

Policymakers, University Researchers, and Evidence- Based Policy

Presented at the Australasian Evaluation
Society Conference

August 29, 2012

Terry F. Buss, PhD

Distinguished Professor of Public Policy
Carnegie Mellon University

Confronting the Policy Hydra*

- University policy research—design, development, implementation and evaluation—is largely irrelevant
- Policymaking—the policy process and governance—is in disarray
- The once great promise of basing policy on sound evidence—the “policy sciences”—seems more remote than ever

* A mythical water serpent with many heads.

Our Focus

- Let's consider university and think thank-based policy researchers, and
- Policymakers in federal and state government, and
- “Big ticket” policy initiatives

Nearly every country declares that its policies are evidence-based. In Australia...

PM Kevin Rudd declared, ‘we cannot afford a Public Service culture where all you do is tell the Government what it wants to hear’.

Terry Moran, Head of the Public Service, stated ‘for civil servants, a capacity to analyse problems rationally and empirically and to advance options for action by Governments is a basic ethical duty’.

And this...

And from PM Julia Gillard, “...it is evidence-based, accountable and transparent. It tells us what needs to be done first and fastest and builds a methodical approach. It allows us to build consensus in support of specific progress, instead of debating abstract ideas. To do what we can, with what we have, where we are.”

But, Evidence-Based Policy Is a Mess

This is not a criticism of the Gillard Government, but applies in many countries...

- Policy analysis seems to have been replaced by policy by press release
- Underdeveloped policies are prematurely launched only to be retracted or perpetually modified
- Rather than develop policy by marshalling evidence, all too often policy analysts are asked to rationalize policy after the fact

Continued....

- Civil servants are often put in a bad position because of the politics of policy
- Little is invested in evaluation and assessment that would help inform policy [see point above], or what is undertaken is often kept secret
- When evidence is brought to bear, it is often discarded in favour of political concerns

So, evidence-based policy has become the first casualty in the policy arena!

Let's Focus on Universities, They Are Soft Targets

- University policy research has become highly politicized
- Researchers are being attacked—by other researchers and politicians—as a way to discredit their research
- Policy researchers seem to be advocates rather than analysts: op eds and talking heads TV programs
- The peer review system for journal publication no longer guarantees quality [if it ever did]

Continued...

- Rewards and incentives in universities do not favour policy researchers
- There is an explosion in the quantity of policy work produced, but a diminishment in its quality
- Policy research is irrelevant to policymakers for the most part, unless it can be used politically

So, even if policymakers turned to university policy researchers for answers, they would not likely find them [or the answers]

And, university research is being discredited!

Reforming Universities to Produce Evidence-Based Policy That Is Useful

- Offer promotion, pay raises, and tenure to those who do high-impact work in public sector research
- Shine a light on the peer review process: open up review on the internet [crowd source everything], compel data from publicly-funded research to be released to other researchers
- Increase student enrolments in policy studies to create capacity in government and academe

Continued...

- Give priority in faculty hiring to professors who have worked at universities and in public sector
- Change attitudes of university researchers toward policymakers
- Get rid of the journal ranking system and the university ranking systems, or downplay it
- Elevate policy programs in status and make them applied, not theoretical
- Incarcerate all so-called public intellectuals

For politicians and political system...

So you won't think me a complete fool...

We really can't do much to change the way politics is practiced: in fact, what we are witnessing is democracy in action. It is what it is. In the US, gridlock by design.

But, there are windows of opportunity here and there that allow university policy analysts to inform policy makers who can either choose to listen or not. If we do that, our job is done.

So, given the current state of affairs in evidence-based policymaking, how might we bring both university policy researchers and policymakers together?

Here's Some Modest Approaches that May Bring Universities and Policymakers Together

- National Academy of Public Administration/National Academy of Sciences
- Policy Academies
- Policy Observatories
- Consensus Conferences
- Partnering: public officials/academics
- Think tanks: IBM Centre for Business of Government
- Australasian Evaluation Society

Questions or Comments