion and really a manifestation of poor coordination and an obsession with short-term political (as opposed to policy) questions.

Despite these caveats, there is a potential problem posed by universities in becoming very active in pursuing contracts. Faculty members already have a comfortable living, and to compete with those who must rely upon government contracts for their livelihood clearly is a tricky problem for the contract administrator in government. When chambers of commerce enter the fray on behalf of their members, there is little wonder why preference is given to the private sector contract work.

A tendency to define policy research as political sensitivity analysis is perhaps one of the greatest defects of current government research. Politicians are frequently forced by the media to expound programs in solution to a problem; a perceived problem with housing prices encourages a politician to articulate a rent-control or land-banking program with little analysis that this will actually produce the desired result. Of course, very few politicians can merely wave their hands and promise vague policies to deal with major social problems. In the heat of the hustings, they are forced to become artificially precise in what they would do to correct a situation. The more precise this program definition in an election campaign, the more forceful the aspiring politician appears, but then this places an evaluator who must eventually render a judgment on the program in a more difficult position. Little wonder that relatively neutral questions, such as whether a rent-control program is producing the desired result, are defined to be political questions which must be undertaken only by those sympathetic to the incumbent government. Evaluation then automatically becomes an assessment of a political platform, and not an actual program.

In summary, policy research, especially that which is done under con-

tract, poses a number of difficulties for universities. Generally, they are poorly equipped to compete successfully for such work, and there are structural reasons why preference is given to the private sector.

The potential for policy research in a university setting

Typical of many problems, the costs (disadvantages) are easy to delineate, but the benefits (advantages) are diffuse. The central thesis of this note is that the benefits of locating a greater volume of policy research in the university are significant, and furthermore, the direct costs to government in so doing are relatively modest.

First, the potential for the university to undertake "free" research is very considerable. People are motivated to devote their lives to academic pursuits because of an intrinsic interest in research and difficult questions, and a number of rather "simple" adjustments to current practice could produce a significant volume of useful information and analysis for government.

Certainly a key element in such a program must be the regular release of non-sensitive administrative data. A coordinated effort by government to routinely release such information would produce stimulus for university-based researchers (including graduate students) to identify research in terms of these data. In turn, the government can expect such an activity to produce significant amounts of applied research. There are no guarantees that this will produce analysis of immediate relevance, and there is the possibility that the research may show current policy in a poor light; but in reality the problem for government is to accept such research and amend its practices, not to subvert the process by withholding information.

Another benefit provided by the university is that it offers potential for a "neutral" debating arena. Many times, public policy debate seems to stall simply because of interdepartmental or intergovernmental tensions, and a neutral forum to debate and explore policy issues could allow individuals to relax their bureaucratic identities, at least to a certain extent. Active involvement of faculty and policy planners in seminars and workshops also produces the important elements of trust required to motivate discussion and work on policy issues.

One specific method of producing the inter-institutional cross-fertilization is to create a system of internships. Thus far, the idea has been implemented in Parliament as well as some provinces wherein recent graduates are assigned to a particular legislator to assist in research. The model can be reversed, and governments could second certain of the personnel to work in a university institute on specific research problems. In this way, they can assist a research unit to acquire additional research support and personnel, assist in defining policy-relevant research for the university, and allow the public policy analyst to come into day-to-day contact with uni-

versity researchers. The actual expense of such a program is modest indeed, but could produce exciting payoffs.

Universities can plan a useful role with respect to program evaluation, perhaps the most important issue in government at the moment. The current evaluation planning process can be rather unproductive. With respect to a new program, the typical cycle is for a department to issue requests for proposals to undertake evaluation assessment and planning. Generally, and many private consultants would concur with this description, the process is for a number of consultants to spend considerable effort in bidding for the job of designing the evaluation plan. This assumes, of course, that the department has ascertained a program as evaluable – often this is not the case. The effort in competing for a relatively small contract to design the plan (usually in the order of \$25,000) is done under the expectation that the contract to do the evaluation itself will fall to the designer of the evaluation plan. Sometimes this is the case, but often the department internalizes the evaluation process. In effect, the proposals to design the evaluation plan usually contain most of the elements of the evaluation plan, and the government essentially obtains a variety of evaluation plans for a modest cost. In the short run, this appears to be a good deal, but over time, fewer firms will participate in the “loss-leadering” and the flow of “free” evaluation plans will dwindle, with the consequence that the overall quality of evaluation plans will fall.

A superior approach is simply to award small commissions to develop evaluation plans, or outlines of evaluation plans, to firms and agencies of known expertise. These awards would produce a similar result, in that a diversity of views would be received, which could then be synthesized into an evaluation plan. Universities are clearly in an excellent position to contribute to this process, although their expertise is not unique. University researchers could thereby be integrated into policy and evaluation planning, as these shorter “perspective” analyses can usually be incorporated into the academic cycle without major disruption, while allowing the academic to better understand the particular policy problems facing government.

A suggestion for better utilization of academic research

As argued above, universities are not well equipped to deliver on short-term, immediate research problems. There is probably little gain in changing their structure significantly to create such a capability; the potential for internal dissension and unproductive competition with the private sector just renders such a goal unviable. More useful is to exploit the natural tendency of universities to “over-research” problems and to adopt longer-term perspectives. Academics rarely consider a question closed, and are

continuously revising and refining, a tendency which can drive a contract administrator to distraction when deadlines are missed, but if properly exploited, can provide a continuous stream of policy ideas. Rather than short-term contracts or unconditional grants (which permit little accountability), government should use "negotiated research agreements" with universities to develop a longer-term program of research on a series of related policy questions. Of course, there is risk in such a process. Universities may not develop the program in a direction of current interest to the government, but such a relationship should not be undertaken without the process of internship described above, or without continuous interaction between university academics and public policy researchers in government. This form of support for research has great potential and is exploited by a number of federal departments such as Transport Canada. Provincial governments, who often complain that universities devote too much time to policy matters of interest to the federal government, can usefully copy this policy research funding approach. Accountability is provided because these agreements are evaluated at regular intervals and can be renegotiated. One potential danger is that an academic could "go native" and lose perspective. More insidious is the possibility of becoming captured by lucrative financial arrangements that may be involved.

The allegation that major negotiated research agreements interfere with the university's function to investigate theoretical and basic research questions may be overdrawn. More so than in the natural sciences, progress in the social sciences requires that the theoretician have a close relationship with empirical and policy issues.

It is curious that many allege that we live in the most trying and complex of times, yet those resources which could, indeed which should, be brought to bear in solving the manifest riddles of modern society, namely the universities, are relegated to the background in policy research. Yet the potential for much more collaboration is very high, and the barriers to such involvement are not insurmountable.