

Translating Research into Policy to Increase Equity in Higher Education: Lessons Learned from the ASHE-WICHE Collaborative

Challenges to closing the gap between findings from academic research and effective policymaking are not new, and they will not be solved overnight. However, as the entire education sector faces mounting pressure to provide high-quality education under tightening fiscal constraints, all while demonstrating improving student outcomes, the time may finally be right for a renewed spirit of collaboration between higher education researchers and policymakers. This *Policy Insights* is just one component of a partnership between the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) focused on how to better connect rigorous higher education research and appropriate state-level policy. This brief examines why research is not currently more influential in policymaking; how those in the academy can develop a cross-sector, state-level research agenda that is more likely to affect policy change; what policy areas are well-suited for collaboration between policymakers and researchers to increase equity and inclusion within postsecondary education; and what action steps can be taken by those in academe and the policy arena to improve the links between educational research and policy.

Debates about college access, affordability, and unequal educational opportunity have put the U.S. higher education system at the top of national and state policy agendas to a degree not seen in more than three decades. Three particular factors have increased over time: (1) unprecedented demographic change in the population colleges and universities are expected to serve; (2) widening income inequality between high- and low-income families, which both reflects and reinforces educational attainment gaps; and (3) the rising cost of higher education, which has led to an influx of policy proposals to address tuition costs, college completion, and the need for institutional efficiency.

Federal and state governments and others are attempting to address these factors with fewer resources and a higher demand for postsecondary education. In 2014, the Association for the Study of Higher Education's (ASHE) then-President Laura Perna expressed that "despite the important role that state policies can play in meeting the nation's needs for increased educational opportunity, social mobility, and economic growth, too little scholarship offers theoretically grounded and empirical examinations of the influence of state actions on these outcomes." In response, ASHE and policy experts convened by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) came together in a collaborative effort to define how to produce appropriate state-level action that would ultimately increase equity in higher education outcomes using relevant and

rigorous research. Adapted from a white paper written by a group of academic scholars and policy experts whose task is to improve communication between researchers and policy actors on issues of educational attainment and equity, this *Policy Insights* provides background and summarizes recommendations for members of both the policy and higher education scholarly communities. Ultimately, the group found there is a need for a smoother pathway that enables higher education research to impact state policymaking more effectively, particularly on issues of educational equity and inequality. Such a pathway should be relevant to the issues and contexts of specific states, make evidence available in a timely way, and be connected to a clear state policy mechanism, such as finance policy or regulations.

This Policy Insights reports on the contents of a forthcoming white paper jointly produced by a working group of ASHE members and policy experts assembled by WICHE. Authors of that white paper are:

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Why Scholarly Research Is Not More Influential in Policy Circles

In general, academic researchers and state and federal policymakers often struggle to connect, due to their differing perspectives, language usage, methods, timeframes, and goals. At the most basic level, scholars and policymakers operate within contrasting contexts. Scholars often study what has occurred after the fact, making their work largely reactive.¹ Policymakers tend to be proactive and often seek to advance their political agendas by shaping public policy. Academics are trained to be cautious, rigorous, and conservative in their investigations of cause and effect, while policymakers must act assertively and definitively based on the data available or the urgency of a specific policy issue.² Moreover, policymakers often come into office knowing what issues they want to address and looking for policy innovations that will advance the causes of their constituents. They must move quickly to maintain their political capital and stay abreast of urgent policy issues and political opportunities. In contrast, academic research often spans many months or even years.³

Incentive structures for academic tenure reward publication in peer-reviewed journals, but staff from policy organizations, such as WICHE and the other regional higher education compacts, Education Commission of the States, National Conference of State Legislatures, Council of State Governments, and others, often lack ready access to these sources. If they do obtain access through academic libraries or costly subscriptions, scholarly papers tend to be either too lengthy or inaccessible for lay readers, and thus are not useful to ongoing policy discussions happening in real time. Moreover, scholarly articles emphasize literature, theory, and sound methods, and while those are certainly valuable foundational characteristics of good policy, policymakers seek bottom-line implications that focus on economic impact or a winning political strategy.⁴ Policy advisors often seek scholarly research that can be easily translated into a format that speaks directly to action recommendations. While faculty may seek opportunities to write policy briefs or offer presentations that meet these needs, such activities are usually considered to be extracurricular. Scholars have little time and few incentives to deviate beyond what is expected by their departments

and institutions, especially if they work within a traditional research university environment. By contrast, the pressing nature of policy development and refinement allows little time to untangle academic studies.⁵

In addition to the challenges of dissemination and translation, academic research often does not align with policymakers' immediate or real-time needs. While scholars seek new knowledge, policymakers look for solutions to emerging policy problems.⁶ Academics also emphasize methodological complexity and rigor, and often investigate narrow questions about specific contexts or groups. Complex methods and the use of specific sample populations may not address the practical or real-time problems policymakers seek to address, which is especially salient within education policy, where the speed of innovations and reforms make it difficult for scholarship to keep pace. Additionally, complex scholarship and scientific inquiry are not always prioritized by the policymaking community, nor do they always provide necessary support for policy reforms. For example, a policymaker may be willing to implement a policy not fully supported by evidence if it replaces a policy shown to be ineffective, as long as no existing evidence indicates that the new policy

will make people worse off than the previous one.⁷ Further, politics also plays a role. Even if an individual policymaker's position is impacted by academic research, political factors outside of that person's control often come into play.

Another filter prevalent in higher education policymaking that may conflict with the way scholarship is traditionally constructed is the role the media plays in shaping policy conversations. News messaging strongly affects public opinion and influences politics.⁸ Media coverage dictates which issues may be important to the public, and by capturing media attention, ideological think tanks and interest groups can gain access to policy conversations and dominate the national dialogue.⁹ A sensationalist media and highly political environment can directly conflict with the values prioritized in academic research. As a result, it may be difficult for scholars to be heard, particularly those whose work deviates from media-endorsed priorities, regardless of how relevant or groundbreaking their research may be to the broader education context – and perhaps to student success. Researchers

Three Ways Research is Used in Policymaking

Instrumental use refers to the direct application of academic research to a specific policy issue. For example, a federal policymaker who wants to change the Pell Grant program might use the findings from recent research on financial aid to understand how need-based aid affects students' enrollment and persistence outcomes.¹⁰

Conceptual use focuses on the "cumulative effect of a broad range of studies" that enlighten and produce new knowledge about a given policy topic.¹¹ This body of evidence could serve as the "intellectual backdrop" for framing and guiding policy alternatives.¹²

Political use focuses on how policymakers utilize research findings to advance a policy agenda. Instead of using research to find an optimal or just policy solution, they might start with a current policy position and draw selectively from the research that helps advance that agenda.¹³ Think tanks, advocacy groups, and other intermediary organizations that translate academic research for policy audiences are not immune to its political use.¹⁴

whose work is endorsed by the media and the policymaking community on hot-button topics face a conundrum, as their work can influence policy but is also at risk of being politicized and misinterpreted. The media also presents a unique challenge to policymakers. It can be an important tool for building public support for an issue, but it can also drive public opinion away from issues important to the public good and toward those that might undermine it.

Building a Cross-Sector, Collective, State-Level Research Agenda for Improving Higher Education Outcomes

This discussion of how scholarly research does and does not reach policymakers leads to the following broad guidelines for crafting a cross-sector research agenda for state higher education policy. These guidelines include suggestions for increasing the probability that research can influence policymaking at the state level.

First, state policymakers are more likely to respond to research if higher education researchers frame work as problem-directed rather than discipline-directed. If the research matches or sheds light on problems identified by a state-level agenda, it has a greater chance of having the scope and applicability needed to have an effect on state-level matters.

Second, research should clearly identify the stage of policymaking in which it is useful (e.g., problem identification, agenda setting, formulation, adoption, etc). This is especially important to understanding the proposed intent, action, or consequence of a policy. For instance, researchers will be better positioned to influence policy if they understand how the adoption and implementation of a postsecondary policy affects student populations in different states, and why a particular policy works in some states and not in others.

Third, it is critical for researchers to understand that some issue areas fall squarely within the purview of states and some do not. When appropriate, state policies addressing those issues have significant potential to reduce inequality and increase equity in higher education outcomes. For example, Michael McLendon argues in the spirit of Justice Brandeis that “states are laboratories of democracy” where both policy experiments and innovative practices are tested, and then eventually adopted and adapted by other states and/or the federal government.

Potential Policy Areas to Supplement Institutional Efforts to Increase Equity

Academic research on higher education has tended to address the impact federal policies, like the Pell Grant, have on the nation as a whole, but which cannot be unpacked for any individual states. There are many reasons for this, including that data are often only suitable for nation-level analyses. Yet state policies are instrumental in creating the

variation we see across the nation concerning such crucial equity issues as access, affordability, and institutional performance, and better alignment and utilization of relevant research in state policy formulation can provide more effective pathways for efficient and creative solution construction in educational policy. In the spirit of spurring more research activity focused on state policies, the ASHE-WICHE Collaborative specified policy areas that seem to be particularly ripe for state-level analyses.

While several state policy areas have the potential to increase equity in higher education outcomes, the following are likely to be most impactful: state financing for higher education, academic preparation initiatives, and the study of workforce outcomes. Framing these issues is the undeniable trend of a dramatically changing student population, and research that targets a state’s or region’s demographic changes could move state policymakers to respond to those changes in order to protect the social and economic health of their constituents – and the nation. Specifically, the following four policy issues are areas that are important to ensuring that postsecondary education continues down the path of increasing inclusion and equity. In these domains, researchers and policymakers can work together to create a better education system for all Americans that not just enrolls and helps students complete credentials of value, but serves as a positive and transforming experience.

Outcomes-based or performance funding. Tying institutional funding to performance metrics is an attempt to incentivize certain behaviors on the part of institutions, such as increased completion, transfer, or other benchmarks. It has undergone many changes since its initial implementation as a remedy to the economic slowdown of the 1990s, expanding higher education costs to states, and the rise in public calls for governmental spending accountability. Following the Great Recession, “Performance Funding 2.0” or “Wave 2 performance-based funding” has brought back widespread calls for increased fiscal efficiency of colleges and universities to an even larger extent than in its first iteration.¹⁵ Ultimately, it is likely that in some form, these funding models will be a lasting component of higher education funding. Therefore, research should examine how performance-funding policies can be implemented to achieve educational equity. More analysis on what changes in institutional and student behavior and what student outcomes result from these policies (if any) would be useful, as would research on what features of such policies drive more equitable outcomes most effectively.

Dual/concurrent enrollment programs. Dual/concurrent enrollment programs (or other forms of accelerated progress, like a three-year degree) offer high school students the opportunity to receive college credit after the successful completion of high school courses. In 2010, over 80 percent of all American high schools had students

participating in dual enrollment. By 2012, 47 states had official policies related to the practice.¹⁶ Other programs like bachelor's degrees that can be completed in three years are getting more policy attention as mechanisms to reduce time to completion and cut down on the expense of postsecondary education. Questions such as – What effect do accelerated programs have on a state? Are all citizens of the state well-served by them, or in the end do they lower educational equality? – remain, however. Research that recommends ways to strengthen dual enrollment policies so more students in a state could benefit from high-quality programs would be useful. In particular, because many states have lately sought to encourage a growing number of students who can to take college credits whenever possible while still in high school, and given states' central responsibilities to deliver K-12 education and ensure it is adequately aligned with their postsecondary systems, research on such policies conducted at the state level seem particularly apt.

State financial aid. States' decisions about the three principal finance levers available to them – appropriations, price-setting, and financial aid policy – have a direct impact on the financial hurdles prospective students face, and on how those barriers might impact access and success for students from various backgrounds. State aid programs exhibit the most extraordinary variation. This includes their sheer number, their eligibility criteria, their intentional (or not) relationship with federal and institutional aid sources, and even other state policies such as guaranteed tuition programs. Therefore, studies on state financial aid have the potential to open and inform pathways for rational equity-minded policymaking. Research on how a single state's financial aid policies are affecting its various student populations, and how to adapt the policy to serve all populations equitably, would be valuable. Conducting these studies across the states, using their own longitudinal data systems, would be even more valuable. For example, how do a state's financial aid programs impact student matching and overall student success? How does the combination of state tuition and aid policies impact student loan debt and other forms of debt? Are certain student populations served more effectively and equitably than others by state policies? How do institutional practices for awarding financial aid change as a result of state financial aid programs? How can these practices be adapted to address inequities?

Remedial/developmental education. Given the high percentages of students who need academic remediation upon entering postsecondary education, this area provides abundant research possibilities at the state policy level. For example, which forms of remediation serve which populations most effectively? How can remediation be provided equitably across a state? Because remediation is a necessary first step in overcoming many aspects

of educational inequality, research is needed on the relationship between states and institutions, and on which structures are most effectively addressing the needs of those requiring remediation. What combination of remediation programs and other forms of support provide the highest probability of achieving educational success?

One example of a new approach with promising results is the corequisite model of remediation, in which students are placed into the standard required course, and a noncredit remediation version is targeted toward supporting the student. While early data are promising, questions remain as to whether it is equally beneficial to all students or if it favors some groups over others, and how the current research has been conducted.¹⁷ Here, researchers, policy organizations, and policymakers can work together to conduct high-quality research to ensure this promising practice is not systematically leaving some groups of students behind.

College readiness and completion. In the last 20 years, college access has been increased across all demographic groups.¹¹ However, recognizing that access does not always lead to success, it is increasingly important that students who enter college have the skills that will enable them to complete a degree. To make policy that strengthens the higher education pipeline that leads students to success, policymakers will need research on students' academic and nonacademic characteristics. What forms of academic support are most effective, and what type of policies can be scaled to an entire state?

Action Steps to Improve Links between Research and State Policy Solutions

To help guide the development and refinement of state education policy with the goal of increasing equity in higher education outcomes, this *Policy Insights* provides action steps and recommendations directed at both the academic and policy communities, including policymakers and the policy shapers around them. A coordinated, comprehensive effort that involves a commitment from all communities is critical to achieve maximum impact of research in state policymaking.

► Action Step 1 (For all communities):

Adjust professional norms, to the extent possible, to complement one another's work.

Professional norms and structures are often a barrier to the smooth progression of research into state policy. Policy organizations can make a more consistent effort to refer policymakers to academic researchers, much like they already often do with one another, and to feature relevant academic research in presentations, publications, and testimony. Meanwhile, reward structures in the academy can better recognize that working in the public policy sphere is a marathon, not a sprint, and that success can be

measured only through sustained change over a lengthy time frame. Building out a public agenda for higher education is a project that will outlast the terms of many political actors, and the existence of a public agenda does not mean that every step taken is in perfect alignment with the best research. Gaining trust and credibility among policymakers takes time and depends on a scholar's ability to tailor her or his expertise to the issue at hand.

► **Action Step 2 (For all communities):**

Establish systematic and sustainable ways for scholarly and policy organization networks to flourish.

Policy organizations and policymakers can seek to forge stronger partnerships with research scholars by inviting them to jointly prepare and disseminate policy briefs, and to connect with the media where appropriate. A major impediment to the dissemination of research into the policy community is inconsistent access to relevant research among members of the intermediary community. Policy organizations' access to the very research they are trying to translate for legislators and other decisionmakers is often surprisingly limited. Individuals and organizations with institutional affiliations seldom have sufficient budgets to sustain subscriptions to the principal journals and other paid outlets across the many disciplinary and interdisciplinary areas relevant to postsecondary education policy, and they rarely have easy access to academic libraries where such material is available.

An obvious step would be to remove unnecessary barriers to putting research in the hands of policy organizations and policymakers, although easier access to journals and libraries might not necessarily result in more widespread use of academic research. A searchable and regularly updated annotated bibliography or meta-literature review on key topics would be a helpful resource. For example, Bridget Terry Long of Harvard University authored a comprehensive review of the literature on financial aid several years ago that proved helpful, both as a summary and as a roadmap to the most relevant research for policy organizations and policymakers to call on.¹⁸ Similar efforts on other relevant public policy topics would likely help academic research find a smoother path from journals into public policy debates.

Policy organizations can make a significant contribution to these efforts by looking for opportunities to broker agreements between states and researchers to work on research projects of mutual interest, especially those that may capitalize on data coming available via the statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDS). Such efforts could prove particularly worthwhile, as many states' capacity to analyze their rich SLDS data is limited and uneven. Researchers, in contrast, can ramp up their use of such data to examine state-specific implementation of various programs and other interventions that can directly assist the state where

the research is done, while also being applicable to other settings. At a minimum, such studies can help add nuance and depth to the knowledge on a particular topic by identifying variations in policy design and implementation that influence outcomes. Researchers must work closely with the states in coming to understand the data, designing studies, and releasing results, and must be prepared to ask and answer questions in which the state data sources are most keenly interested, in addition to those at the heart of the researchers' original interests.

Finally, university-based researchers and research staff from policy organizations and policymakers' staff can create more systematic ways to interact and network. After all, networks matter in determining what information gets shared and how. There is no sustained way to make networks between staff at policy organizations and academic scholars thrive and grow, apart from having memberships in professional associations like ASHE and AERA, and by participating in their meetings. A number of useful efforts over the years have brought staff from policy organizations together with faculty members, such as the associate's program run by the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education.¹³ Such programs are episodic, in large part because they depend on external funding. Moreover, the number of individuals who can be engaged is limited by the space available, yet the opportunity to come together through a purposeful program invites relationship-building in ways a large annual association forum cannot. The connections participants make not just with one another but with one another's contacts over time can be powerful. Building such a network can be as modest as making adjustments to conference programs – like invited sessions or streamlined proposals for conference sessions or dual discussants – or more elaborate externships or faculty-in-residence programs that would require external funding. As stronger networks form between researchers and staff from policy organizations, the distance between researchers and policymakers shrinks, making further collaboration more likely. The key in activating these networks is making them intentional, systematic, and sustainable.

► **Action Step 3 (For the research community):**

Create rigorous research that is accessible and responsive to policymakers.

Although academic freedom means that university-based scholars are able to establish their own research agendas independently, framing the problems addressed in a policy setting will likely be defined by someone in policymaking, not the academy. This means that if research is to have an impact, it must be responsive to the needs of decisionmakers. It also must avoid adhering to a narrow, disciplinary lens, since the problems public policy is trying to address are inescapably complex, and solutions

that are not informed by multiple perspectives are found rarely. Working in state policy also requires an awareness of structural features that are external to most research projects themselves, including the impact of term limits, ballot initiatives, balanced budget requirements, and the like.

► **Action Step 4 (For the policymaking community):**
Seek out and connect with scholars whose work speaks to pertinent policy issues and contains rigorous evidence.

Academic researchers are trained to study the theoretical base and design possibilities for a critical problem in the field. Three factors in particular have shaped the strategy for education policy research. The first is the production and collection of stronger data systems, particularly longitudinal data.¹⁴ Second, many hypothetical interventions have been tested and, although mostly in the K-12 sector, are able to offer valuable lessons, such as models of school choice, accountability, and the teacher labor market. All these issues are part of the evolving agenda of higher education concerns, although they will need to be examined within the particular context of states and the higher education sector (i.e., two- versus four-year, private versus public). Third, the U.S. Department of Education and many state education agencies increasingly require more rigorous research designs to produce credible findings that are causal or infer causation.¹⁵

As colleges and universities come under increased pressure to use performance metrics and rigorous research to justify appropriations and spending, policymakers should seek to use the same resources when evaluating programs and crafting new legislation. By holding themselves to the high standards of in terms of finding and utilizing research-based evidence when designing policy, policymakers demonstrate their commitment to effectively striving for improvement within the education sector. Connections between policymakers and researchers are potentially beneficial for both parties, making it easier to form these relationships than may be expected. Especially through methods like action research, real-time feedback on pilot policies and programs could help inform policymaker's decisions while the traditional publication process is ongoing.

► **Action Step 5 (For all communities):**
Develop a more coordinated communication strategy in the design and release of research among scholars and policy organizations.

As researchers design and prepare to release policy-relevant research, it may be helpful to think about a coordinated communication strategy that includes pairing a peer-reviewed journal article with a more broadly accessible policy brief; engaging policy organizations early in the design process; and offering others a chance to review and comment on the results of the research prior to its release.

Given the fleeting opportunity research has to impact the policymaking process, scholars might work with journal publishers to fast-track the peer review process so that fresh research has the best chance to impact the policy debate before policymakers' attention has moved on. Anything that can speed relevant research to market would help, but the research also must be easily digestible. In addition to white papers and policy briefs that still have to find their way out of the narrow academic world, new models such as blogging, which requires writing that is concise and accessible to a wide audience, are having growing impact.

Conclusion

For all the insights gleaned from rigorous research about federal policies, it is as vital to attend to the impacts of state policies and implementation if equity gaps are to be reduced. Bringing research to bear on state policy issues most effectively means going beyond broad questions to examine how specific variations in design and implementation that occur among states can boost or inhibit policy effectiveness, or lead to unintended consequences.

Elevated expectations that higher education institutions should be engines of economic development for the nation and of economic opportunity for all, combined with rapidly diversifying demographics, make it more vital than ever that the best information about what works in reducing inequality informs public policy. As true as this is for the nation and for federal policymaking, it is at least equally important for state policymaking, since so much of the policy and regulatory environment in education is driven by the states. Recognizing that the best research must be deployed to inform policy is not sufficient to ensure that it will be. Stronger, lasting partnerships between the academic research community, policy organizations, and policymakers have the potential to transform state policy and ultimately lead to increased equity in higher education outcomes.

Endnotes

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