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Charlotte Etier

National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), etierc@nasfaa.org

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Book Review: *Using Research Evidence in Education: From the Schoolhouse Door to Capitol Hill*

By Charlotte Etier

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In *Using Research Evidence in Education*, editors Finnigan and Daly, both K-12 education policy experts, push readers to more explicitly connect education research and policymaking. The book provides critical guidance on how research may be better used for education policymaking, and how researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can learn from the past and form a new relationship going forward. Although the book focuses on K-12 education, its points also apply to postsecondary education. Chapters written by leading scholars in policy research and education examine issues such as the use of research at the state and federal levels; defining, acquiring, and using research by improving the relevancy of future studies; and the structure of our current academic system producing the research. The book's authors urge us to rethink the relationship between researchers and policymakers, shifting from *research to practice* to *research and practice*.

In the foreword, Robert C. Granger argues that research is mostly reactive with respect to policymaking; it is conducted on already-enacted policies. He asserts—and each chapter supports this assertion—that we instead need a relationship of research *and* practice, where research is the basis for policy. Granger bases his perspective on his experience as the former president of the William T. Grant Foundation, an organization that has long advocated for and supported evidence-based policymaking.

In their chapter, “Research Evidence and the Common Core State Standards,” McDonnell and Weatherford find that education policymakers, advocates, and researchers often combine formal, peer-reviewed research findings with other types of evidence, such as advocacy research, to create a collaborative problem-solving approach. A timely example of this is the recent shift from using prior-year (PY) to prior-prior year (PPY) income data on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). PPY allows students to file their FAFSA earlier. The PPY concept percolated for more than a decade in higher education policy circles and gradually gained support through peer-reviewed research (e.g., Kelchen & Jones, 2015) and advocacy research (e.g., NASFAA, 2013; 2015) that demonstrated its efficacy to federal policymakers. This ultimately resulted in an executive action in September 2015 to utilize PPY starting with the 2017-18 FAFSA. This sequence of events illustrates the main point of Tseng and Nutley's chapter, “Building an Infrastructure to Improve the Use and Usefulness of Research in Education”—that is, that policymakers, researchers, and practitioners must build relationships and trust to engage in evidenced-based policy making, or to connect research and practice.

The book strikes a balance by providing evidence for how researchers may alter their behaviors to better accommodate practitioners and policymakers, as well as how practitioners and policymakers can develop their views on research evidence to understand and trust researchers. For example, in their chapter, “The Intermediary Function in Evidence Production, Promotion, and Utilization: The Case of Educational Incentives,” Scott et al. found that policy intermediaries and legislative staff view university-based research as more credible than research produced by think tanks and advocacy groups, but they also perceive it as too expensive to produce. However, the same study points out that researchers must strive to produce more useful work and strengthen their ability to interact more intentionally with possible users of research.

Charlotte Etier is senior research analyst and grant manager for the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

While an overarching theme of this book is the importance of research evidence on policymaking, Finnigan and Daly acknowledge in their concluding chapter that “research is not the next silver bullet for education reform Instead research helps us understand problems and think about potential solutions” (p. 173). As the books’ authors point out, decision making at the federal level often combines a broad mix of sources, and peer-reviewed research is generally not at the forefront. It has been my experience this is due largely to the mistrust and lack of relationships between researchers and policymakers.

A similar separation is apparent in the relationship between practitioners and researchers. For example, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) are currently collaborating on an in-depth examination of how financial aid administrators use research in their daily work. Initial results from this collaboration show that peer-reviewed research is often not a high priority for financial aid administrators. Building greater trust between practitioners and researchers will allow for more partnerships that can produce the evidence-based research needed to support effective policymaking. The authors build a strong case for how beneficial these relationships may be, and also address barriers to creating these relationships, including the current structure of our academic system itself.

I had two distinct and competing reactions to the book—a very positive one and a more critical one. The authors do a good job of reminding researchers that their work will rarely be the sole factor guiding education policymaking. They highlight the need for basing policymaking on a good mixture of research evidence in addition to other resources, and emphasize the usefulness of having different constituencies at the table, along with intermediary organizations, to contribute to policymaking conversations. The authors consistently stress relationship building. Trust is essential: Consumers of research at all levels tend to use research from sources they trust, and this trust is not built overnight.

From a more critical standpoint, the K-12 focus of this book does hinder to some degree its usefulness to postsecondary education. The considerable diversity of colleges and universities may affect how research evidence can be used as part of postsecondary education policymaking. Also, the complexity of postsecondary education policy suggests that an increased number of voices at the policy table may result in more conflicting viewpoints than in the K-12 sector. Policymaking for primary and secondary education may be more streamlined, whereas postsecondary education’s varying sectors may create more challenges.

I am also skeptical of the ability of researchers to build the relationships with practitioners that are necessary for fostering a trusting environment in which to use research. This skepticism does not lie in researchers’ lack of desire, but rather in the much more complex system of postsecondary education, which can impede building such relationships. For example, the current incentive system around tenure and promotion, which emphasizes peer-reviewed publications above all else, may hinder the ability of university-based researchers to put in the time needed to build relationships with policymakers and practitioners.

Another example of the difference in complexity between K-12 and postsecondary education is that schools and districts, while varying in size, are mostly laid out in a model that allows for shorter information flow. Based on examples given in this book, if a researcher is able to build a relationship with one principal, in theory, that principal can serve as a direct line to the district level and the students for conducting and using evidence-based research. The decentralized nature of higher education and the relative autonomy of colleges and universities makes it far more difficult to connect research and policymaking at the postsecondary level.

Undoubtedly, the need for evidence-based policymaking will only continue to grow. Consider that the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, mentions the word “research” nearly 80 times, and the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 mentions it nearly 120 times. This suggests that policymakers are

interested in using research at the postsecondary level. The time is right for scholars to build the relationships necessary to ensure that their research becomes the basis for research and practice, supporting evidence-based policymaking.

With the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act and ongoing changes in postsecondary education at the federal and state policy levels, with a few caveats, the findings from this book can provide vital guidance for research and policymakers going forward.

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