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Roadmap Connecting Researchers and Practitioners to Relevance for Postsecondary Policy Interests

By Zakiya W. Smith

Those interested in positioning research to be used by policymakers or funded by foundations often wonder how best to do so. Foundation and policy interests can intersect, as philanthropy and policy both aim to provide solutions to big societal problems. This article explores themes from federal financial aid policy, in particular, suggesting that relevance can come from attention to the national mood, aligning solutions with identified problems, and condensing ideas for more immediate connection.

Keywords: *policymaking, policy, higher education policy, financial aid policy*

What does it take to get your work noticed by foundations or policymakers focused on postsecondary education policy? Which approaches cut through the noise and meaningfully shift the policy debate? Increasingly, foundations dedicate their resources and energy to solving big societal problems. In our most sanguine state of hopefulness, policymakers are also interested in finding solutions to social problems. Many researchers also come to their work with a hope that it will provide some insight on similar challenging societal issues. Given this convergence of intention, researchers seeking to be involved in solving challenging societal problems are often interested in figuring out how to make their work appealing to foundations and/or relevant to policymakers. Current trends in federal student aid policy development can offer a guide.

Foundation Interests

In recent years within the postsecondary education space, foundations have tended to focus on the need to increase the proportion of Americans who hold postsecondary degrees and other credentials of value.¹ Each foundation defines “high quality education” differently, with some more focused on learning outcomes and others more squarely focused on connections to the labor market. Also, the question of on whom we should focus may be slightly different for each organization. Many are focused on closing attainment gaps by race and income.

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¹ This is the sole mission of Lumina Foundation, the author’s employer, which has established a time-limited, numeric goal to this end.

The first step in pursuing funding is to determine whether your interests align with those of a particular foundation. This may seem like a basic step, but the best way to gain insight into a foundation's interests is to look at the materials provided on their website. Most foundations make public their strategic plans, which provide insight into the mission and the methods the foundation intends to use to reach its goals. Getting a foundation with an expressed interest in increasing access to postsecondary education in rural areas to instead care about the impacts of global warming in Southeast Asia will be a tough sell. In general, it is better to search for a foundation with interests that mirror your own than to try to change the foundation's interests to fit yours.²

Strategic plans, recent press releases, and other public-facing documents shared by a foundation are all good sources of information about foundational priorities and how they are carried out. Looking at prior grant work and talking to existing foundation grantees can also be helpful in giving a general sense of the kind of work a particular foundation is willing to support; however, it is important to remember that past support is not always indicative of future support. Foundation priorities can, and often do, change. The best way to ensure your work is relevant to a specific foundation is to consider the most recent information publicly available.

It is useful to determine some overarching information about grant priorities before requesting a meeting with representatives from the foundation. Examples include whether the foundation provides support for research or just programs; whether they are willing to provide general operating support or only fund specific projects; and whether they provide support for direct services or only program design and evaluation. Finally, while some foundations may require online submission of proposals, others review proposals by invitation only, making a cold web submission a waste of time.

Policymaker Interests

Given that policymakers are also in the business of developing solutions to large social problems, much of the advice about doing research that appeals to foundations also applies to the conversation about doing policy-relevant research. Keeping up with the policy discourse and staying attuned to the expressed interests of policymakers is necessary to understand how one's research agenda might fit into the current dialogue. Reading trade publications, watching legislative hearings, and parsing press releases can provide useful context about the interests a policymaker may have regarding postsecondary education.

Here, an interdisciplinary approach may be useful, as public policy and political science research provides important lessons for how policymakers develop their agendas over time. The seminal book on this topic, Kingdon's *Agenda's Alternatives, and Public Policy* (2003), provides one theory of how ideas come to the attention of federal policymakers. Kingdon's theory suggests that problems, the political environment, and policies sometimes come together to create a "policy window" for change. Within this frame, each of these "streams" of factors—problems, politics, and policies—has its own characteristics. Problems are identified by "indicators, focusing events, and feedback," with budgets identified as a "special problem" that comes up on a recurring basis (Kingdon, 2003, p. 105, 113). The political environment includes elections, interest group pressure (or lack thereof), and the national mood more broadly. Policy solutions float around from year to year in the "policy primeval soup" until the right conditions coalesce for their selection (Kingdon, 2003, p. 116). Research applying Kingdon's theory to higher education policy provides examples for current researchers to consider (Hearn, 2001; Ness, 2010; Robertson, 2011; Smith, 2016).

² There are valid critiques of how foundations develop their interests and the role of foundations in helping to solve global problems, more broadly. This essay does not attempt to address those concerns; the perspective shared here is about foundations as they exist today, save current debates about how they might change in the future.

Kingdon notes that the academic research community is likely to be able to influence the policy alternatives considered, but not frame the agenda entirely. This idea is similar to the suggestion mentioned earlier relating to working with foundations: Once a politician (or a political entity) has determined the problem they wish to solve (the agenda), it is difficult to get them to care about a different problem altogether. Instead, it will be easier to influence their choice-set of options (the policy alternatives).

As might be expected and as is evidenced by the research, politicians tend to consider issues that are relevant to their constituents and those taking up national media attention. The president can also have a large role in setting the national policy agenda. Of course, some presidents are more interested in education policy than others. Even when a president is uninterested in postsecondary education policy, however, members of Congress continue to play a key role in determining the policy agenda for education issues.³

There Is No Man Behind the Curtain: Connecting Your Ideas to Policy

A common archetype of policymaking is that of a grand scheme being orchestrated by some set of mysterious actors. While there may be actors involved with different missions and agendas, when it comes to policy, there is no “man behind the curtain.” Policy is made by imperfect people with imperfect ideas, trying to achieve some goal for societal change. Oftentimes, these aides and analysts welcome help in developing policy to achieve that outcome. This presents a clear opportunity for anyone who can proffer constructive advice about how to help develop policy to reach these goals.

Given what is known about how the policy agenda is set and why lawmakers and foundations might care about certain issues over others, how do you get in front of the relevant individuals, either in government or within philanthropy?

Here, a novel, if unexpected approach might prevail: Just ask. Ask for a meeting to share your ideas with the relevant legislative staff member.⁴ Lawmakers have a limited amount of time for individual meetings with non-constituents, so they employ staff who can meet with a more diverse cast of characters. Begin with staff who work at the congressional committee level—that is, staff who are dedicated to working on particular issues rather than those mostly dedicated to solving constituent problems within an individual lawmaker’s office. You are more likely to gain a meeting if you have achieved some level of notoriety by publishing in a respected popular media outlet, though social media (particularly Twitter) has provided a platform for many academics in recent years as well.

Likewise, staff in philanthropic organizations regularly field calls and emails from researchers who believe their interests align. Here, the environment is a bit akin to dating: You learn about the foundation, the foundation learns about you, and then the two of you see if there is a connection. Either one party or the other might determine that it just isn’t a good fit, and if so, no hard feelings (hopefully). You may connect again in the future if either of your interests change.

In both foundation and policy contexts, gaining initial traction is key. While policymakers’ motivations and customs certainly differ from those of foundation staff, both parties have limited time and interact with a myriad of individuals and policy ideas over the course of a year. Catch the interest of staff by connecting your ideas to the prevailing policy discourse or the stated goals of a foundation, be brief in reaching out for

³ The recommendations offered here are based primarily on the experience of setting national policy priorities and policy agendas. The state and local experience may be similar, but they are not explicitly explored in this piece.

⁴ There is an entire industry built on knowing with whom to talk in different congressional committees, federal agencies, or within the White House. Lobbyists and consultants not only attempt to sway votes on particular issues, they also sell connections and insider knowledge of who really has power. While the easiest way to get in front of powerful policymakers might be to hire a lobbyist, this option is not available to many researchers.

the initial ask of a meeting, and then use the opportunity of the meeting to delve more deeply into your work—but always be mindful of the time allotted. Once a relationship develops, if there is interest, then the policymaker or foundation staff member will likely ask more probing questions about your work.

Contrary to how one might format the approach to an academic journal or conference presentation, do not start with detailed information about your methodology or research design upfront. Instead, begin with the end in mind: What is the main point of your work and how does it connect to the stated interests of the person in front of you? If the person you're talking with shows interest, there will be more than enough opportunities to delve more deeply into the details of your work.

Forging Foundation and Policymaker Connections: The Power of Brevity

A principle that is typically helpful in obtaining a meeting or catching the eye of a policymaker's staff on social media is that of brevity. It has been asked before, but it is worth repeating: Can you boil down your ideas into a one-pager? A paragraph? A 140-character tweet? (OK, perhaps a tweet-storm?) The biggest constraint of policymakers is time, so a brief description of your work will be necessary to get on their radar.

There are entities that do this kind of translational work, connecting broader lessons in research or practice to relevant bits and quips that policymakers can use. Organizations like the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), The Institute for College Access and Success (IICAS), the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and others often take longer academic pieces and mine them for the policy-relevant connections, making recommendations via shorter white papers or reports. These kinds of organizations could be helpful in getting your message out. In addition to focusing on developing bonds with policy staff directly, fostering relationships with staff at such outlets can be beneficial—sometimes even more than your own direct connections to policymakers themselves. Likewise, foundations often work directly with these kinds of organizations and may have existing relationships that you can leverage to get your work onto their radar.

Make Sure Your Ideas Are Relevant

Being attentive to the national mood and current political agenda makes it more likely that your research is used by policymakers and foundations. While a cynical view suggests that policymakers simply cherry-pick the research to fit their preconceived notions of what is best, there is still a role for high-quality research on issues of national or regional interest, and there are some examples of cases in which policymakers used research to develop new solutions. For instance, efforts to simplify the FAFSA have been rooted in research by scholars such as Susan Dynarski and Bridget Terry-Long; the movement for free community college has been influenced by the work of Sara Goldrick-Rab; and the development of national goals for postsecondary attainment are based on projections from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce.

To this end, the type of research that is most likely to appeal to policymakers is that which presents a solution to a problem they are trying to solve. Of course, sometimes research is about better problem definition, and this kind of research is useful and necessary in ensuring that solutions are formed with an appropriate understanding of the environment. However, research that presents evidence in favor of a particular approach, or that presents its own evidence-based solution, may be more attractive, given the nature of policymaking.

Timing is critical. Policymakers are limited by the bounds of time in office. Without accomplishments to show, they won't be able to get reelected, and won't be around to continue to do good work in the future.

Furthermore, policymakers are presumably in office to make policy. By definition, they should be solution-oriented and looking for how best to initiate positive change in whatever way they define such change. That said, policymakers are likely drawn to solutions they can implement rather than further problem exploration.

In order for those solutions to be implementable, they need to be actionable. Does your research suggest a specific action policymakers could take? Does it suggest that there are specific ways in which programs could or should be designed? Does it suggest certain approaches are more likely to be successful than others? The more specificity a researcher can offer regarding exactly what should be done to address an identified problem, the better.

Research to Policy in Real Life: An Example

Recent efforts to improve the financial aid application process illustrate a path from research to policy. As national policymakers sought to simplify the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), some researchers had completed an experimental study of how FAFSA simplification and FAFSA completion assistance might improve college enrollment (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2009). The study suggested that “seemingly small changes to the college application process can have large effects on enrollment and the amount of aid received” (p. 26). This study has served as the basis for future FAFSA simplification efforts and is often cited in congressional testimony about the effectiveness of aid simplification (Dynarski, 2012; *Ensuring access to higher education*, 2013a; 2013b).

Later, White House officials also cited this study in their own work to take administrative action to streamline the FAFSA, employing skip-logic to reduce the number of questions, and linking to the IRS to have family tax information auto-populate the form (Executive Office of the President, 2009). Advocates for low-income students suggest that these reforms have made the financial aid application process easier, even if those reforms have been complicated by technical issues in recent months (Kreighbaum, 2017).

Kingdon (2003) suggested that policy solutions that cost less are more likely to be taken up. Similarly, Smith (2016) found that both Republican and Democratic administrations favored budget-conscious policies. Certainly, and perhaps obviously, policymakers want solutions on the path of least resistance (i.e., the one that costs the least and makes the fewest people angry). The fact that FAFSA simplification might be accomplished at a lower cost than other policy alternatives likely played a role in its popularity among policymakers.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road: Questions to Ask of Your Research

If there is no man behind the curtain, and we are the ones we've been waiting for, then what is it that you aim to do? You might take a step back to begin with one or more serious, if not self-reflective questions: Why do you do this work? What are you hoping to achieve? Far from having an agenda about a certain proscribed set of solutions, sometimes it helps to ask yourself: Is this research for research's sake, or for some larger purpose? Sometimes it can feel as if research is divorced from any larger goal. However, from this basic question one can begin to form a research question, continue with developing a robust methodology, and communicate the findings in a way that advances the dialogue on a given issue.

Policy recommendations often appear in the implications section of a research paper. This is where the rubber meets the road in terms of practical application. Frankly, policymakers might begin with the implications section when looking for specific solutions to problems they are trying to solve. Unfortunately, too often these sections get short shrift in research reports. While not all research needs to have policy

implications, if you intend that policymakers will use your research, including a clear and specific set of implications is imperative.

To this end, getting as specific as possible is helpful. For example, you might ask yourself questions like these: Are you recommending the creation of a new grant program or more money for an existing program? Is new money needed, or do you recommend allocating money in a different way? If more money is needed, how much? How should it be distributed? Should it be awarded through competitive grants or formula grants? If formula grants, what should the allocation formula be? If competitive, what are the application criteria? What entity is eligible to apply? Which agency would administer the program and how much leeway should program administrators have in determining who gets an award? Does research have anything to tell us about the relative efficacy of any of these different approaches? Does it matter? Do we have any evidence about what kinds of implementation would be better or what effective implementation might be? These are the kinds of questions policymakers grapple with, and providing specific responses to such questions makes your research more attractive and useful to policymakers.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that research may not be able to give us precise answers to all these questions. We should also recognize that there is both an art and a science to policymaking. Policy solutions are not developed in a vacuum. They are crafted in a constantly evolving environment and choices are limited by policy options dictated by the political pressures of the time. Hannah (1996) reaffirmed Wolanin and Gladieux (1976) in noting that the policy process is “shaped by the ‘skills and intentions’ of key participants and the ‘crosscurrents and constraints’ of the political environments in which they work” (Hannah, 1996, p. 499).

When congressional Republicans took back the House of Representatives in 2010, they vowed not to work with President Obama on major new legislative asks (Barr, 2010; Hulse & Nagourney, 2010). This obstruction led to a period where new presidential initiatives were limited to those that could take place within the auspices of executive authority (Savage, 2012). This meant little to no new spending and no major rewriting of higher education law. It was within this context that the College Scorecard, the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet, and other information/transparency initiatives were born.

Such limitations mean that there may not be research supporting the specific solution you propose in the specific way you are proposing it. At the end of the day, circumstances may dictate the need to forge new, creative solutions that have not yet been researched. The confines of the moment, the budget flexibility available, and the parameters of legislation may provide a less than ideal environment for policy development. In these cases, sometimes policymakers choose to move forward with ideas that haven’t yet been proven effective. This uncertainty is something policymakers must live with, and researchers must understand.

Conclusion

The conundrum of how to effectively connect research to policy and practice has perplexed researchers, analysts, and other observers for decades. Funders with goals for social change may increasingly look to play a role in connecting those dots.

Foundations can take more risks, but they are legally prohibited from lobbying, and therefore the kind of specificity they can support will differ from that which might be most helpful to policymakers. Policymakers are constantly being lobbied by professionals with vested interests who present solutions that are explicit. These professional lobbyists know what legislative language to ask for, which provisions should be changed, and what funding levels they are seeking.

Meanwhile, many in foundations feel uncomfortable funding policy research at all and may be more inclined to support research for community-level solutions. While foundations cannot fund lobbying in favor of or against a specific legislative provision, they can provide funding for nonpartisan research and analysis that may help policymakers better understand how to develop good policy.

In any context, the world needs solutions that are research based, responsive to current events/pressures, and pragmatic given solution sets available to policymakers. It should go without saying that such research isn't the only kind that is of value. In addition, policymakers may use research in ways that do not always align with our best hopes, and research may produce conflicting results. Despite these challenges, to the extent that a researcher has evidence of solutions that could be useful to policymakers, policymakers and foundations are likely to be interested in this work.

The views expressed in this piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Lumina Foundation.

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