Can and should universities help government with policy-oriented research?

by Robert J. Lampman

A member of the Economics Department of the University of Wisconsin, Robert J. Lampman has been actively involved with the Institute for Research on Poverty since its inception in 1965. This article exploring the history of the Institute and the past and future role of university research in public policy is the text of the keynote speech presented at a workshop sponsored by the Institute and the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in June 1983. It provides an appropriate backdrop for the commemoration of the Institute's twentieth birthday. Lampman's monograph *Social Welfare Spending: Accounting for Changes from 1950 to 1978* has just been published and is available from Academic Press, New York.

Let us start with discussion of a case in which a university answered that question in the affirmative. In March of 1966 the University of Wisconsin said it could and would help the Office of Economic Opportunity with its policy-oriented research, and to carry out that purpose it established the Institute for Research on Poverty.

The OEO was established in 1964 with Sargent Shriver as its first director. The Economic Opportunity Act specified that the director would wear two hats. Under one he would administer certain programs, such as the Job Corps and Project Head Start, and under the other hat he would advise the president on the whole range of antipoverty programs in all federal departments. It was under this second hat that Mr. Shriver presented his first antipoverty budget in July 1965.

The OEO was quite an unusual organization. It was located in the executive office of the presidency and it was designed to experiment with and to evaluate ways to reduce poverty. This meant that the OEO's division of research and evaluation would be at the center of its operation. To head that division, Shriver selected Joseph Kershaw, who had been chair of the economics department at Rand Corporation, the think tank of the Air Force. Earlier, Secretary McNamara had brought people from Rand—notably Charles J. Hitch—to introduce PPBS (planning, programming, and budgeting system) into the Department of Defense. By 1964, there were assistant secretaries for research, planning, and evaluation in several departments and President Johnson was to mandate PPBS for all departments. All this was consonant with the mood expressed by President Kennedy that the solution to problems was technically complex but not ideologically based.

Kershaw set out to develop a strong in-house research unit at OEO, but he also saw the need for an outside research group to do for OEO what Rand was doing for the Air Force plus some other things. He wanted to have a team of researchers who could (1) respond to short-term technical assistance assignments from his office, and (2) build a backlog of information, concepts, evaluation procedures, and ideas, and add to the nation's capacity to do research needed for a sustained War on Poverty. Kershaw emphasized the need for a critical mass of research effort to be concentrated on the goal of his agency. He proposed to give this outside think tank a free rein to investigate the nature, causes, and cures of poverty in the United States and thereby to dramatically increase scholarly research on these matters.

When Kershaw visited Wisconsin in the fall of 1965 to talk with Chancellor Robben Fleming about his idea, he got a rather cool reception. The university was cautious about being an outpost for a government agency or a tail to a political dog. Fleming saw the prototype agreement as the one previously negotiated with the Army for the Mathematics Research Center. He emphasized the need for academic freedom of researchers and the need for long-term funding. Other important issues seen by the university involved the guidelines for the institute—its mission, governance, relationship to the tenure-granting disciplinary departments, its role in subcontracting, and its need for space. Some doubted that the university's goal of contributing to knowledge was compatible with a partisan political goal of what might be a one-term president. Others worried that federal funding and pressures for results might upset the balance of scholars and teachers in established departments.

An agreement was nevertheless reached, and the Institute for Research on Poverty began functioning in 1966 with Harold Watts as its first director. In 1967, the Institute took on an important responsibility as research contractor for the New Jersey experiment in negative income taxation, which led to close work with the first Nixon administration. The second Nixon administration liquidated the OEO and in 1973 transferred the Office of Plan-

ning, Research, and Evaluation to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. It might at that point have declared that the War on Poverty was won. However, the grants to the Institute continued through the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations. During this period, the National Academy of Sciences gave the Institute two strongly favorable reviews, published in 1971 and 1979. The Reagan administration decided it did not want to continue the discretionary grant to the Institute, but a special act of Congress has at least temporarily extended the grant.

The 20-year life of the IRP spans a period of turbulent change. It was spawned at the time when enthusiasm for government action on economic and social problems—and the role of research and evaluation—was at a peak. By the middle of the 1970s, this enthusiasm had waned. Henry Aaron, in his 1978 book, *Politics and the Professors,*[1] offers some explanations for the change. He assigns primary importance to the loss of credibility of government in Vietnam and on the stagflation front. However, he also believes that the dissolving of the scholarly consensus about the effects of social programs had something to do with the big change. He points out that research and evaluation have a "profoundly conservative tendency" (p. 33). They have contributed to a widespread belief in government failure as being as pervasive as market failure. Aaron says the process by which R&E is created corrodes the kind of simple faiths on which political movements are built (p. 159) and that those responsible for economic policy must proceed with a "cacophonous intellectual chorus in the background" (p. 139).

I have given you a brief review of one case where a university took an unusual step to help a particular government agency with its policy-oriented research. Both the OEO and the IRP were unusually goal-oriented. The OEO was centrally concerned with research and evaluation and its Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation unit was equipped to nurture and to make use of research produced at the Institute. It is noted that the IRP was and is unique among university-based social science organizations. No federal agency has replicated the IRP for dealing with another social goal.

What light does this case study shed on our more general question of how university researchers should relate to governmental policymaking?

We can agree, I suppose, that making public policy requires social science research, and we can observe that a considerable amount of such research does go on in the federal government. But should the long arm of Uncle Sam reach out to the universities and motion them to engage in social science research that is relevant to—or useful for—governmental decision-making? The government does, of course, have alternatives. It can hire its own researchers, including faculty members on a short-term basis, or contract with private companies that hire researchers. Why should it seek to get universities to accept and administer funds for academic research?

Before taking up that last question, please let me note that there is inevitably a tension, within government, between those of a research discipline and those in a decision-making and hence a political role. The political role often requires that decisions be taken and adversary stances be developed even before research is completed. It also seems to dictate that policies be clouded as regards the multiple goals to which they are oriented. On occasion a policy is adopted first and researchers are called upon to find a rationale for it.

Now, to get back to universities. The scholars' guilds that developed into modern universities deliberately walled themselves off from the turmoil around them in order to pursue the truth. They asked for freedom from government influence and, in turn, did not seek to influence government. Some contemporary observers see the same danger to the primary mission of the university as did our forerunners. They urge that we should study government but not help it; we should chronicle the struggles of society but not intervene. We should be dedicated critics rather than actors. Both conservatives and radicals are among those who warn of the possible corruption of the university ideal—what Robert Nisbet calls "the degradation of the academic dogma"—which may result from government's contracting with universities to help it solve social problems. Some would go further to urge that government is not the solver but, rather, the source of many problems.

Furthermore, university scholars see autonomy as necessary if they are to pursue the goals internal to their academic disciplines. This means that they are unlikely, if adequately and autonomously funded, to follow shifting government priorities in selecting their research questions. Robert Oppenheimer observed that what is regarded as a contribution to knowledge is "anything that is of interest to our colleagues." Paul Samuelson asserted that the only applause that matters to us scholars is our own.

The need for autonomy and the fierce loyalty to academic discipline would seem to make it difficult for government to enlist academic researchers in its policymaking studies. Certainly no university wants to risk its long-run stability by becoming a handmaiden of an administration in power, or by getting entangled in serving a partisan position. However, it can be argued that it is in the interest of government and of the larger society at this juncture to seek to enlist faculties, taking account of their special role in pursuit of truth and its dissemination, in the struggle to solve our national social problems. I would argue that government (especially the federal government) can reap dividends from investment in academic social science research that is long-term and broad-based. For this to work out most successfully it must be part of a general

effort to encourage scientific and rational modes of public-policy decision-making. In other words—and this I regard as my most significant point— if government is to benefit from universities, it must run the risk of changing the frame within which political decisions are made. Let me spell that out a bit.

If universities are to play a bigger part, government must elevate the role of researchers in government. These people are the ones who are best-equipped to play a mediating, interpretative, and translating role between university specialists and policymakers (including interested private citizens). They are the ones who can bring research findings to bear on government problems in the frame of the planning, programming, and budgeting system, wherein a goal is specified, and alternative means to approach the goal are arrayed in terms of cost-effectiveness as established by the research. After a decision has been made by informed policymakers, the results of the decision are monitored under arrangements which, ideally, are written into the legislation, and the benefits and costs of the decision are evaluated after the legislation has gone into effect. And that scientific audit then becomes a part of the basis for decision in the next decision-making cycle.

It is that optimistic view of the contribution that universities can make to rational public decision-making—and I would note that this is consistent with the land-grant university philosophy of knowledge in the public service—that leads me to argue that the federal government should support social science research. In some instances that research support will be most effective if channeled to a multidisciplinary team of researchers concentrating on a selected topic and addressing it in a problem-oriented way. But that group must be equipped to draw on the basic research going on around them and to communicate to others—including their students—the disciplinary significance of what they are doing. Only if that is the case, and only if the research is subjected to scientific criticism by those in the disciplines, will the government be getting its money's worth. And for this to occur, there must be an arm's-length relationship between a government operating agency and the university. The university should select the research personnel and should insist that research findings be unclassified.

Tension will remain between researchers within government and in universities on the one hand, and between researchers and politically based decision-makers on the other hand. But these can be fruitful tensions if all parties show respect for the others' needs. So, I conclude that, under certain arrangements, academic social science research can be relevant to public policy, and, at the same time, government can contribute to the basic and unique mission of the university, namely, the pursuit of truth. ■

[1]Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.

ASPE-Institute workshop

A workshop was held in Madison June 18–20, sponsored by the Institute for Research on Poverty and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of the Department of Health and Human Services, to examine the initial results of some ongoing projects.

Small Grants Projects. The three recipients of small grants in Round I of the Small Grants program presented preliminary results of their research.

- Philip Robins (University of Miami), "Child Support Enforcement as a Means of Reducing Welfare Dependency and Poverty."
- Laurie Bassi (Georgetown University), "AFDC: An Empirical Examination of the Forces behind the Growing Caseload."
- Richard Burkhauser, Kathryn Anderson, and J. S. Butler (all of Vanderbilt University), "Return of the Phoenix: A Hazard Model Approach to Labor Market Reentry."

Relative Economic Status Project. Researchers are examining changes that have taken place in the patterns and causes of poverty and income inequality.

- Saul Schwartz (Tufts University), "Earnings Capacity and the Trend in Inequality."
- Michael Sosin (IRP), "The Utility of Private Social Welfare Agencies in Delivering Emergency Assistance."
- Peter Gottschalk (Bowdoin College) and Sheldon Danziger (IRP), "The Effects of Demographic Changes in Labor Force Participation on Male Earnings Inequality."
- Timothy Smeeding (University of Utah), "Nonmoney Income and the Economic Status of the Elderly."

Project on Income Security and the Low-Wage Labor Market. Studies are being undertaken on how to increase the earnings of low-wage workers.

- Glen Cain (IRP), "Work and Economic Well-Being: Men and Women."
- Gary Chamberlain (IRP) and George Jakubson (Cornell University), "Dynamic Models of Labor Supply: Female Labor and Leisure over the Life Cycle."

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