PAR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REVIEW

Gary Banks
Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Australia

Could Academic Research Be More Policy Influential?

Commentary

Gary Banks is dean of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Australia. From 1998 to 2012, he headed the Productivity Commission, a statutory agency providing research-based policy advice to Australian governments.
E-mail: g.banks@anzsog.edu.au

In their article "Do Policy Makers Use Academic Research? Reexamining the 'Two Communities' Theory of Research Utilization," Joshua Newman, Adrian Cherney, and Brian W. Head draw on the results of a survey of more than 2,000 public servants in policy-related parts of government in Australia, together with around 120 individual interviews, to test the validity of the "two communities" theory. This theory attributes an apparent underutilization of academic research by policy makers to differences between the worlds of academia and government that militate against mutual interaction, even when it could be beneficial.

The survey, unsurprisingly, demonstrates that an extreme version of the two communities theory—that academia and government operate in isolation from each other—does not stand up. Straw men rarely do. Nor does the notion of homogeneity within the sectors themselves. But less extreme versions in which the two sectors exhibit distinctive features that serve to reduce engagement are not disproven, and indeed they find support in the survey results.

The interesting questions that emerge, therefore, concern the forces responsible for "suboptimal" interaction—in the sense that society would gain from there being more—and how these might best be overcome.

What the survey confirms is the existence of a "spectrum" of interaction between policy developers on one side and academic researchers on the other—ranging from very little to a lot. As the authors note, the degree of interaction in practice will depend on the function of a particular area of government, the activities in which it is engaged, and how those officials involved "perceive their roles." This last element, in my experience, is one of the more important, reflecting motivation, incentives, and professional background. For example, I have noticed that the research inclinations of certain policy departments in Canberra have been greater when the most senior officials have had a research background themselves.

A distinction needs to be made, however, between the use of existing academic research and that of academic *researchers*. The reality is that only a subset of the stock of documented research is motivated by practical matters of public policy, let alone issues with which a government may be grappling at a point in time. Navigating the body of research to find relevant policy insights can be akin to finding proverbial needles in haystacks.

Moreover, the utility of policy-relevant research depends in part on where and when it was done. Research conducted in the past, or in other jurisdictions, will often be of limited usefulness. And policies based on it can go astray if differences in context are not allowed for. For example, a universal subsidy program for intensive early childhood education in Australia drew inspiration from James Heckman's celebrated work on the social rate of return from the Perry Preschool Program in the United States. But the main source of the observed benefits came from subsequent reductions in crime and incarceration for disadvantaged children in the program. Although of high quality, Heckman's research got lost in translation in Australian policy circles.

When it comes to a government seeking to commission research to inform a specific policy task, some two-thirds of interviewees in the Australian study noted that "attitudinal barriers" can get in the way of direct academic involvement. Again, this accords with my own observations.

Government departments typically face time constraints and, under pressure from their political authorizing environment, may want reassurance that commissioned research will fit with government thinking. For their part, few academics with the necessary skills will be willing to "dance to the piper's tune." And when it comes to timing, they march to the beat of a different drum—for good reason. Sound research normally involves an iterative process (drafts, discussion, feedback) that is inherently time-consuming.

Public Administration Review, Vol. 76, Iss. 1, pp. 33–34. © 2015 by The American Society for Public Administration.
DOI: 10.1111/puar.12482.

This can also require a degree of transparency beyond what government may be willing to countenance.

Looking back over my time in government, the connections between the two communities have tended to be strongest when political leaders have been supportive (or at least accepting) of the sort of deliberative policy-making processes in which research and evidence can play a role. As the authors note, "government" comprises political and administrative parts, and these need to be distinguished in any behavioral theory. But the attitudes and actions of the latter are necessarily conditioned by the former.

I concur with the authors that "bridgers" or "boundary riders" between government and academia (metaphors consonant with the concept of two "communities") can make an important contribution. For example, there are instances of academics attached to ministerial offices exerting considerable influence on public policy in Australia over the years, and notably so during the so-called reform era. Research agencies or units created within policy departments (such as agriculture, industry, and transport) have also played a useful bridging role. And Australia is unusual in having established an independent research institution within its federal government, the Productivity Commission, with a statutory remit to undertake public inquiries in complex and contentious policy areas. This institution has drawn extensively on academics and academic research in formulating its reports to government, which are seen as having been highly influential overall. (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has advocated this body as a model for other countries.) Finally, private consulting firms have increasingly been entering this space in recent years, and their work often involves a degree of subcontracting from academia.

This leads me to question whether the perceived underutilization of academic research in public policy may be overstated. Academics may be more influential than they imagine!